

ROBERT LEE

Schools for Simians

Quigley the gorilla, according the satirical news site The Onion, has been able to be taught its own death. This poor gorilla contemplates existence itself as a “cruel joke.” The reason why this fake newscast comes off as so absurd is the gorilla’s “complex emotions” as it realizes that its own muscles will eventually decompose. The news segment is clearly a parody of the humanizing ape-learning experiments such as those on Koko the gorilla and Kanzi the bonobo. If Quigley were a human being, the humor would certainly turn into a stark seriousness, for human beings seem existentially oriented toward their deaths in a way forever unfamiliar to the earlier pre-humans. Human beings can and must learn things about life that apes cannot.

For many people education has become a preparation machine, i.e. a merely useful apparatus for getting young people into the swing of everyday work and environmental obstacles. In this essay, it will be proposed that this view of education as mere preparation is animalistic and more relevant to monkeys than it is to people. Human beings need much more to be introduced to the world in which they historically move. In order to get this point across, this work will examine and explore three issues: first, what education is for and how it separates itself from mere animalistic preparation; second, how conceptions of adaptability and practicality play out in a variety of scholastic attitudes; lastly, what such attitudes do to many aspects of one’s educational life.

One should keep in mind that as these prevalent attitudes toward education are discussed, it is not being said that the concepts of adaptability and practicality are bad in and of themselves. These days, students should of course learn to adapt and be practical in their decisions. The point here is that holding these concepts as *central* to what a good education should be keeps important aspects of human life hidden and only allows mere preparation for one’s environment as the aim of education.

The Environment and the World: Preparation and Education

Before the concepts of adaptability and practicality are explicated, and how they play out in educational practice is revealed, what must first be explained is why a human being should become educated at all. One might ask what education is if it is so important to do correctly and holds so much weight for the society at large.

20th century German thinker, Hannah Arendt, discussed the purpose of education in an essay entitled “The Crisis in Education.” For Arendt, education acts as a transitory period between the private domain of the home and the world itself.¹ This means that for children the first socially decided and institutional introduction to the world is through schooling. What is important to note here for the purposes of this essay is that this is a specifically human practice. Human beings educate their young while animals merely *prepare* their young. This distinction here is heavily inspired by Arendt:

IF THE CHILD WERE NOT A NEWCOMER IN THIS HUMAN WORLD BUT SIMPLY A NOT YET FINISHED LIVING CREATURE, EDUCATION WOULD BE JUST A FUNCTION OF LIFE AND WOULD NEED TO CONSIST IN NOTHING SAVE THAT CONCERN FOR THE SUSTENANCE OF LIFE AND THAT TRAINING AND PRACTICE IN LIVING THAT ALL ANIMALS ASSUME IN RESPECT TO THEIR YOUNG.²

It seems that while animals prepare their young for an *environment*, human beings educate their young into a *world*. Now, the differences between environment and world must be briefly touched upon.

First of all, the environment is something that must be adapted to. If an animal fails to adapt to an environment adequately, it will fail to survive. As most people know, this is the process that drives and steers evolution. Clever critters with specific traits or skills will surpass those without. If the environment changes, the creatures had better change with it or else be left behind. Eventually down the evolutionary line, however, animals begin to enter into a curious state of hominization. Before the human being emerges from the evolutionary scrimmage, animals begin to self-effect their own environments. For instance, they begin to organize themselves into helpful herd formations or use gizmos like rocks and sticks to throw, smash, and cut. The contemporary German philosopher, Peter Sloterdijk, calls this a “greenhouse effect,” where the animal, or animal-herd, is “being-in-the-greenhouse-environment” insofar as it effects its own climate.³ At this point, once the animal is a climate-former, evolution begins to favor those that can not only adapt to but change their own environments. When looking at the human being, being-in-the-greenhouse has taken such a dramatic effect that one can hardly call it being-in-the-environment at all. Now, the human being is in a world and is a world-creator.

Human groups take care of themselves in a “cultural incubator, their greenhouse of technology, art, and customs” as they live mostly in the past and future rather than “the continual present of the animal.”⁴

1

Martin Heidegger: *What Is Called Thinking* (Harper Torchbooks. NY, SF, London: 1968) pg. 6

2

Thinking inceptively refers to a going back to origins; but in no way should it be understood in the literal and reactionary sense of a simple redoing or repetition of an already worn out belief system (this would constitute an ideology); rather, it involves an act of interpretation (hermeneutic) which returns to a decisive historical ‘event’ which, although past, still constitutes the horizon of our present condition. One returns in order to recollect a certain crisis and the problematic situation which is still our own. We will discuss the word hermeneutics (interpretation) in the latter part of our talk.

3

Plato, *The Dialogues of Plato*; The Republic Book VII (University of Chicago Great Books, vol.7, 1952) p. 388.

4

See: D.J. Ciraulo, *Deflationary Essays*, “The Children of the Screen” (D. Monroe Press, San Jose, Ca, 2018).

The mere animal cannot see far beyond the obstacles immediately present as this is what characterizes such an environment. The world, however, manifests itself in a whole new range of experiences. Human beings are stuck out into the striking indeterminacy of the world. In Martin Heidegger's words, the human being is "held out into the nothing."⁵

Being held out into indeterminacy, people can see that the world is a certain way but does not have to be. The human world is always a possible world as opposed to the animal's environment which is always actual and immediate. The latter's youth only require a preparation to deal with a singular set environment, while the former's youth require more due to the complexity of the world's possibilities.

It is then education that introduces the student to a world which, as opposed to the primate's environment, has a history, a culture, civilizations, institutions, and various dominating worldviews. These aspects of human life have structurally emerged from a high level of complex greenhouse formations. Without equivocation, the dog has no worldview; the chimpanzee has no culture; the gorilla has no history. Thus, an education, as an introduction to the world, must do a lot more than simply prepare or encourage students to conform to an actual environment in its brute immediacy. The student must be shown a world that can either be changed or conserved. After all, possible human beings are world-creators whose choices stand before them. As Herbert Marcuse said in *One-Dimensional Man*, "The way in which a society organizes the life of its members involves an initial choice between historical alternatives which are determined by the inherited level of the material and intellectual culture."⁶ Marcuse has just given us the word "inheritance." Given a material and intellectual heritage, the human being must choose between a set number of historical possibilities for society. Whether the possibility eventually chosen contains the same state of affairs as the current actuality or not is irrelevant here. What matters is that, for an authentic choice to be made at all, the young person must be shown his or her world-creating potentialities through the inheritance of a material and intellectual culture.

In order for a good education to be given, the young must be introduced to a good deal of this heritage. This includes, not only an overview of significant historical events, but also a history of the various frames of thought including myth, religion, philosophy, and the sciences. The young must be informed about how western civilization got to the highly technologized and affluent state it is in today. They must also understand, as much as possible, how the present mindsets and sensibilities of the culture, that is, the constituents of the prevailing ideology, came to be. With this historical, technological, affluent, and intellectual heritage in mind, human beings can make an informed, authentic choice on whether the world's prevailing order should be changed or conserved; to do otherwise would entail an indoctrination to an ideology, or to what is thought of as the given reality.

5

Peter Sloterdijk, *Spheres I, II and III* (Semiotext(e), Pasadena, CA, 2014); also see: Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (Anchor Books, New York, 1969).

6

See: Eric Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections* (Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, London 1989) p. 97.

It is true that both secondary and post-secondary educations teach courses such as history; but despite being introduced to such history, young people are not being taught to take hold of it. There is, in other words, no reason to learn it. There is not too much of a reason to cling to the past if what matters is the present. Why do students not care more about history like they do mathematics? With the high costs of post-secondary education and a highly competitive job market, the world has disguised itself as a new environment. Again, animals prepare for an environment while human beings are educated for the world. When the world is disguised as an unchangeable environment, one must adapt just like the animal and be 'practical' in one's investments.

If education is understood as mere preparation, then it would follow that the history of events and ideas would be useless for engineering. This imposed behavior by a new environment is akin to what Marcuse in *Eros and Civilization* calls the 'reality principle.' What is central to the human being (that is, of being a creator of this world) is taken away. According to the reality principle, human beings must submit to the environment in which they find themselves. Marcuse suggests that what we call the reality principle should rather be called the 'performance principle' which "operates as an independent power to which individuals must submit if they want to live... Men do not live their own lives but perform pre-established functions."⁷ This implies that what is thought of as a reality is in fact an imperative to comply with the current economic forces.

7

For the classic exposition of Hegel's master-slave dialectic, see: Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* (Basic Books, Ithaca, London 1969) ch.2; for, hopefully, a more humorous take, see my essay on Moby Dick: "We Slaves, or the Problem of Ahab's Whale-Bone-Leg" in *Deflationary Essays* (Available on Amazon).

Let's be Practical

So far, what education is for and the differences between the human world and the animalistic environment have been discussed. Now, the concepts of adaptability and practicality as they manifest themselves in today's attitudes toward education will be explored.

Today, young people are faced with a world they must adapt to, the new environment. They must think from a young age about getting a high-paying job and investing large sums of money that are never a guarantee for financial success or stability. The young person is not treated as a potential world-creator that must be shown the world that emerges from history, their cultural incubator. The young person is treated, if it may be put crudely, as a bonobo. Schools are preparatory jungle gyms for bonobo-humanoids that will eventually have to enter into the dangerous jungle-workforce. Our view of education as mere preparation for a dangerous, harsh environment fits exceedingly well with the attitude that human beings are simply primates like any other, just slightly more intelligent. Such a view of the world as jungle-environment becomes completely justified when everyone is viewed as an animal like any other in nature. There will naturally be winners and losers as many self-sufficient individuals climb the hierarchy in this competitive animal kingdom. Human society is simply a global community of bonobos fighting for limited resources.

An example of this mindset is the adaptive hierarchy of the disciplines built purely on practicality. People are swift to point out the school subjects they deem useless or unnecessary. History, English literature, and the arts tend to go toward the top of that list. They are not conceived as practical and one should not have to learn too much from them in the same way that the bonobo should not have to learn to hula hoop or juggle. Bonobos must prepare for the jungle which will present its own fixed obstacles. The human being, seen as a primate, should get through its general education quickly so that it can focus on important things like STEM because that is what the mostly unchangeable environment calls for. Of course, the environment can change due to shifts in the market, but it is not usually the will of the community at large.

Animals, as we all know, adapt to their various habitats. Massive acclimatization is rare for the animal and very often, when environmental conditions change drastically, members of a species, who would otherwise be prospering, die. The same thing, in accordance with this new environment, is true for human-bonobos. It remains a mystery to most where automation will take the human species and which fields of study will be needed most in the coming decades. Job markets are very often oversaturated with too many incoming workers. For now, science and technology are simply a best bet and there remains no guarantee that changing conditions do not loom over the horizon due to a multitude of possible environmental modifications. All of the competing members must be ready for the worst.

The animal-human false equivalency plays out when the young are prepared for an environment. Adaptability is the skill employers are looking for while being flexible will get one the work hours. What is the best, practical way students can prepare for such conditions? Everywhere, parents are making sure that their children are building specialized skills. Not just any skills should be learned, though, since the marketplace only has little room for historians, musicians, and latin-speakers. The skills that must be learned are reading, writing, and primarily mathematics. Thus comes the pressure on students to get into the most advanced math classes possible. It tends to be agreed that, generally speaking, mathematicians in engineering and the natural sciences are highly employable, while daydreamers in the fine arts are not. If one is being practical and adapting adequately to changing conditions, he or she will major in STEM and ignore “fluff” or “Twinkie” majors.

Adaptability itself becomes a skill to learn in the adaptive process. This adaptive skill of adaptability carries especially the human-bonobo overtone. The University of Kent online article, “Adaptability and Flexibility,” has a list of supporting quotes on the right hand side of the screen. The quote third-closest to the top is from Charles Darwin himself explaining how the species that survives is the one most adaptable to change.⁸ Included in this article as well is the most depressing picture of a business man on a camel. Such a man is placed in a harsh desert environment. Luckily, he has his useful camel to help him adapt. The flexible person is able to work in any environment for it will be forever pre-given. In a University of Manchester article about adaptability, the reader

8
Ibid Plato.

is confronted immediately by the picture of a running leopard.⁹ This image is a manifestation of a “survival of the fittest” attitude. In both examples, the student is shown that he or she is simply an animal like any other that must change according to its environment. The changing environment is clearly out of control for the young and there is nothing to actively change or conserve. Reality is what it is and that is that. Arguments about the potential for societal change can be ended with short ideological phrases such as, “Get with the program,” or, “What can you do? Life’s unfair.” The cynical outlooks carried by the young are therefore justified and repeatedly reaffirmed by the imposing structures of thought.

Human beings, again, are seen as mere primates. With this equation of the human to the animalistic primate, the Pan paniscus becomes a portrayer of morality and culture just like the Homo sapiens. Melissa Hogenboom’s article states that, “Many scientists are now convinced that all these traits, once considered the hallmarks of humanity, are also found in animals.” She goes on to claim that, “Chimpanzees even have culture. They aren’t composing symphonies but culture can be defined as passing on knowledge, habits and transmission from one generation to the next.”¹⁰ If one trusts that bonobos have a culture, as Hogenboom and many others say, then humans are certainly not going to be seen as special in this aspect.

However, despite the fact that bonobos have learned behaviors and practices, subtle acts of mimesis, they do not have culture. Simians remain locked in an excremental cycle of food-waste-life-death.¹¹ Only human communities have shared experiences of the sacred and profane (see Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*). Likewise, only human communities can cherish works of art or consume wine ritualistically. Even mimetically learned behaviors among human beings go a step further into the realm of historicity by having a relation to *tradition*; this requires a recollection and “keeping the past alive,” i.e. not merely living in the present. Giving mere acts of imitation the name “culture” disrupts what human beings actually experience as a cultural incubator. Just as the equation between human and animal culture is unjustified, so is the current animalistic attitude toward education. Hogenboom, when commenting on animals and humans, reveals the unfortunate attitude that is currently gaining strength in our society: ...“the point is that the differences are not stark and absolute, but rather a matter of degree—and they get subtler the more we investigate them. By that measure, humans are no more unique than any other animal.”¹² With this, the human being is roughly equated with the animal. One should expect consequences from this form of thought. (Perhaps, we should recall Bergson’s distinction between a difference of degree, and a difference in kind?)

9

Much has been written on the term pharmakon which meant for the Greeks both a cure and a poison; see: Jacques Derrida’s essay “Plato’s Pharmacy” in *Dissemination* (Continuum, London, New York, 1981); also see: Bernard Stiegler, *What Makes Life Worth Living, on Pharmacology* (Polity Press, MA, 2013). (Available on Amazon).

10

Ibid Sloterdijk.

11

For the French philosopher and psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan—under the influence of Freud (superego) and Heidegger (das Man = they self)—the child is born, or ‘thrown’ out of the pleasurable immediacy of the womb into the symbolic domain of family order, social norms, history, ... and so on. This is for Feminist theory the world of the phallic master-signifier (god, king, father, and so forth).

12

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra in The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (Viking Press, New York, NY, 1970) p. 252.

The Massacre of the Disciplines and the Decline of Culture

Now that the concepts of adaptability and practicality have been explained and how they play out in today's attitudes toward education has been overviewed, it is time to present some consequences that result from such orientations.

Students are currently bonobos preparing for the jungle. One obvious result of this is that students may not truly understand what intellectual virtue is for. Going through school, one might wonder why history and English, for instance, are at all important. When a bonobo-student asks its bonobo-teacher why math is a big deal, the usual and most immediate answer is, "Most high-paying jobs require math." Out of all answers, this sticks out to students as the best one given the current predicament of the world-environment. As the student takes this as the standard for all other classes, literature and music seem to be of very little use. Subjects like these are important due to less immediate reasons.

Literature gives people the thought and experiences of the author. It helps with the maturing of the human being and helps to bring him or her into a confusing and complex world. Its goal is at least partly clarification. Additionally, music is not only a special mode of expression. It gives way to the appropriation of skills. These are skills that require discipline and practice and they are gathered from a rich tradition of great musicians. Music also gives way to events of communal celebration. The animal herd does not celebrate in the same way as the human community. Before the invention of headphones or the speaker, music was primarily listened to in the public space. It helped to hold a community together. Under the current paradigm of education—with its mediated and telematic modes of communication—we, like the bonobos, experience mere 'contact' through a signal (input), receiver (output), and feedback loop. This is not a 'community'! The latter concept implies a coming together in terms of an idea or belief which transcends isolated individual concerns.

The centrality that animalistic conceptions of adaptability and being practical have in education works to justify their own grounds. Environmental attitudes such as these will inevitably lead to the situation of justified winners and losers. The losers at the bottom of the food chain can be blamed for bad scholastic choice-making and lack of skills demanded by the current market. Likewise, this mindset of having rightful hierarchies chosen by the marketplace, as central for the social order in which we currently find ourselves, justifies the mindset that education is mere preparation for a harsh environment. The means justify the ends which further reinforce the means.

Lastly, the value of a culture, with these educational attitudes, is destroyed. Immigrants and other groups often get targeted for being the downfall of what is usually called western culture. However, one must look elsewhere for any seeming destruction of our cultural incubator. The communal and historical greenhouse is in need of a proper refurbishing. After all, what better place is there for values and forms of thought to be learned than a well-functioning education system? Where else should human beings gather large groups of newcomers to the world and

reveal to them their heritage? The student, in reality, is not a bonobo. The human being today is not meant to merely be prepared for a wild jungle, unforgiving in its animality and hostile in its pecking orders. If the shared cultural incubator is shrinking or becoming wobbly, it probably is not because the immigrants are not “integrating.” As the pillar of society meant for introducing people to such a historical world that can either be changed or conserved, education is, today, merely preparing us for a ready-made environment. It must instead reveal to them a cultural heritage, a gathering together of historically accumulated potential.

Conclusion

In this meditation on a savage scholastic-animalism, it becomes apparent that education as mere preparation, while satisfactory for the bonobo or any other animal, is not at all decent for the late-hominid. Human beings, as held out into an indeterminate temporal and futural world, are confronted with individual and societal possibilities. Young people can only take hold of such potential when education introduces them to it through the heritage-aggregation of multiple topics such as science, mathematics, the arts, history, English, and philosophy. Education can only do this well when it does not treat itself as mere preparation for an environmental actuality. Again, it is not the case that students should not be worried about adaptation at all, nor is it the case that education should have no responsibility in preparing the young for any difficult obstacles they may face. What is important, however, is living up to the human greenhouse function by keeping education in compliance with human existence as a project. Animals are practical creatures that are perfectly in tune with what ‘is’ the case while human beings are opened out to what ‘ought’ to be or could be the case.

Endnotes

1

“Scientists Successfully Teach Gorilla It Will Die Someday.” *The Onion*, [https:// www.theonion.com/scientists-successfully-teach-gorilla-it-will-die-somed-1819594897](https://www.theonion.com/scientists-successfully-teach-gorilla-it-will-die-somed-1819594897). Accessed 5 Sept. 2018. Web.;

2

Arendt, Hannah. “The Crisis of Education,” *Between Past and Future*. New York, Penguin, 2006, pp. 170-193. Print.

3

Ibid.

4

Sloterdijk, Peter. “The Domestication of Being.” *Not Saved*, Polity Press, 2017, pp. 89-148. Print.

5

Ibid.

6

Heidegger, Martin. “What is Metaphysics?” *Basic Writings*, edited by David Farrell Krell, HarperCollins Publishers, 2008, pp. 93-110. Print.

7

FMarcuse, Herbert. *One-Dimensional Man*. Boston, Beacon Press, 1974. Print.

8

Marcuse, Herbert. *Eros and Civilization*. Boston, Beacon, 1966. pp. 89.

9

“Adaptability and Flexibility.” University of Kent, <https://www.kent.ac.uk/careers/sk/adaptability.htm>. Accessed 1 Sept. 2018. Web.

10

“Adaptability.” The University of Manchester, <http://www.careers.manchester.ac.uk/experience/skills/adaptability/>. Accessed 1 Sept. 2018. Web.

11

Hogenboom, Melissa. “Humans are Nowhere Near as Special as We Like to Think.” BBC, 3 July 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/earth/story/20150706-humans-are-not-unique-or-special>. Accessed 1 Sept. 2018. Web.

12

For an amusing essay on ‘primatology’, see: “Simia Dei, Reflections on the Pseudo-Event, and the Sad Case of Koko the Ape,” D.J. Ciraulo, *Deflationary Essays* (Amazon.com, 2019).

13

Hogenboom, Melissa. “Humans are Nowhere Near as Special as We Like to Think.” BBC, 3 July 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/earth/story/20150706-humans-are-not-unique-or-special>. Accessed 1 Sept. 2018. Web.