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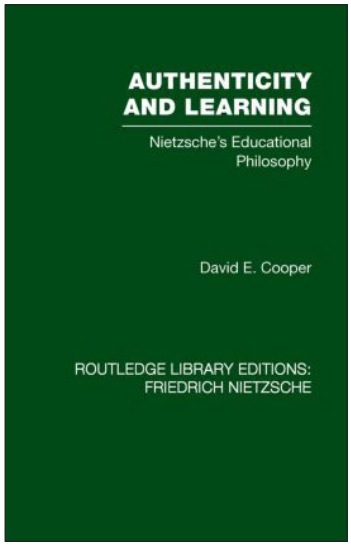
Retro Book Review

Authenticity and Learning: Nietzsche's Educational Philosophy (Modern Revivals in Philosophy)

by **David E. Cooper, Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon, 2009, 176pp**, **ISBN-10: 9780415562218**. First published in 1983 by Routledge and Kegan Paul; reprinted in 1991 by Gregg Revivals.

Reviewed by **Onel Brooks**



I first read this book in 1983 or 1984 soon after it was originally published. I was a young man engaged in writing a doctorate on Nietzsche's philosophy, busy reading and rereading Nietzsche's texts, regularly searching works that presented themselves as about Nietzsche's thinking, looking for his likeness, something that was attuned with the sense I made of what I found in Nietzsche's work. Back then, I thought that much of what I read about Nietzsche managed to miss the point of what he had to say, pressing him into one form or another, according to the preoccupation of the writer.

I am pleased to return to David E. Cooper's book 35 years later, not just because it takes me back to that time in my life when we had just left the 1970s, and I and many of the people I knew felt (to make use of one of Nietzsche's images) that we were facing open seas, littered with unexplored islands. Gender, race and sexuality could be approached more honestly, justly and courageously, and the Cold War was over; how could the world's tomorrows not be so much better than our yesterdays and today? We marched with CND (the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament), protested against apartheid, understood that oppression is interrelated, so all oppression affects us. How could we fail to make things better? Youth! Optimism!....

I am pleased to return to Cooper's book because I praised it then as obviously written by someone who had read and understood Nietzsche enough to focus on something that's central and essential to Nietzsche's thinking. It was a book that pointed things out, described, collected comments together, made coherent arguments about what Nietzsche has to say; it did not float far away from Nietzsche's own words, themes and concerns. I could not have known then that many of the themes and concerns I found in Nietzsche's work, some of which are outlined and argued in Cooper's sober and solid work, would follow me throughout the years: in my work in therapeutic communities, studying, practising and teaching psychotherapy, including my time at the Philadelphia Association and at Roehampton University. I should have known and been able to say, not only from reading Nietzsche and Cooper, but from reading Richard Rorty (1980, 1982), that when it comes to considering the implications of 'postmodernism', and more generally continental philosophy, for psychotherapy, Nietzsche's writings would be crucial.

'Most of what Nietzsche has to say', Cooper writes, 'is of perennial, and certainly contemporary, significance' (pp. 27–8). The main tasks of the book are identified as to give an account and interpretation of Nietzsche's philosophy of education; to give an introduction to, and interpretation of, Nietzsche's philosophy more generally; and to use Nietzsche in constructing a critique of the ideas and convictions that dominated education in Britain in the 1980s. Cooper means the idea that education must be about technology and technological mastery, vocations and being initiated into disciplines (p. viii); and even where it does not prepare a person for a conspicuously technological role, it needs to train them to take up a place in an economy that is geared to technological success, as this is where financial success clearly lies. Being educated means being ready to take your place in this sort of economy.

We may like to think about whether we've changed very much since the 1980s, or whether we have continued on the same path

with regard to what are the dominant notions of what it means to be educated. I would say that anyone who is interested in an introduction to what Nietzsche has to do with education, or an introduction to Nietzsche's philosophy generally, or a critique of some of the dominant notions and convictions in education and society at large, would benefit from reading Cooper's fine book.

In 1983, before reading David E. Cooper's book, I had a conversation with the continental philosopher David Wood in which I expressed the view that as Nietzsche is a precursor of Freud, and that from reading Nietzsche I should go on to studying Freud. David Wood, who told me that he was at the time more interested in Derrida and Levinas (he introduced me to Derrida; I had not heard of Levinas), encouraged me to go to Heidegger rather than Freud. Cooper's book relates Nietzsche's thinking to Heidegger's at many points, but only twice does he touch on Freud's work. Freud has been more prominent in my reading, practice and teaching over the years, but clearly the two Davids tried to impress on me that Heidegger's thinking is crucial. I could not have said in the mid-1980s that Nietzsche's concerns (Plato's, Kierkegaard's, Heidegger's and Wittgenstein's too) would be there waiting for me at many points in my life as a practitioner of social work, psychotherapy, and as a lecturer in psychotherapy and counselling. I could not have said then, although Cooper's book presented me with the means to do so, that Nietzsche and these philosophers are preoccupied with how we are nurtured, affected, changed by conversations with others, and the conversations with ourselves that we call thinking and writing. These concerns with how we learn, how we are educated, how language is central to this, how we become what we are and how we might betray ourself in this respect, clearly have implications for what happens in the classroom and the consulting room, as well as in the rooms and clearings outside of these two cultural practices, which, being cultural practices, are 'current', of a particular time and place.

One of the features of David Cooper's book on authenticity and learning, or authenticity and education, is that it makes use of the work of Martin Heidegger to argue that Nietzsche wants to encourage, persuade and seduce us to a serious concern with ourself, which must include a serious and honest assessment of ourself and our situation. Where Cooper states that 'Human beings are essentially distinguished by their capacity for self-concern' (p. 15), he is showing us how much Heidegger in *Being and Time* carries on Nietzsche's thinking. For example, Heidegger tells us that Dasein 'has its being to be' (Heidegger, 1927, p. 33), and that Dasein is 'ontologically distinguished by the fact that, in its very Being, that Being is an issue for it' (ibid., p. 320), and 'Dasein is an entity which, in its very Being, comports itself understandingly to that Being' (ibid., p. 78). Here, Heidegger is saying something about our human capacity to concern ourself seriously with the life we lead; and like Nietzsche before him, Heidegger points out that the others – Nietzsche tends to say 'the herd', Heidegger says 'Das Man' or 'one' – and the time and place in which we find ourselves will often provide us with what we should do, think and say, taking from us (we like to think) the responsibility of having to find our own way, a way that is really ours. Of course such an argument at least touches on Jean-Paul Sartre's work, with its notion of 'bad' faith – a link that Cooper himself makes (pp. 9–10) – and D. W. Winnicott's work, with its notion of true and false self and experience (Winnicott, 1960), which is a link that is not often made.

The first chapter of Cooper's book begins by sketching what is meant by 'the death of God' and his shadows. This is still one of the best accounts of what Nietzsche meant by 'the death of God', and it plunges right into Nietzsche's thinking. That is, Nietzsche does not only mean the loss of faith in Christianity. (Could anyone with some grasp of Europe's history from about the beginning of the sixteenth century to the end of the nineteenth, argue with the claim that in that part of the world religion became less central, and science and Reason came to dominate?) Nietzsche, Cooper points out, wants to tell us that we should have lost confidence in the shadows of God, which include 'Progress, the Perfectibility of Man, Historical Destiny, and Universal Morality' (p. 1), and, we might say, 'scientism'. In a world that is no longer watched over and guided by a supreme being or his surrogates, where we know something about the 'shabby origins' of our beliefs and values, we are, for the first time, in a position to appreciate, be concerned about and take responsibility for our life.

In his second chapter, Cooper tells us that Nietzsche's early lectures on education, when he was a professor at Basel, 'reveal a man struggling to decide whether he can, with integrity, remain a teacher within the public system' (p. 26). If Cooper's book is at all dated, this is not where it shows. I would find it remarkable to be in conversation with a teacher in our schools or universities who insists that she has never experienced such a struggle.

From here on, Cooper's main argument is clearly set out. It is that Nietzsche's philosophy is educational in that it is concerned with the education or cultivation of a new kind of person. Education, in this sense, is not about preparing someone so that they will make more money than others, become the sort of specialist that the economy needs, or even someone who is an indefatigable collector of knowledge for its own sake. Education as emphasizing speed and memory puts a person in the wrong place for what characterizes an educated person. The speedy regurgitating education (how to make yourself sick quickly), the production line, is more consistent with what we might call 'schooling' (p. 35); and if we follow Cornel West, we might say 'cheap schooling'. (However, 'schooling' may not be as valuable to Nietzsche and Cooper as 'education', but in terms of the money spent and the people who are aided by this kind of 'schooling' to remain lost, it is far from 'cheap'.)

Cooper is saying something crucial when he sets out Nietzsche's critique of 'technicism'. This, he tells us, is the idea that the technological power at our disposal is the most important feature of our time, and that we should be primarily concerned with mastering and using this power to increase our material welfare (p. 36). The real business of life is with making, producing, being effective and efficient. Yes, we are allowed a little leisure, a hobby or two, otherwise we might 'burn out'; we need 'down time' in order to keep us efficient. Nietzsche, Cooper tells us, argues that 'technicism' is incompatible

with authentic living (p. 39) and drives out other attitudes and ways of being (p. 41). We may tend to associate this sort of critique with Heidegger (1953), but it is hard for someone who reads Nietzsche to miss that this was one of his preoccupations.

As a thinker and writer, Nietzsche is very much concerned with words and what we do with them. He argues that we need above all to turn our attention to how we use language. For example, it is consistent with Nietzsche's thinking and with Cooper's argument in this book that phrases such as 'burn out' and 'down time' indicate how firmly technicist ways of thinking have got hold of how we speak and think. We make sense of our situations through what we say, and are tempted to say; what we are predisposed to say partly constitutes the situation. We need to turn our attention, in particular, to the 'web of cliches', metaphors, slogans and chatter with which we often greet situations (p. 56).

In a time when writers were more likely to identify Nietzsche as a Nazi, as just a relativist, as someone who is deliberately obscure, someone who is passionately engaged with something but it is not possible to say what that is, David Cooper was one of the writers who could see that as well as the 'No-saying' part of his writing, his critiques, polemics, his love of knocking down what is held in high esteem around him... – there is a 'Yes-saying' part of his writings in which he is preoccupied with education, cultivation and what it means to be human. And at the centre of this 'constructive' rather than wholly 'destructive' Nietzsche is the idea that what is crucial to education is 'linguistic self-mastery', practical attention to how we use our ears and our tongues, how we fail to listen, how we fail to speak thoughtfully, and be awake to our speaking, how we might refuse to allow ourselves to be habitually seduced and mystified by the words, metaphors, cliches and stories that are often repeated around us by everyone, including by us ourselves (p. 57). I could not say in 1983, but I can say now, that this attentiveness to and conscientiousness about language is, I think, also crucial to practising as a therapist.

Cooper certainly does not miss the fact that some of the themes found in Nietzsche are taken up by Ludwig Wittgenstein, and indeed are more likely to be associated with Wittgenstein. Cooper, writing about Nietzsche and Wittgenstein, comments on their 'remarkable kinship on so many large matters' (p. 80). Nietzsche is making arguments that will later be linked to Wittgenstein when Nietzsche claims that no two actions are the same, that we need to stay with the particular rather than seek to generalize, and that we see them as similar because we look only at their 'coarse exterior' (pp. 96–7). People are not similarly placed, and there are many aspects of what we do and what happens to us. We are often lazy. To think that our habitually using similar or the same words for different events or actions means that they are the same, is to be seduced by language or our linguistic habits into thinking and acting as if words or the sounds we make pick out essences in virtue of which they are the same. Nietzsche's philosophy helps us to consider the many layers and aspects of an action (p. 105).

There is, as I am indicating, much of value in this book and more than can be set out in a review. For instance, Cooper tells us that the notion of the 'overman' is to do with a 'totally authentic' person, the 'ideal product of "true" education' (p. 115). I find it remarkable that anyone could read much of Nietzsche's works – rather than take a quotation or two out of context – and not see that Cooper is beginning to get hold of what Nietzsche is trying to do with the 'overman'. How do you read a book called *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and not see that he is concerned with speaking and being unable to speak, listening and failing to listen, not being the right ears or mouth for this person, with what is in someone's heart rather than just in their mouth?

I have a sense that Cooper's book, and in particular the first few chapters, could have been written more clearly and in less words, and sometimes, such as on p. 83, the author uses 'men' where we are now more likely to write 'people'. He writes, 'I mean that there will be men who can never rest content with whatever theory and scheme is current'. This might give the reader a sense of the book being dated. I do not doubt that Cooper would hold that there are restless women as well as men in this respect. Perhaps I have less of a sense of a book on Nietzsche's philosophy and his philosophy of education needing to work so hard, as if engaged in an uphill struggle, precisely because there have been writers such as Cooper, who, in the face of the usual nonsense about Nietzsche, wrote this fine book.

I think of David Cooper as an important philosopher, open to engaging thoughtfully with ideas, someone who has been able to go his own way. I think this is an important book. This book and this author deserve to be read and celebrated.

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