Thinking Through Disenchantment: A Propaedeutic to Re-enchanting Education

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“Does that mean,” I said in some bewilderment, “that we must eat again of the tree of knowledge in order to return to the state of innocence?”

—Heinrich von Kleist

Introduction

In his recent book *The Allure of Order* (2013), sociologist Jal Mehta suggests that the major US educational reform movements of the 20th century can be characterized using Max Weber’s term rationalization. “As Weber famously noted,” says Mehta, “rationalization creates order out of chaos, but it does so at the cost of creating an ‘iron cage’ that often emphasizes the measurable to the exclusion of the meaningful” (2013, p. 6). Assuming that Mehta is right and that Weberian rationalization is a problematic tendency in educational reform—along with related conceptions “what works” (Beiesta 2007) “instrumentalization” (Higgins 2011) and externally motivated “standards, accountability, and outcome assessment schemes,”(Curren 2013, p. 244)—it seems like emphasizing the meaningful over the measurable in education is a worthwhile end; or, put in another way, and evoking another Weberian term, that the enchantment of education is desirable. Yet given the prevailing disenchantment of educational institutions, how should philosophers of education approach the task of re-enchanting education in the aftermath of positivism?

The purpose of this essay is to address this question within the context of Max Weber’s theoretical writings. The reader might wonder: “Why focus on Weber—especially given the exciting prospect of applying insights from contemporary re-enchantment proposals to the educational domain?” I choose to focus on Weber for two reasons. First, because all of the contemporary re-enchantment proposals I will discuss refer back to Weber’s notion of disenchantment without sufficient elaboration. A return to Weber’s writings, at the very least, provides useful clarification of the term. But, second, because Weber’s theoretical writings, as I will argue, suggest a pedagogy for thinking through disenchantment. A return to Weber’s writings thus provides guidance for moving forward as well, particularly for philosophers of education undertaking scholarly work on the re-enchantment of education. To make this argument, I will begin by briefly mentioning three contemporary re-enchantment proposals (John McDowell’s, Charles Taylor’s, and Akeel Bilgrami’s) before developing, at greater length, a distinction between Weber’s description of a disenchanted social condition and Weber’s prescriptions for teaching amidst a disenchanted social condition.

Contemporary Re-enchantment Proposals

To briefly describe these contemporary re-enchantment proposals, it is helpful to begin by pointing out that none of the philosophers mentioned above are proposing a naïve return a pre-scientific age (McDowell 1996, p. 72) Yet, all of the philosophers mentioned above note philosophical problems with the modern idea that nature is “brute and valueless” (Bilgrami 2014, p. 185) or that “the universe at in which we find ourselves is totally devoid of human meaning” (Taylor 2011, p. 116). These contemporary re-enchantment proposals, therefore, can be approached as responses to the philosophical problems with disenchanted conceptions of nature, subjects, and politics.

Re-enchanting Nature

For McDowell, the philosophical problem of disenchantment arises when the whole of nature is conceived scientistically, that is, in terms of natural laws alone. When this occurs, meaning is problematically reduced to facts about nature, and our receptivity to the demands of reason in the world, such as ethical demands, begin to provoke anxieties because they appear otherworldly or “spooky” (1996, p. 82). These anxieties
can be dismissed, according to McDowell, by recalling Aristotle’s conception of second nature, which “initiation into conceptual capacities which include responsiveness to other rational demands besides those of ethics...having one’s eyes opened to reasons at large by acquiring a second nature” (1996, p. 84). Thus, for McDowell, the fact that meaning is in the world—and, by implication, that the world is not utterly disenchanted—can be explained by a person’s initiation into language and culture, their formation or Bildung, which explains their receptivity to the demands of reason in the world and refutes a (disenchanted) scientistic naturalism.

Re-enchanting Subjects

Inspired by Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty’s critique of modern epistemology—which affirms that “Our grasp of the world is not simply a representation in us [but] resides rather in our dealing with reality” (Taylor 2011, p. 117)—Charles Taylor’s re-enchantment proposal responds to the problem of the atomistic modern subject. As Taylor sees it the modern subject can be described as “buffered”—i.e., disengaged from meanings and values in the natural and social world (Taylor 2007, p. 42). Although not quite harkening back to a pre-modern “porous” self—who is haplessly susceptible to a world of spirits—Taylor’s re-enchantment proposal calls for the:

...need to enlarge our palette of ...points of contact with fullness [robust meanings in the world], because we are too prone in our age to think of this contact in terms of “experience”; and to think of experience as something subjective, distinct from the object experienced; and as something to do with our feelings, distinct from changes in our being: dispositions, orientations, the bent of our lives, etc.. (2007, p. 730)

In contrast to McDowell, who diagnoses the philosophical anxieties provoked by a disenchanted view of nature, Taylor’s work diagnoses the kind of subject produced by a disenchanted (or “secular”) age. His re-enchantment proposal is thus a response to what is deemed problematic about disenchanted modern subjects.

Re-enchanting Politics

Suggesting a third re-enchantment proposal, Akeel Bilgrami’s work aims to draw out the “humane and radical political possibilities” (2014, p. 201) in the Romantic metaphysics as articulated by M.H. Abrahams in Natural Supernaturalism (1971). Bilgrami’s concern with disenchantment—which he traces back to William Blake—involves a political critique of the collective understanding that shapes and implements policy by evacuating values. Bilgrami finds the most critical and creative resources for critiquing what we might call “disenchanted policy” to be found in everyday perceptions of the world, which are “shot through with value properties, that is to say, enchanted in the low-profile sense” (2014, p. 205). The political project motivated by Bilgrami’s re-enchantment proposal is thus a proposal to remove the “boundary” that separates the frame of disenchanted policy from the frame of ordinary, quotidian enchantment, such that everyday values and responses to the world can be brought to bear on value-neutral policies that perpetuate the disenchantment of political life.

Recalling Mehta’s line that the history of US educational reform “emphasizes the measurable to the exclusion of the meaningful,” there is an inclination to put these contemporary re-enchantment proposals to immediate work. If our upbringing is what enables us to become receptive to the demands of reason in the world, as McDowell notes, and thus “education makes us who we are” (Backhurst 2011, p. 162), then perhaps philosophers of education could use McDowell’s work to identify the misplaced anxiety which drives educational reformers to make teachers and students meet
curricular standards derived from a disenchanted conception of (human) nature. And, if full and robust meanings are available in the world, as Taylor notes, perhaps philosophers of education could apply Taylor’s work to show how students are being problematically buffered by an education that teaches them to prioritize atomistic “points” above transformation. And finally, if the most creative political possibilities are inherent in everyday, “quotidian” values, maybe philosophers of education could deploy Bilgrami’s work to criticize graduate studies in law and policy that, by inculcating a value-neutral language and disposition, produce “experts” who create policy designed to help the disadvantaged but who, because of their atrophied receptivity to moral values, can only discern in the voices of ordinary people ignorance and noise.

Granting the exciting opportunities to think through the educational implications of these contemporary re-enchantment proposals, a return to Weber’s theoretical writings may initially appear to be a step in the wrong direction. This worry arises from the fact that Weber’s understanding of disenchantment has been largely confined to a description of a disenchanted social condition. Few critics have considered that Weber meant something more by disenchantment and none (to my knowledge) have argued that his prescriptive remarks about pedagogy can be understood as a guide for thinking through disenchantment, or, what we might call a propaedeutic to re-enchanting education.

A Disenchanted Orientation

The purpose of this section is to briefly define and note connections between Weber’s (1) descriptions of a disenchanted social condition (2) intellectual positions and (3) conception of pedagogy. These are necessary first steps in my argument that Weber provides a distinct pedagogy for thinking through disenchantment.

Disenchantment as a social condition

Weber provides two distinct but related definitions of disenchantment (Entzauberung) as a social condition. The first, more literal definition, is a social condition where magical or incalculable forces are no longer used to explain occurrences in the world. There is literally an entz (de-) zauberung (magicization) of the world (cf. Green 2005, p. 52). This occurs, Weber explains, as rational methods and abstract rules begin to govern the conduct of man and nature; thus for every unknown occurrence (e.g., the mysterious death of hundreds of birds) an explanation, in principle, can be given by an expert. As Weber explains: “….the knowledge or belief that if we only wanted to we could learn at any time that there are, in principle, no mysterious unpredictable forces in play, but that all things—in principle—can be controlled through calculation” Weber 2008, p. 35). According to this first definition, expert testimony removes agency from mystery and fixes our expectation of the world’s possibilities.

Weber’s second definition of disenchantment pertains to the fragmentation of social values. In a disenchanted age, originally unified social values become fragmented into autonomous value domains, which Weber identified as the religious, economic, political, aesthetic, erotic, and intellectual. To illustrate this definition, whereas a member of the Canaanite cult found correspondence between activities such as worshiping the male sky god and female earth goddess, sexual intimacy and procreation, labor in the field and the public celebration of harvest (cf. Ricour 1995, ch. 2), according to this second sense of disenchantment, the “organic unity” of life is broken into distinct value domains with autonomous logics. So while in the Canaanite cult, to quote Friedrich Schiller, “Everything to the initiate’s eye / showed a trace of a [g]od,” the modern urbanite living in a disenchanted social condition may unequivocally distinguish—at least
verbally, if not psychologically—between non-overlapping spheres of life, say their “religious life,” “sex life,” “financial life,” and so on. As one scholar summarizes: “…meaning no longer resides in axiomatically shared and publicly inscribed beliefs which constitute the epistemic and moral community” (Jenkins 2000, p. 15) These two definitions of a disenchanted social condition relate to the two intellectual positions that Weber endorsed throughout his career, namely, the fact/value distinction and value collision.

*Intellectual positions*

The fact/value distinction relates to the first definition of disenchantment and rests on the ideas that, as Phillip Gorski explains, facts exist in an “intransitive realm that is clearly bounded from the influence of value” and “values [are] subjective and relative.” (2013, p. 546). Now Weber's description of the “the (often-thin) line that separates science from belief” does not seem to amount to an “intransitive realm,” but this gets ahead of my argument (Weber 2014, p. 137).

Value collision relates to the second definition of disenchantment and rests on the notion that if we want to understand the world as it is we must not look for a unity or harmony of values but aim to understand values in conflict. Weber used the metaphor of disenchanted polytheism to explain value collision. As he explains in “Science as a Vocation”:

…as long as life remains immanent as is interpreted in its own terms, it knows only of an unceasing struggle of these gods with one another. Or speaking directly, the ultimately possible attitudes towards life are irreconcilable, and hence their struggle can never be brought to a final conclusion (1958, p. 152).

Employing a metaphor of disenchanted polytheism is a rather enchanting way of describing disenchantment, but this gets ahead of my argument too.

For the time being, note that the fact/value distinction and value collision are both intellectual positions that appear to entrench a disenchanted social condition. Indeed, if these are the only ways to intellectually understand the social world, Weber appears to be denouncing any attempt to understand it otherwise. If we join the philosophers mentioned above and are troubled by features of a disenchanted world (e.g., scientism, buffered selves, value-free policy), we should be troubled by Weber's apparent endorsement of it. A fortiori, if we are dismayed by initiatives resembling “Weberian rationalization” in educational reform, we should also be dismayed that Weber's pedagogical principles are premised on the fact/value distinction and value collision.

*Pedagogy*

In his lecture “The meaning of ‘value freedom’” (first presented 1914), we find an explicit statement of Weber’s pedagogical principles—which are echoed throughout his canon. In “The meaning of ‘value freedom’” Weber remarks:

…what the student should learn above all from their professor in the lecture hall is (1) the ability to content himself with simply carrying out a given task; (2) to face facts—including (indeed: above all) those that are uncomfortable for him personally—and to distinguish between stating [such facts] and taking an evaluative stand with regard to them; (3) to rate his own person less highly than the task [before him]; and, consequently, to suppress the desire to parade, unbidden, his personal tastes or other feelings (2014, p. 307)
The presence of the fact/value distinction is explicit in item (2), but the espousal of value collision also undergirds his pedagogical principles.

Weber's endorsement of teaching value collision rests upon the strong claim that the world will not be understood and self-knowledge will not be achieved if value collision is ignored. Endorsing value collision, says Weber, is tantamount to eating from the "fruit of the tree of knowledge;" it is necessary for a self-determined life, i.e., one that is "lived in full awareness" and one that "...chooses its own fate—the meaning, that is, of its activity and being" (2014, p. 315). Accordingly, it seems as though Weber does not simply endorse a disenchanted methodology but endorses forming disenchanted people too. Prominent critiques of Weber can be interpreted according to this pedagogical worry (cf. Habermas 1984, Strauss1965). If these critiques are correct, then a Weberian pedagogy merely teaches students how to better resign to disenchantment. But, as I will now suggest, Weber’s remarks on disenchantment amount to something more than a description of a disenchanted social condition.

Thinking Through Disenchantment

That there is something more at stake in Weber’s understanding of disenchantment is suggested in the following line from “Science as a Vocation.” Responding to the question of whether or not science has a meaningful vocation, Weber states:

I answer the question in the affirmative through my own work. And I do it precisely from the standpoint that hates intellectualism and regards it as the worst devil, just as today’s young people do, or—more often—imagine they do. There is a saying that applies to such people: “Reflect: the devil is old; grow old to understand him!” This has nothing to do with a date on a birth certificate. Rather, the sense is that we must not flee from the devil if we want to get the better of him, as so many do today, but must first become thoroughly acquainted with his ways, in order to see what his power and his limitations are (2008, p. 48).

This line does not seem to guide students towards resignation. Quite the contrary: it evokes realism "we must not flee from the devil"—but it also evokes something more “if we want to get the better of him.” What can be made of this “something more”?

Political philosopher Jeffrey Green argues that Weber is not simply referring to disenchantment as a social condition in his lecture “Science as a Vocation,” but also testifying to disenchantment as a philosophical act. Like Nietzsche’s madman proclaiming “God is dead” to a crowd of unbelievers, Green claims that Weber’s philosophical testimony "generates a moral direction out of the very insistence that moral direction is lacking" (2005, p. 55). According to Green’s interpretation: “Disenchantment, as a philosophical pronouncement, is thus engaged in two struggles: against those who think they possess what is in fact missing and against those who have no sense what is missing” (2005, p. 66). Depending upon the audience, in other words, Weber’s testimony to disenchantment might mean a sober realism for those who “think they possess” what is missing or an uncomfortable romanticism for those with “no sense” of what is missing.

Might Green’s observation mean something more for Weber’s conception of pedagogy? As I see it, Green’s insight can be extended into the intellectual positions that inform Weber’s conception of pedagogy. Indeed, if these intellectual positions also testify to the philosophical meaning of disenchantment, the claim that Weber’s pedagogy helps us to think through disenchantment becomes less absurd and more akin to the contemporary re-enchantment proposals mentioned above.
Methods of An Enchanted Educator

When Weber is read as an educator we find a rare synthesis of political realism and romanticism. There is nothing, as far as I have read, resembling Weber’s position in the field of philosophy of education. However, rather than pasting together two abstract terms “political realism” and “romanticism,” a surer explication of Weber’s pedagogy can be achieved by considering what occurs when the intellectual positions, described above, supplement each other.

It is important to recall that the intellectual position of value collision—according to Weber—is premised upon the importance of ultimate, personal decisions. If people’s lives are not to be carried out in a shallow manner, says Weber, then they must not “evade the choice between “God” and the “Devil,” and the fundamental personal decision as to which of the conflicting values belongs to the realm of one, and which to the other” (2014, p. 315). According to critics, this valorization of personal decision may result in fanaticism. Yet if we live in an age of calculated explanations, then surely the educator can provide the student with some careful guidance while respecting the formative power of their personal decisions.

For Weber, careful guidance occurs by teaching students the history of the value conflicts that occur in the present. This is how the fact/value distinction bears upon value collision. Instead of throwing students into the fray to make sense of the various value conflicts in their lives, or instead of playing the sophistical role of a norm consultant who advises students on the quickest path towards any desired life, the Weberian educator guides students by teaching them the history of value conflicts. Such a history involves teaching students about the course of human interests (material and ideal) but also about the ideas that have “like switchmen…determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest” (1958, p. 208). A student may arbitrarily choose to ignore these lessons and opt to blaze their own trail to happiness. However, the Weberian educator would remind such a student, using facts and ideas from history, that the values they choose have fueled human interests long before this particular “…desire to parade, unbidden, [their] personal tastes or other feelings” (2014, p. 307).

The fact/value distinction thus provides substantive and realistic guidance for students living in a disenchanted world. The formal quality of the distinction between facts and values does not remain formal as it is filled in (as the teacher must acknowledge) by the student’s particular and substantive desires. And so, the teacher who challenges students to approach their desires and values objectively is not encouraging relativism, where all values are equally desirable, but clarifying and rendering responsible the student’s understanding of what a commitment to x value entails. Objectivity, therefore, becomes a personal aspiration versus a given outcome, a solid subjectivity versus a “view from nowhere.” Yet, does this aspiration for objectivity serve to inoculate the problem of value collision and evade a world where diverse values conflict? The answer is no.

The Weberian educator, who supplements the fact/value distinction with value collision, does not simply refer to value-free facts. In presenting facts about particular values, the educator must also consciously acknowledge that there is something more at play than what can be captured by intellectual explanations. Intellectual explanations are only one means of responding to the world and while intellectual explanations have “power” they also have “limitations.”

Recalling Green’s observation that Weber performs disenchantment as a philosophical pronouncement, as I see it, the Weberian educator must also preform value collision when stating facts, because the presentation of facts are undergirded by intellectual values (e.g., academic trends, consistency, precision, rigor), and these
values—even the value of reason itself—does not exhaust reality. Pascal writes: "Reason’s last step is the recognition that there are an infinite number of things which are beyond it. It is merely feeble if it does not go as far as to realize that" (Pascal 1984, p. 85). I think supplementing the fact/value distinction with value collision provides an analogous reminder, because values (at least partially) constitute a world that is not simply disenchanted. The persuasive pull of some of these values for certain people cannot be exhausted by third-person explanations or intellectual genealogies. If this occurs, alternative forms of persuasion are evacuated from the world, and an understanding of the world and one’s purposes therein diminish. Weber might say the thoughts of an intellectual in our disenchanted age are merely feeble if they do not realize value collision. But, more to the point of this essay, the lessons of an educator, who presents intellectual lessons as an unquestionable path to a totality of values, guides students away from the problem of thinking through a disenchanted social condition. Weber makes it clear that totalizing intellectual explanations (from Platonism to scientism) do not encompass all values. The Weberian educator sees a pantheon of values and does not presume to govern it. Although buried in a qualification, I find it highly suggestive that in “Science as a Vocation”—a testimony to the disenchantment of the world—Weber opts to leave the educator enchanted. He claims “mastery of [pedagogy] is a personal gift”—a phrase he uses elsewhere to denote divinity or grace—“and by no means necessarily coincides with the scientific abilities of a scholar” (Weber 1958 p. 79). The task of the Weberian educator is not to produce intellectuals per se; but to serve “moral powers” in the world by guiding students towards self-determination and encouraging students to think clearly and responsibly about persuasive and non-univocal values in the world. Expressed dramatically, the Weberian educator educates the capacity of students to knowingly commit to a “god” or “weltanschauung” position and, through an educated commitment, the Weberian educator teaches students to remain faithful to themselves. The Weberian educator, accordingly, must relentlessly tow the “often hair-thin line” that separates science from belief, all the while seeking motivation from a thin but powerful educational aim: educating people who are awake to and reflective about their purposes in the world, we might say, educating people who are re-enchanted.

Expressed in terms of the contemporary re-enchantment proposals mentioned earlier, the “personal gift” of the Weberian educator is to educate less anxious people: that is, people who have learned to affirm the “meaning...of [their] activity and being” in the world. It is to educate less buffered people: that is, people who have learned to heed the beckoning of the task calling them. And it is to educate people of courage and conviction: that is, people who have learned to recognize the power and limitations of disenchanted sets by knowingly responding to the drama of everyday values, such that “…the world is all the more affirmed as the theatre of [g]od-willed activity” (Weber 1958, p. 291).

Conclusion: A Guide for Re-enchantment Proposals

This essay argues that Weber offers a pedagogical method for thinking through disenchantment. As the methods of the Weberian educator point to something more than a disenchanted social condition, the Weberian educator does not entrench disenchantment but guides students towards re-enchantment, that is, a state where decisions are not reducible to a calculation of prudential reasons, and non-fragmented and self-determined purposes govern the student’s activities. In light of Weber’s pedagogy, I’ll conclude with a question: Is undertaking systematic scholarly work about re-enchantment of education desirable?
Recent philosophical re-enchantment proposals, ripe for application, may prompt a quick “yes.” Like positivism, disenchantment has been deemed a “philosophical fallacy,”¹ and philosophers of education are charged with pointing this out (I assume) to any and all who will listen. Yet a return to Weber’s work can help us to see why a hasty “yes” to this question will not suffice. Recalling Green’s apt description, “Disenchantment, as a philosophical pronouncement, is thus engaged in two struggles: against those who think they possess what is in fact missing and against those who have no sense what is missing” (2006, p. 66) Weber’s pedagogy for thinking through disenchantment helps students to realistically acknowledge a disenchanted social condition (i.e., to realize what is missing and the institutions that insure its absence) but also to romantically overcome this position (i.e., to respond to everyday values with responsibility and conviction amidst disenchanted institutions). The synthesis might amount to what Rogers Brubaker described as an “ethos of engaged opposition” and “responsible struggle” (Brubaker 1984, p. 111); or perhaps what Karl Löwith described as “the contradiction, always conquered anew, between the recognition of a rationalized world and the counter-tendency towards freedom for self-responsibility” (Löwith 1993, p. 77). However described, I think philosophers of education who are keen to write about the re-enchantment of education would benefit from “growing old with the devil”—from thinking through disenchantment—and from examining their inclination to pursue re-enchantment (“states of innocence” some might say) by intellectual means.

REFERENCES


¹As suggested by Prof. Paul Standish in a recent conversation (10/11/2014).


