

# THE ETHICAL POSSIBILITIES OF POSTMODERN PEDAGOGY

Jane Skinner

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## DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I, Jane Phyllida Skinner, declare that this research report "The Ethical Possibilities of Postmodern Pedagogy" is my own work and that all sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Jane Skinner', written in black ink.

JANE SKINNER

DURBAN

December 1995.

## ABSTRACT

The aims of modern education are largely Enlightenment-inspired - thus postmodernism finds an uneasy foothold within educational theory. But the needs of the present are not so much for universal reason and truth as for respect and non-violence (which it is argued are the "spirit" of postmodernity). This research report suggests that the usefulness of postmodern thought (and particularly of deconstruction) to education is not so much political as ethical. Drawing upon recent work of Jacques Derrida and commentaries upon his work by Simon Critchley and Johan Degenaar, it is argued that deconstruction is inherently a discourse of moral advocacy - and that although it undermines the ultimate validity of any particular thought system this does not render it nihilistic; rather it involves responsiveness and openness towards the Other (person or system). While a reading of postmodern pedagogy acknowledges this, the intention is more often linked to particular political agendas, especially radical and feminist, than to wider ethical issues. Within educational theory a deconstructive "ethic of ethics" has implications for the kinds of knowledge which will be taught, the social relations which will be promoted, and the kinds of educational provision which will be made - but without prescription and within wide bounds of possibility.

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**THE ETHICAL POSSIBILITIES OF POSTMODERN PEDAGOGY**

**1. INTRODUCTION**

Pedagogy has no option but to respond to the contemporary world in which the certainties of political stances have been shaken and in which reason, individualism and truth - the icons of the Enlightenment - are increasingly in need of theoretical and moral justification. But postmodern theory - which may appear to deal with these problems by claiming that they don't exist, or that the ground on which they are premised is an abyss (Morphet, 1995, p1) - is understandably viewed with extreme suspicion by defenders of modernist discourses, whether politically of the left or the right, and this goes perhaps particularly for educationalists. It is the intention of this paper to consider the possibility that postmodernism (and particularly "deconstruction") may be seen, not as nihilistic, nor as underpinning (or undermining) any particular political discourse but rather, as Jacques Derrida claims, as inherently ethical. The implications for educationalists may then involve a shift away from an almost exclusive preoccupation with postmodernism's potential political impact, towards a wider ethical perspective.

There is currently a great resurgence of interest in ethical approaches within the social sciences generally and while I draw upon the ideas of various writers it is with Jacques Derrida's thought, and commentaries upon it, that this research is most particularly concerned. I also believe that the philosophy of Michel Foucault is entirely compatible with an "ethics of deconstruction" and, although an exploration of this is beyond the scope of this research paper, I shall also refer to Foucault from time to time.

## 2. ETHICAL OPENINGS AND CLOSURES

Education was implicated in the Enlightenment from the beginning. Early enlightenment thinkers believed that they - the knowledgeable - could mold the educable populace into the enlightened citizenry of the ideal society and that this could be done through the exercise of reason (Bauman, 1987, p95). The focus was also from the start upon the individual within society. Both arms of the Enlightenment - idealistic and emancipatory - came to see the implementation of their projects as working in and through education (Usher and Edwards, 1994, p30). Thus "(t)he work of education is not only the critical uncovering of the dead hand of traditional authority - it is also the ushering in of reason and thus of freedom" (Morphet, 1994, p286).

Reason, freedom, individualism (authenticity) therefore emerge as the triad upon which Enlightenment/education function and justify themselves. The implications of these three for justice and ethics must involve considerations such as whether truth entails goodness or excludes it; whether freedom denies or enhances ethical positions; and whether individualism is inherently selfish or altruistic. But it appears that there are problems with an ethics of modernism which defy simple resolution and there arises the powerful suggestion that modernist discourses in themselves are too narrow to accommodate widely ethical stances and that we require something different - or something further.

Raphael de Kadt, defending an ethics of modernity, says that "the good society needs to be shaped so as to be consistent with modernity's highest intuitions" and these are "rational, autonomous moral agency" (de Kadt, 1994, p44). And Andrew Vincent in tracing the

individualism of classical Enlightenment thought explains the understanding that "it is only individuals who can be moral, accountable and responsible; and such individuals form the key units out of which society is constructed" (Vincent, 1995, p128). Charles Taylor takes these ideas further in explaining authenticity as "being true to my own originality" which involves "defining myself" and "realizing a potentiality that is properly my own" (Taylor, 1991, p29). The implications are that justice inheres in the individual - and that it is just (and liberating) to be an individual - but the silences in each of these explanations would seem to involve the response required from an individual to the Other (1). Human conduct happens in a social context. Thus any investigation of what that conduct ought to be (ethics) cannot be conceived in narcissism, in subjectivism. But if we say that individuality involves a response to others because an individual is only defined in relationship with others we are beginning to cross the borders of rationalism and self identity - over which it is not possible that we stray and stay within modernity.

The ethical dangers which lie in the logic of rational systems have been exposed by Zygmunt Bauman. "Structurally, the gas chambers are driven by the same presiding principles that [are] taken for granted as the positive aspects of modernity: the principles of rational efficiency" (Docherty, 1993, p12). Thus rationality taken to ultimate conclusions and final solutions finds its logical dark side, its ability to forget the individual Other in rationalist essentialism. To hold it back from this brink would require a denial of conclusion - but this again would take us into another order of thought.

Current functionalist education systems, following modernist approaches, are individualistic, rationalist, didactic, interventionist, hierarchical and seek closure and certainty in truth. Emancipatory discourses challenge existing hegemony and see the truth as hidden and freedom as curtailed - but the truth is still there to be sought, argued for, and ultimately it is

still the task of education to track it (and freedom) down. At a glance, then, education as we know it would seem to be affirmative of authenticity and reason (without which it would indeed be hard for us to conceive any viable and valuable educative experience) but at the same time its need to grasp the truth closes off openings to difference and to otherness.

Modern theory finds truth (and ethics) in regulated systems - postmodern understandings suggest instead that as human beings in society we are "ineluctably - existentially...faced with the challenge of the Other, a condition of being-for" (Bauman, 1995, p1, original emphasis); or to put it otherwise: as social beings we are inescapably in a position of ethical responsibility which precedes the logic of moral rules.

Derrida's thought is a radical challenge to modernist epistemologies. It denies points of origin and refuses ultimate conclusions: these will always escape us. The essences of essentialism are ensnared in contradiction and contingency, and systems of thought are challenged by the very supplements which support them and must succumb to deconstructive readings. I cannot capture anything in the living present or know it in itself, because it is haunted by the past and taken on into the future - known only in relationship with other things, themselves unfixed points of reference, caught and constituted within time and context. I cannot claim individual authorship or simple autonomy. Thus ontology becomes "hauntology" (Derrida, 1994, p10), epistemology relational, and language opaque.

"Differance" which Derrida first explored in Of Grammatology is the conception amongst these ideas which concerns us most particularly in any exploration of the ethical implications of deconstruction. "Differance" is "not a concept, not a word" (Derrida, 1976, p1) rather it is a space (or perhaps a space/time continuum) in which things are constituted through their difference from (but also their relationship towards) other unlike things and in which we must

defer the grasping of their essence - indefinitely. Things exist for us in relationship, and in the tension between presence and absence. What is challenged here is the security of foundations and of hierarchies and of the boundaries which these permit us to draw, along with the violence of exclusions and inclusions which boundaries impose. And what is ultimately at stake is the violation of otherness.

It is important to stay a little longer with this "aporetic" space and its complex relation to otherness. As Derrida sees it the aporia is not a simple contradiction, not only because the boundaries of knowledge are always fuzzy and elusive, but also because they involve both their own opposites and wholly non-opposable non-opposites (alterity) - legal/illegal but also legal/just (Derrida, 1993, p15). Thus dialectic resolution becomes impossible: no synthesis, consensus or simple victory of one idea over another is possible - but it is with the responsibility which this entails that our concern principally lies. In this discussion Derrida focuses especially upon the analogy of death which is, as Heidegger sees it, the other of Being, of experience, and yet (which Heidegger was blind to) both wholly mine (no one else can die for me) and wholly other (in that it is what I ultimately cannot experience). Similarly, Derrida suggests, the foreigner is both my own other and also a wholly (and hence unassimilable) other. And here we come into the realm of ethics. The inhibition which this conception logically places upon "turning the other into the same" is closely related to Simon Critchley's concern for the violence which modernist epistemologies unwittingly commit - and which I shall discuss presently.

Derrida considers closely related ideas in the special context of the law and justice in an address which he delivered in New York in 1992 entitled "Force of Law: The Mystical Foundations of Authority". Here he suggests that to "enforce the law" reveals what the French "appliquer la loi" conceals - that law is involved inescapably with force, with

violence, from its inception (Derrida, 1992, p5). "There is no law without enforceability" (ibid. p6). Thus, while it is just that there be law, law is not justice, for justice requires the incalculable, the contingent, the other: it requires not that the law be blind (indifferent between all cases) - but rather (or simultaneously) that it have a "seeing eye" (Dallmayr, 1995). It is in that space of indecision (the deconstructive moment) between the calculable and the incalculable that justice lies (2). That "moment of suspense ... is always full of anxiety, but who will claim to be just by economising on anxiety?" (Derrida, 1993, p20). Empirical reason, on the other hand, seeks resolution in closure and truth, as does dialectical reason and both involve the suppression of the Other which will be subsumed, taken over and (re)appropriated in the smooth assumption of a now established superior and universal truth.

The violence involved in this (re)appropriation is the principal focus of Simon Critchley's book The Ethics of Deconstruction. Critchley suggests that the telos of rational thinking is to turn the Other into the same - involving a violent grasping or invasion of Otherness denied by both the conceptions of deconstruction and of a Levinasian "ethic of ethics" (3). Levinas's thinking, like deconstruction, undermines instrumental rationality, but its undermining involves a somewhat different approach. Levinas sees that "thought, though its telos is self-knowledge [rationality], does not think of and by itself" (Cohen, 1986, p4). The ethical "saying" of any text is addressed first to the individual before it becomes the ontological "said" and thus the interhuman relationship involving response towards, and responsibility for, the other (the face-to-face relationship) is always first - coming "before categorization and synchronization" that is before rationality (Bernasconi and Wood, 1988, p63) (4). The other "whom I cannot evade, comprehend or kill" (Critchley, 1992, p5) is the irreducible component of all social systems. Thus, for Levinas, reason is not required to justify ethics, which precedes it, and his understanding of moral consciousness is, like Derrida's, not as a moral code or branch of philosophy but as "a way that disrupts traditional

moral thinking and all claims to good conscience" (Critchley, 1992, p4) (5). Critchley's conclusion that deconstruction therefore "takes place (a lieu) ethically" (ibid. p2) is reinforced by Derrida himself in the following passage:

Good conscience as subjective certainty is incompatible with the absolute risk that every promise, every engagement, and every responsible decision - if there are such - must run. To protect the decision or the responsibility by knowledge, by some theoretical assurance, or by the certainty of being right, of being on the side of science, of consciousness or of reason, is to transform this experience into the deployment of a programme, into a technical application of a rule or a norm or into the subsumption of a determined "case". All these are conditions which must never be abandoned of course, but that, as such, are only the guardrail of a responsibility to whose calling they remain radically heterogeneous (Derrida, 1993, p19).

The final sentence is important because it highlights the role of logical systems in creating appropriate conditions for ethical decisions while remaining radically different from them.

Conceptually related and yet discreet from both Derrida's and Critchley's thinking are the ideas of the South African theorist Johan Degenaar who finds an ethical implication within the idea that knowledge involves relationship rather than absolute ontology. This "highlight(s) ...the importance of the other as precondition of the self's awareness and understanding of itself. In this sense otherness penetrates self-understanding" and "as meaning is not found within terms but rather in the relationship between terms, so morality is not found in individuals but rather in the relationship between individuals" (Degenaar, 1995, p9). To take this thought further: it is not the individual Other only but the whole community which constitutes and defines me: "I am a person only within the context of other people" - as the philosophy of Ubuntu would have it (6).

## 2.1 The Spectre of Nihilism

It would, however, help us as educationalists very little to find that this investigation of the ethical implications of postmodern ideas has revealed them to be affirmative of compassion, other-centredness and justice - if they are somehow at the same time nihilistic and incompatible with reason, freedom or authenticity. It is therefore important to address the charge of "soft relativism" with which postmodern ideas are so frequently charged.

We might consider at the outset that: "irrationalism, like nihilism, is a posture that is completely symmetrical to, thus dependent upon, the principle of [foundational] reason" (Derrida, 1983, p15). Deconstructive understanding is of another order of thought: there is a double, paradoxical, movement between the calculable and the incalculable; the ontological "said" and the ethical "saying"; the dialectical opposable "other" and the non-opposable "other"; the law and justice. Nihilism finds everything featureless and valueless. As Richard Rorty says: "to say that we should drop the idea that out there the truth is waiting to be discovered is not the same as to say that out there there is no truth" (quoted in Vincent, 1995, p138), or, as Derrida says, we should query whether answering to the principle of reason is the same act as answering for the principle of reason: we need to question "the reason of reason" (Derrida, 1983, p9). Thus deconstruction is an opening to other dimensions of thought in which reason is questioned rather than taken for granted. Overall perhaps deconstruction does not deny reason but awakens our awareness of the problematic nature of its relationship to truth and trips us up in any attempt we may make to found truth absolutely and this forces us, as Degenaar says, to be more "modest" about it (Degenaar, 1994) (7).

All this has important consequences because it makes the perpetration of violence in the name of the truth irrational, whereas systems of thought founded upon certitude allow, and in the

final instance demand, that violence be committed in their name. And this does not confine itself to fascist systems but involves equally the moral high ground assumed by defenders of liberal democracies and "natural rights" (8) (to be distinguished from human rights which may be found to be exactly what deconstruction protects). The defence of democratic systems was used to justify American intervention in the radically Other of Vietnam leading to a vortex of escalating violence and final defeat. And still the impulse of this modernist regime is to subsume the recalcitrant Other as demonstrated in its continued blockade of Cuba against all justice, against human rights (and even against the "guardrail" of international law) (9). The pursuit of freedom requires a wider vision than the victory of any one system of thought over another.

If reason and freedom are not incompatible with deconstruction - but on the contrary enhanced by it - this takes us some way towards challenging Charles Taylor's contention that an "ethics of authenticity" is at odds with postmodernism. Taylor defends individualism as a principle about which few of us in the modern world are likely to be in dispute. He argues that even conservative defenders of old-fashioned "standards" against the selfishness of the "me generation", would not seriously consider a return to the pre-modern authority of revealed truth. We are all individualists now. And as educationalists most of us would agree. But the value of individual choice, he argues, lies not in the limited horizon of the right of choice but rather in the significance of the grounds on which that choice is made. Also authenticity, if it is not simply to be narcissistic, entails other-centredness, and here he takes issue with Foucault and Derrida whose thought he sees as entirely relativistic in that it deconstructs "even the idea of the self" while, paradoxically, seeing all values as constructed (self-made). And this, he contends, can only strengthen self-centredness by giving it "a certain patina of deeper philosophical justification" (Taylor, 1991, p61).

A closer examination of Taylor's position however reveals that he sees the self as continually constructed and re-constructed throughout life and always in relationship with "significant others" (Taylor, 1991, p33). He sees that people must ground their actions upon values in which they believe, but is indifferent between those values - provided only that the choice be reasonable. Thus the valuable may not involve the final truth nor be irrefutably rational: the circle need not, indeed cannot, be closed - for then there would in effect be no choice (no authenticity) but a final solution - and presumably Taylor does not keep for professors of philosophy and politics like himself the privilege of seeing the wider picture, of appreciating that there may be many truths.

If, for Taylor, the self is constructed and shifting and truth and reason are situational then, I believe, we can claim that within his conception of authenticity postmodern ideas represent a necessary (dangerous) supplement (10) and that he is perhaps after all a postmodernist "malgre lui". Thus authenticity is, I believe (like reason and freedom) fully compatible with deconstruction. This allows us to move closer still to seeing in an "ethics of deconstruction" a strong claim to contemporary educational significance.

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### 3. THE UNCERTAIN HORIZONS OF POSTMODERN PEDAGOGY

Since Jean-Francois Lyotard first predicted "the death of the professor" in The Postmodern Condition in 1979 the implications of postmodernism for education have been on the agenda, and they have generally been judged to be negative particularly by mainstream educationalists. A typically suspicious response is Andy Green's in the British Journal of Education Policy in 1994: "(p)ostmodernism has little to offer educational theory but it has

many dangers" (p76). To attempt to account for this cool reception I suggest that while the critics cannot see beyond the political the postmodernists often contribute to the confusion by being themselves embroiled in politically specific issues which defy resolution - while the human, ethical, and indeed educational, implications of their theories are in danger of becoming sidelined. Major areas of concern for postmodern educationalists include: the canons of truth upheld by the academy, the borders of knowledge which create hidden exclusions and inclusions, restrictions created by rationalist epistemologies, and the silences around the involvement of power with knowledge which situates the subject and which infiltrates all of these concerns taking them beyond the scope of traditional emancipatory discourses which, it will be objected, also concentrate upon many of these issues. I shall consider each of these concerns in turn in order to point both to the ethical dimension which postmodern educational theorists find (but sometimes lose) and to the political dimension which they feel compelled to find - and in which they sometimes get lost.

There is currently a movement in the western academy to close ranks against the "threat" of multi-culturalism (D Ravitch, in Giroux, 1991, p503) - to return to tradition and the inspiration of "great books" (Bloom, p54, 1989) - to create a "stronger ... canon" (Morphet, p5, 1995) - and generally to defend the "citadel of learning" (Morrow, 1995, p220) against the invading hordes which threaten to overwhelm it. The feeling of imminent loss of the valued and loved is palpable here - and borders being sharply defined and defended seems initially understandable, even laudable - and certainly rational. But if we take one of the most influential examples of this kind of thinking - Allan Bloom's The Closing of the American Mind - and examine it more closely we find that the exclusions become more and more extreme as the argument progresses revealing a hatred even for the Enlightenment itself - because Bloom suspects that its telos is the proliferation of those depthless personalities who currently believe that "all truth is relative". But his validation of the heroic and the

aristocratic - the pre-modern - which emerges from this would seem less than helpful to most practicing twentieth century educationalists.

At the opposite political pole is Henry Giroux who sees in postmodernism opportunities for the re-thinking and undermining of borders, and for "border crossings" allowing students to appreciate how definitions have constituted them and others in particular ways. As he says, difference, "otherness", in this way does not become a "marker for inferiority"; on the contrary it opens up possibilities for teaching that "deepen forms of cultural democracy and enlarge one's moral vision" (Giroux, 1991, p509). The direction here is clearly ethical but anyone reading Giroux knows that his old radical combativeness still takes precedence. As he writes in the abstract which he provides for this article, his concept of Border Pedagogy "embodies a political project which serves as a ... response to the assault on difference and culture currently being waged by the New Right in the United States" (ibid. p501). And his anger at the current celebration of the traditional western canon provokes him into proposing that we use whatever critical thinking and postmodernism together can provide to produce a "counter-canon" (Aronowitz and Giroux, 1991, p186).

More illuminating than either of these starkly political positions is a recent article which appeared in the Times Higher Educational Supplement (April 28, 1995) in which an oriental scholar, W Radice, demonstrates (whether consciously or not is left uncertain) how Harold Bloom's list of the "Great Books" of the Western Canon deconstructs itself. Through his enthusiastic embracing of the concept of Great Books; his challenge to the claims of some to be included in the list; his interest in the Eastern books which somehow slipped in; and his suggestions for the inclusion of more of these, Radice institutes the complete dissolution of the borders set by Bloom - and opens up a host of greater possibilities - amongst them the re-thinking of the hierarchies of excellence. The political right is prepared to see these

hierarchies as inevitable and acceptable; the left respects them too (probably more) but is consumed by guilt when it considers its elitist love of gourmet food and its antipathy for kitsch! In educational terms both responses are unhelpful: we should be able to celebrate the beautiful and good without claiming for either any final security in a pre-given order of things.

Turning to analytical reason itself and the exclusions which it institutes we become involved in a debate particularly associated with Elizabeth Ellsworth's article "Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering? - Working through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy". Ellsworth finds that within a multi-cultural class analytical reason cannot succeed on its own in uncovering the roots of racism. The inhibitions which this "masculine, western" discourse unknowingly imposes cannot be a tool for disrupting the western canon of which it is the instrument. Thus a multi-ethnic group will never be able fully to access each other's reality. Therefore her conclusion is at first ethical - a validation of "otherness" as irreducible - but its entanglement in the political debate around critical pedagogy and feminism forces her into a position at odds with fellow educationalists such as Giroux (Ellsworth, 1989, p298), and could marginalise the wider human impact of her findings. The ethical direction of both discourses are, as she sees, the same; and the problems which critical pedagogy practitioners face are well known to themselves: action researchers seek anxiously not to impose their ideas upon their subjects. Thus their motivation is as much ethical as it is political. Ellsworth has been accused of setting up a "straw man" in her stated opposition to critical pedagogy.

Allied to the question in contention "can analytical reason accommodate otherness?" is the question "can analytical reason achieve emancipation?" and with this we remain within the critical pedagogy/postmodernism debate. The insights of the South African theorists David Bensusan and Yael Shalem are helpful here. They articulate the epistemological claims of

critical thought with the psychological area of desire (Bensusan and Shalem, 1994). Critical pedagogy claims to unsettle the (falsely) perceived needs of pupils and replace them with rationally validated ones. Bensusan and Shalem contend that a satisfied desire (final resolution) is not going to provoke the ongoing thirst for knowledge which is important for pupil involvement in learning. Other teaching strategies are necessary including unsettling and disrupting (not resolving or replacing) settled conceptions. Thus it becomes possible to suggest not only that freedom may not be achieved through the dialectic of reason, but nor will learning gain so much impetus as the provocation and stimulus which non-resolatory discourses can provide.

Rationalist thinkers however will still contend that these educational and ethical issues are peripheral. They believe that the "feline ironists and revelers in relativism...sidestep [any] heavy military engagement" with the "real" political and material world (Soper, quoted in Criticos, 1993, p67). On this they are convinced, postmodernism has no purchase. Taking the argument closer to home they contend that the realities of poverty and inequality in South Africa demand concrete political solutions even more forcibly and make postmodernism still less relevant here than in "advanced" western democracies (Morphet, 1995).

These contentions need careful examination of the rationalist underpinnings which support them. Knowledge of a truth makes believing in it necessary, winning support for it feasible, and imposing it upon others the next logical step - upon the whole world, the ultimately logical objective. In all modernist conceptions the social can be "sutured" - to use Laclau and Mouffe's rather unhappy medical terminology (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p7). Within this epistemology all social theory must serve to support some particular political position and to undermine others; and the first objective of modernist theorists in their own defense is therefore to try to get to grips with exactly what postmodernism supports and what it

undermines - and they are remarkably successful in discovering that it supports exactly what they most despise - whatever that may be. Here are three examples: (p)ostmodernism "is essentially reactionary" (Cole and Hill, neo-marxist sociologists of education, 1995, p175); "...deconstructionists and other radicals" (Fraser, on the New Right, quoted by Giroux, 1991, p504) - and even: "(p)ostmodernists are covert liberals [!] who ... have moved even beyond the metanarrative of anarchy" (Vincent, 1995, p138 - discussing Rorty and Connolly).

One can sense the frustration of Vincent when he admits that "it is more difficult to make out the precise political shape of Foucault or Derrida" (ibid. p144). The problem is that the uncoupling of reason from determinable truth uncouples political projects also - at least in the form that we have known them up to now, so that "it is not certain that such thinking can bring together a community or found an institution" (Derrida, quoted in Zuckert, 1991, p355). The only specifically political implication of postmodernism would appear to be an incompatibility with any form of totalitarianism (11), so that we might argue that in the same way that "deconstruction takes place ethically" it also "takes place democratically" - but in the loosest understanding of that word. Therefore Vincent's frustration with Foucault and Derrida is destined to remain unresolved and perhaps he might like to contemplate Foucault's own thoughts on the situation:

I think I have in fact been situated in most of the squares of the political checkerboard, one after another and sometimes simultaneously: as anarchist, leftist, ostentatious or disguised Marxist, nihilist, explicit or secret anti-Marxist, technocrat in the service of Gaullism, new liberal, etc ... None of these descriptions is important by itself; taken together, on the other hand, they mean something. And I must admit that I rather like what they mean (Foucault, quoted in Kritzman, 1988, pxvii)

And Lawrence Kritzman's commentary on this passage is pertinent here: he sees that Foucault refuses "to let thought coagulate into systematic doctrine". Foucault's project is in

the widest sense more ethical than political.

Of course this is not to say that postmodernism has not played a major role in illuminating hidden ways in which power operates. Radical discourses do this too of course - but they do it in the name of another truth. The contribution of postmodernism is to dismember Utopia and to make us consider that we are always constituted within discourses of power which conceal themselves from us - and the particular responsibilities which this imposes upon educationalists have been demonstrated by thinkers such as Jennifer Gore in Australia and John Aitchison and Tony Morphet in papers delivered at Kenton Educational Conferences in the recent past. Gore examines the regimes of truth which operate to situate teachers in positions of inferiority as regards academic theorists (Gore, 1993) (12); Aitchison considers similar power disparities within "community education" in South Africa; and Tony Morphet (in postmodern mode here!) warns us to appreciate that power/knowledge situates us, as academic educators, in positions of privilege and to distrust the particularly South African mythical promise that "if education is given freedom will follow" (Morphet, 1994, p290). The educational message is paradoxically both an increase in awareness and a reduction in assurance, particularly self-assurance.

### 3.1 Implications: Deconstructing the Curriculum

The reorientation involved in this kind of thinking must entail consequences for education in that what we teach, how we teach it and the kind of educational provision which policy-makers will be inspired to work for, will be affected, albeit without prescription and within wide bounds of possibility. Expert knowledge/grassroots knowledge - the hierarchy of significance here would become less assured and syllabuses would have to be constructed

acknowledging less certainty about the authority of the intellectual experts and of the canons of truth on which they are based. But this does not mean that the value of authoritative knowledge would be downgraded - rather the framings of power and place which support it would now emerge and demand to be taken into account. In the past we were happy to assume that there were no framings and that the canons represented the nearest approximation to truth available to us, and on that account they required our unquestioning acceptance (Edward Said successfully dispels this kind of assurance for western "orientalism", as does VY Mudimbe for western understandings of Africa (Said, 1978; Mudimbe, 1988)).

It would also seem that how we teach must become less didactic and interventionist now that the truth is more illusive. But the truth has in any case imposed a tremendous burden upon us all to ensure that the young are correctly and completely schooled in whatever it is we are entrusted to teach them and a wider definition of what we can understand by "school knowledge" generally would now become possible. Greater acceptance that power and situation structure what we know is not so very different from the ideological concerns of emancipatory discourses - only now the political search for the particular ideologies which structure discourses would become less important than the understanding that multiple framings operate within all discourses and this becomes interesting and (ethically) illuminating for students and teachers to attempt to unpack together.

This would seem to be beginning to overlap quite closely with current critical pedagogy and action research positions - and I believe that it does. Critical pedagogy started as an impassioned (and Marxist inspired) reaction to oppressive regimes but its value has developed towards the validation of teaching methods which emphasise "process not product", and learner-centred and "skills-based" curricula - and these are entirely compatible with Bensusan and Shalem's "education of desire" and the contingency-coping strategies required

of education in our dangerously unpredictable postmodern world. And most significantly they all refuse the subsumption of the Other into any cultural, religious or politically fundamental position.

But let us return to those hard (and often economically intransigent) "realities" - this time those required of school provision. Critics generally see that any provision of education informed by postmodernism would be necessarily fragmented - entailing the kind of uncontrolled free-for-all which would provide dangerous opportunities for the conservative entrenchment of privileged local communities (Green, 1994, p80) - in South African terms a kind of haven for the most dubious supporters of Model C schools. Although deconstructive understandings would certainly challenge any authoritative centralised educational provision, it would seem to accommodate an overarching "guardrail" such as the current Teacher Education Policy initiative (COTEP), which provides non-prescriptive guidelines (in the form of its six "competencies") very well. This leaves, of course, the responsibilities for thrashing out the details to individuals. Never being able to fall back on the certainty of rules (or of funding) does not promise a smooth-running system - but rather endlessly complicated, threatening, but also exciting possibilities.

Thus this approach does not open a new door perhaps so much as awaken us to the possibilities which are all around us for educational initiatives and to a realisation that these may be driven by ethical considerations which are always entangled with political "realities" rather than necessarily driven by them. These ideas could become a step towards bringing to light an educational "non-system" for the New South Africa as a life-enhancing process - a different Enlightenment, perhaps, rather than a "better" or "more self-confident" canon (Morphet, 1995, p5) (13).

#### 4. (IN) CONCLUSION

Losing the clear-cut political boundaries of the Cold War has embroiled everybody in fragmentation and uncertainty - not least in uncertainty about the boundaries of political "reality" itself and its old hegemony over the less substantial ethical dimension of the social. In the recent past it was easy to delegate responsibility for action to a system of thought, but now the very conception of the political, is becoming increasingly "spongy" as Gwyn Prins, Director of Cambridge's Global Security programme, says (Prins, 1994, p6). Threats are no longer only political and military but increasingly ecological as well, and both Prins and the ex-marxist Professor of Social and Political theory at Oxford, GA Cohen, find that the economic and environmental fragility of late modernity can only see a way forward in ethical responsibility (Prins, 1994, p12; Cohen, 1994, p9) (14).

Finally I believe we can see the complex contemporary situation of South Africa as requiring that we - educationalists and others alike - acknowledge, with one of the most prescient of our contemporary writers, that there is (and ought to be) always a space between 'yes' and 'no' (J M Coetzee, 1991, p133). It may then become possible to rescue Mandela from the rather incongruous position alongside America's Founding Fathers assigned to him by Tony Morphet at the 1994 Kenton Education Conference - and suggest that he represents something more complex than simply the victory of reason over chaos - or the start of a new South African "Enlightenment" in the old sense.

Rationality suggested to Western minds that the overturning of apartheid would inevitably be accompanied by violence against the old oppressors, and these barricaded themselves into

their houses with home generators, candles, matches and tins of beans as the political change-over loomed. But 27 and 28 April 1994 saw instead an almost complete suspension of violence and long lines of patient people (some in extreme old age) waiting in the sun to vote. What emerged was indeed quite unpredictable. It involved a cabinet which could accommodate at the same time a Joe Slovo and a Constand Viljoen; the facilitation, by an ANC-led government, of Afrikaans farmers' immigration into independent Africa; a Truth Commission but not Nuremburg Trials; and the simple omission of the word "Orange" from the name of the Free State Province - leaving its state of freedom undecided between that recently won and that more distantly achieved. These indications do not suggest so much either victory or consensus as Conolly's "agony of difference" which must replace the "antagonism of identity" (Degenaar, 1995, p1). This agony denies Utopia, but provides openings to thinking the impossible - and so gives hope a chance (15).

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## 5. NOTES

1. The concept of "otherness" and its complex associations with postmodern thought became a focus of discussion when this Research Report (or an earlier version of it) was read as a paper at the Kenton Education Conference in Grahamstown. A questioner suggested that the postmodern constructed nature of the self requires the Other as some kind of antagonist against whom we posit ourselves, rather than towards whom we have an obligation. But concepts of absolute antagonisms (binary oppositions) are denied within deconstruction; and also, although the concept "slave" may only be understood through its relationship with the opposing concept "master", the interhuman relationship implied involves the slave's conception of herself in the eyes of her master, but also of other significant people, which

will all be relationships of obligation and involvement, not necessarily positive, but necessarily entangled.

2. Ernesto Laclau, rejecting these implications, argues that there can be no ethical moment to be derived from a constitutional indecidability or "space" (Laclau, 1995, p4) - that this conception would permit the establishment of totalitarian (unjust) systems as easily as the democratic ones which he sees unproblematically as just. But it is not the space (which he reads as freedom of choice) but the inability to delegate responsibility to a rule that this space entails, which denies totalitarianism.

3. Foucault's refusal of reappropriation and rejection of the "indignity of speaking for others" (Foucault, quoted in Kritzman 1988, pxvi) accords well with deconstructive (and Levinasian) conceptions of response and respect for the Other.

4. There are also very interesting links here with the thought of Mikhail Bakhtin in his later "postmodern" phase. Bakhtin sees that literary works are only understood within context - which cannot be that of the author - thus the reader becomes the author: "(t)hanks to this readerly authoring the 'text' becomes the 'work'" (Bakhtin, quoted in Pechey, 1993, p63)

5. Clearly there are differences between the thought of these two thinkers and Levinas's finding of a "first philosophy" would generally put him in another order of thought from the postmodern. However the "existential" situation of humanity as "beings in society", which is the position taken by Levinas, (and by Bauman) must be acknowledged in any ethical approach - postmodern or otherwise.

6. Masisi Kunene, acknowledged "Poet Laureate of Africa", abhors the current political (and

even commercial) exploitation of this concept but still insists that we must be serious about Ubuntu (Kunene, 1995).

7. Where these arguments are strong is paradoxically also where they are most vulnerable - for how can the strength of argument, analytical reason, guarantee the undoing of this kind of reasoning? The problem of immanent critique, of undoing logocentrism with the language of logocentrism - the only language available to us - is the acknowledged blind spot, the "dangerous supplement", which deconstructive readings face. But I believe that **both** analytical reason **and** the ungraspable which disrupts it, are mutually dependent and must be seen to co-exist in tension in human understanding and that an acknowledgement of this is in fact the direction which Derrida's thinking is currently taking. [David Bensusan's response to the Kenton paper from which this Report derives, pointed to this problem which he saw as a structural/poststructural dichotomy within the paper - and this is doubtless where the crux of serious critique must lie. But if it is so the problem lies equally (or more because they do not acknowledge an equal status for analytical reason) with Derrida and with Critchley - but not with Degenaar whose relational ethics avoids this problem].

8. Derrida has dealt quite extensively with the problems he finds with the notion of "natural rights" as associated with the initial establishment of liberal democratic states. He discusses it in the context of South Africa and apartheid in "Racism's Last Word" (Derrida, 1986).

9. Perhaps it could also be argued that the Structural Adjustment Programmes advocated by the World Bank miss the significance of the radical Otherness of Third World economies thus rendering their policies inappropriate in these contexts however rationally justifiable they may be within the discourse of Western economics.

10. Derrida uses the "blind spots" within Rousseau's "Essay on the Origin of Languages" to illustrate his contention that all claims to foundational truth are forced, unwittingly, to rely upon their supplements - in both senses of "additional to" and "insinuating itself in the place of" (Derrida, 1976, p79).

11. Derrida, defending himself against suggestions that he might be contaminated by Heidegger's Nazi sympathies in view of his debts to Heidegger's philosophy, says that deconstruction was designed primarily "to free oneself of totalitarianism as far as possible" (Zuckert, 1991, p353).

12. Gore is also concerned in this book with the antagonisms existing between defenders of critical and feminist pedagogies, despite their common desire for human rights - re-enforcing my contention that politics (in the narrow sense) gets in the way of ethics (in the widest sense) in current educational theory.

13. It is interesting that, whilst the popular conception is that the thought of both Derrida and Foucault is radically opposed to the Enlightenment - a closer reading of each reveals a much more interesting picture of radical critique of the Enlightenment opening rather towards a wider, less definable, but still recognisable Enlightenment project within their own philosophy. Nicholas Royle writes in the introduction to his recent book After Derrida: "the general proposition [is] that [Derrida's] work has to do with what he refers to as: 'a new affirmation and new ways of taking responsibility'... and indeed with something like a new enlightenment" (Royle, 1995, p1-2). And Foucault sees that "what we need to preserve is not what is left of the 'aufklarung' ... it is the very question of that event and its meaning" (Foucault, in Kritzman, p94).

14. Cohen sees that "while the most developed form of socialist thought, Marxism, saw equality as resting on abundance, we have to seek equality in the context and under the stimulus of scarcity" (Cohen, 1994, p10) and thus "we have to settle for ... more moral advocacy than used to be fashionable" (ibid. p9). Prins finds that "(g)lobal security studies look at humankind as a potential success, rather than as a demonstrated failure. We have to seek the philosophical basis in non-consequentialist thinking; which means not only abdication of 'realist' and short term goal-defined approaches, but also a different basis for social prescription: here pessimism will not do". Prins's rejection of instrumental reason here accords well with postmodern thought, and while his advocacy of a new "idealism" is clearly different, even postmodernists may see ecological threats as presently constituting all of humanity within one discourse. The underlying primary concern for the Other and for all living things, make these ideas not incompatible.

15. A recent example of the genius of Mandela to encapsulate the spirit of postmodern ethics was demonstrated, I believe, in his public courtesy to Ms Nigeria when her withdrawal from a beauty competition was necessitated by the Government's stand against the unacceptable regime in control of her country. The system was condemned - the innocent individual honoured and exempted. The tragic opposite of this was demonstrated in the O J Simpson case where a suspicion will always remain that a guilty individual was set free to assuage anger against a system and to condone the power of riches.

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