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## 'Plastic justice': a metaphor for education

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### ABSTRACT

Education appears to bear responsibility on the one hand to do justice to society's need for reproduction and continuation, and on the other to do justice to the individual's capacity for and need to express resistance, critique and political action. How we navigate this problem is tied to how we understand justice. 'Plastic justice' is the suggestion that questions concerning justice and education might find a materialist expression instead of the usual transcendental ideals of justice. In this perspective, 'justice' appears not as an (un)achievable ideal but as a philosophical void that allows us to identify and react to injustice. An example of this is the void that allows for social selection – in the form of admissions or exams – that must be kept open if we wish to avoid encouraging social conformism and reproduction.

### KEYWORDS

Education; justice; plasticity; biology; Malabou; materialism

### On justice and education

The theme for this article is justice, so it's useful to start by considering education's long tradition of maintaining its obligation towards morality – 'the good' – on a general level. In the Allegory of the Cave from the *Republic*, Socrates makes the point that education is not about teaching the student how to learn but about directing the student's gaze towards the good. His conversation with Glaucon goes as follows:

- But our present discussion, on the other hand, shows that the power to learn is present in everyone's soul and that the instrument with which each learns is like an eye that cannot be turned around from darkness to light without turning the whole body. This instrument cannot be turned around from that which is coming into being without turning the whole soul until it is able to study that which is and the brightest thing that is, namely, the one we call the good. Isn't that right?

- Yes.

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- Then education is the craft concerned with doing this very thing, this turning around, and with how the soul can most easily and effectively be made to do it. It isn't the craft of putting sight into the soul. Education takes for granted that sight is there but that it isn't turned the right way or looking where it ought to look, and it tries to redirect it appropriately (Plato 1997, 1136).

It's prevalent still, this notion that education is something that in one way or another lays the grounds for, refines or brings about 'the good.' Whatever 'the good' might be. Of course, education would be a foolish endeavour were it not based on the idea that it might be of benefit in some way. But as I shall return to later on, some thinkers suggest that education is not a societal 'outsider'; a neutral source from which society can collect 'the good.' To them, education should rather be seen as a constitutive and conservative part of modern society. If not a 'necessary evil,' education might not be an unequivocal 'necessary good' either. This appears perhaps as a trivial point. It would certainly be unexpected to find something that was uniquely good or bad. However, what I would like to discuss here is how exactly we might navigate this dichotomy.

Taking the example of Martha Nussbaum's book *Not For Profit* (2010), we find the suggestion that education is in crisis because of the global emphasis on skills instead of directing the gaze towards the good. More specifically, curricula across the world tend to focus on skills that are thought to increase a nation's economic prosperity, instead of allowing students to study the humanities, which to Nussbaum are essential to develop critical thinking and, crucially, democratic attitudes.

One of Nussbaum's examples is from India and the then-ruling BJP, a Hindu nationalist party aggressively pursuing economic-growth politics. The BJP issued schools with a textbook Nussbaum considers incommensurable with good education:

These books (now, fortunately, withdrawn, since the BJP lost power in 2004) utterly discouraged critical thinking and didn't even give it material to work with. They presented India's history as an uncritical story of material and cultural triumph in which all trouble was caused by outsiders and internal "foreign elements." Criticism of injustices in India's past was made virtually impossible by the content of the material and by its suggested pedagogy (for example, the questions at the end of each chapter), which discouraged thoughtful questioning and urged assimilation and regurgitation. Students were asked simply to absorb a story of unblemished goodness, bypassing all inequalities of caste, gender, and religion (Nussbaum 2010, 21–22).

For Nussbaum, humanities education can provide an antidote to such authoritarian attempts by laying the grounds for critique in a general sense (Nussbaum 2010, 2). This is what Nussbaum sees as the 'silent crisis' in education: Nations that consider humanities education irrelevant to the global economical competition tend to give it less and less space in the curriculum. This dynamic, according to Nussbaum, causes them to 'rapidly [lose] their place in curricula,

and also in the minds and hearts of parents and children' (Nussbaum 2010, 2). The result is that these minds and hearts become less capable at directing their gaze towards the good than they otherwise would.

*Not For Profit* is a manifesto (Nussbaum 2010, 8, 121), written on the form of diagnosis/prescription. Nussbaum identifies a number of issues she deems important for justice, among them whether the goal for education should be national profits or human prosperity; whether weakness should be perceived as deeply human or despicable; and whether the political discourse should be rhetorical or argumentative (Nussbaum 2010). Nussbaum's prescriptions consistently return to humanities education. According to her, the skills that humanities education cultivates have the potential to (re)direct education's focus to human prosperity, weakness as a fact of life, and argumentative politics. *Not for Profit* is but one example of the idea that 'the real questions' concerning education are not about whether it can provide 'the good,' but about its role for laying the grounds for, or even providing 'the good,' in what appears to be fairly concrete terms.

If we cautiously take Nussbaum's manifesto as symptomatic for one type of thinking that frames education as 'something that provides justice,' it seems we should inquire what education, justice, and their relation are. Some thinkers contend that education is a governmental structure with its main identity in schools and schooling, but has implications that stretch beyond the institution as an isolated entity. It seems impossible to think a society without schools, which suggests that schools are not an isolated institution in the modern, Western (and increasingly, global) society, but constitutive of it (Foucault et al. 1988; Jaeger 1986; Peim 2020). Education appears as necessary in modern life, as Nick Peim calls it: 'An offer you can't refuse' (Peim 2012). In this perspective, education appears as a bio-political force that functions at least in part as an instrument for governmentality. Peim argues that this force is seeping into philosophy of education, (re)constructing it as a hand maiden for education's structure of improvement and salvation (Peim 2012). Furthermore, Jan Masschelein and Norbert Ricken argue that even the concept *Bildung*, previously thought as a critical element emanating from the individual's creative encounter with history and curriculum, now has turned into an integral and therefore toothless part of the governmental structure that education has become (Masschelein and Ricken 2003).

Focusing on doctoral thesis writing, Peim (2011) argues that the top of the hierarchy of institutionalised education, the doctoral thesis, inhabits a 'spectral' space between originality and obeisance to the canon of the field. The term 'spectrality' is a reference to Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, in which ontology's conflicting nature of being the original and therefore final name of the thing; and of the mourning which is caused by laying the thing to rest for eternity while observing its continued effect on the world. Like a ghost, its presence is predicated on its absence (Derrida 2006, 9). For Peim, education appears as

a spectre in the sense that it balances between validating the student's knowledge as conform to the one represented in the 'archive,' while encouraging the student to create or express themselves and their newfound knowledge in original ways (Peim 2011).

### **A 'plastic' balancing act: expectations and creations**

In a previous study, I have suggested that education, in the broad sense, conducts a balancing act of on the one hand, what 'education' expects or even demands from the student, and on the other, the possibility for the student to bring something new and unexpected into the world. This balancing act might be described in terms of Catherine Malabou's reconfiguration of Foucault's term 'bio-politics' (Hogstad 2020a). Her reconfiguration is built around the concept *plasticity*, which implies in very short terms an ontological model according to which 'form' exhibits the capacity for receiving change from outside, causing change to itself and other forms, and the capacity for losing form altogether. Plasticity concentrates on the change that form goes through over time – the difference form gradually acquires from itself – instead of the difference between forms. This model finds its material exemplification most clearly in the plasticity of the brain, the organ formerly thought as the supremely material substance, given at birth and barely modified throughout life. Over the last few decades, this image has given way to that of 'brain plasticity,' the notion that the brain does indeed keep on changing and repairing itself throughout life. Sometimes this happens in astonishing ways, for instance the brain's ability to reconfigure its neural networks even after serious brain damage. The philosophical upshot is that fully materialist theories might grasp even contentious dualisms such as symbol/matter or brain/thought (Malabou 2008, 2012, 2016b).

For Malabou, 'form' is what 'différance' expresses, that is, our way of sorting the world in terms of discernible units of thought (Hogstad 2021a; Malabou 2010, 49). In that sense, it resembles a semiotic 'floating signifier.' Nevertheless, it should be understood in concrete and material terms (Hogstad 2021a; Rathe 2020). Plasticity sees power both as something being exerted on form from without, and as something provided by form itself (Malabou 2015a). While plasticity as a concept concerns itself with the thinking of the human and the thinking that humans do, if it is a humanism it's one that flattens the usual humanist hierarchy (where humans transcend the order of other things) because forms stand in necessary and supplementary relations to one another. One of the main features of plasticity is its lack of centre; its construction of the world as a synaptic network of forms continually interacting with each other (Hogstad 2020b).

On this basis, education cannot be thought of as an absolute power, but a governmental structure nonetheless. At a fundamental level, education is an institution integral to modern life, a structure imposed on us from outside,

stratifying and selecting us via exterior and previously agreed-upon criteria. While it's 'an offer you can't refuse,' for some groups it can be seen as 'an offer you can't accept' because it presupposes capacities, aims and goals that the student might not have or share. In those cases, the governmental aspect of education steps clearly into the foreground (Peim 2012).

Even so, education can be considered a semiotic and plastic instance in the sense that it is a fleeting, changing concept that embodies history. While it appears governmental in modernity, that does not mean that education's essence is absolute or permanent; it is unthinkable that a 'pure' version somehow exists outside of the tissue of our intelligible world (Derrida 1998; Hegel and Friedrich 1977; Malabou 2005; Peim 2012). Education is impermanent in the sense that it is not today what it used to be, and the education of tomorrow will have changed in ways that are unforeseeable for us today. At least some of this change has been, is, and will be caused by the student, the teacher, and their relationship – from actors who are both within and part of the system.

In the following, I will suggest the outline of a process of dealing with questions concerning education and justice. Extending Catherine Malabou's concept 'plasticity,' which suggests an alternative to Derrida's 'messianicity without messianism,' to the field of educational thinking, I propose a model for educational justice which I will call 'plastic justice.' 'Messianicity without messianism,' according to Derrida, allows us to think that justice is 'to-come,' i.e. unknowable in the present and only discoverable once it has arrived. When it does, it will be as an 'event' (2006). For Malabou, on the other hand, time does not work like that. The future event does not have a form, as an event or otherwise, until it has come to be formed (Crockett and Malabou 2010). In other words, the 'to come' is not until it has been thought, until it has been formed (Malabou 2012). One might perhaps then say that Malabou's plasticity puts an even stronger emphasis on the 'always already' than Derrida. As a consequence, the notion of educational justice I will be outlining in this text has a somewhat clearer tone of creation than of fulfilment.

## Plastic justice

What I will call 'plastic justice' follows a line of critique that Clayton Crockett and Catherine Malabou explore in their article 'Plasticity and the Future of Philosophy and Theology' (2010). While their article concentrates on deconstruction's apparent adherence on a Christian model of salvation, their argument presents what they call 'plastic time' (Crockett and Malabou 2010). 'Plastic time' is a reconfiguration of the future, the to-come, positioning it as a continually renewing and (partially) created feature of the world. This reconfiguration is a response to Derrida's *Specters of Marx* (2006), in which the idea of the 'messianic without a messianism' – the to-come that can't be expected, foreseen or conjured, is presented.

Derrida suggests that justice must be thought as an event, something currently unknown, which is to-come but we can't expect to come. Yet we must still hold the spot open for it, show it 'hospitality without reserve,' and thus provide its condition of possibility and therefore also its condition of impossibility (Derrida 2006, 81). Justice in this perspective is a messianic event, something that comes if and when it must. However, as Derrida urges us to show it 'hospitality without reserve' and thus also prepare the grounds for justice's condition of impossibility, we are

Awaiting without horizon of the wait, awaiting what one does not expect yet or any longer, hospitality without reserve, welcoming salutation accorded in advance to the absolute surprise of the arrivant (Derrida 2006, 81).

Justice, then, is something we await by not awaiting it. We leave it to justice to decide if it is to come or not. Attempting to separate this model of the messianic event from its theological (and therefore teleological) roots, Derrida claims that the 'messianic without messianism' is our only possible way to justice. Without it we 'might as well give up on both justice and the event' (Derrida 2006, 82).

Even in Derrida's 'messianicity without a messiah,' the deeply Western and Judeo-Christian pattern of linear time from Creation through Salvation towards Eternity remains. While Derrida suggests that justice should be awaited without awaiting and expectation, the image remains that we are moving towards some sort of temporal conclusion where the will of the world is realised – or not. The horizon is there precisely because it is not there. It transcends. By extension, the model of time implicit in this model contains a movement towards the future which is (not) to come, thereby – in Malabou's view – upholding a Western, Judeo-Christian, salvational understanding of time (Crockett and Malabou 2010). The same model appears true in certain prominent strands of educational thinking (Hogstad 2021b).

'Plastic time' reconfigures this model and flips it on its head. Instead of accepting that we are taken along on time's ride towards the horizon, plastic time counters the idea of a formless future that's to come or not to come with the idea of time as a plastic form, capable of giving, receiving and losing form through the plasticity of the brain. Through our capacity for plasticity, we are creating time and not simply experiencing it (Crockett and Malabou 2010).

If we reconsider the concept of justice as related to education with 'plastic time' in mind, it would establish justice as an immediate concern instead of a distant goal. The difference is subtle, but potentially important: In the Derridean model, justice as a salvational figure must remain a transcendental ideal. As with Christian salvation, justice as a salvational figure remains unachievable until it is achieved, and it can't be brought forth by us. On the other hand, plastic justice would not exist in an unknowable future, but be created continually by us. Perhaps, then, plastic justice is best described as the void that we must keep open so it can allow us to identify and react to injustice.

In what follows I will give an outline of how 'plastic justice' might be exemplified in a question concerning some internal workings of education, namely the principle of social selection. In a text on the role and function of materialism after Marx, Malabou reads Althusser as Althusser reads Darwin. She asks whether it might be possible to think a materialism that refrains from relying on predetermined criteria, or in other words, presupposing the future.

## Plastic selection

As I have touched upon already, Malabou's plasticity opens up for a reimagination of biology. In this reimagination, biology is not the solid and unchanging 'given,' substantially different from 'thought' or 'symbolism,' but the continually changing and changeable material foundation for being. Symbolism and matter are aspects of form, interrelated and reciprocally affective (Malabou 2005, 2015b, 2016a). What this reimagination implies, according to Malabou, is the outline of a materialism because they share some fundamental characteristics:

Materialism is a name for the nontranscendental status of form in general. Matter is what forms itself in producing the conditions of possibility of this formation itself. Any transcendental instance necessarily finds itself in a position of exteriority in relation to that which it organizes. By its nature, the condition of possibility is other than what it makes possible. Materialism affirms the opposite: the absence of any outside of the process of formation. Matter's self-formation and self-information is then systematically nontranscendental (Malabou 2015b, 48).

But what kind of materialism should this be? In line with Althusser's position in the text 'The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter' (1982), Malabou argues that dialectical teleology is disqualified because it effectively transcendentalises the telos, which must reside outside the system to organise it. Instead, Malabou suggests that we consider an alternative she finds in Althusser's discussion of Darwin: A 'materialism of the encounter.' This materialism finds its inspiration in Darwin's writings on natural selection, which are all about a non-teleological, non-presuppositional, non-transcendental materialist encounter of forms (Malabou 2015b, 49).

Since plasticity is an ontological model, i.e. one that concentrates on forms, any 'thing' we can think of will in principle be 'plastic.' According to Malabou, symbolic forms should be understood as plastic in the same sense that the human is plastic, whether it is theory (Malabou 2016c), society's organising metaphors ('motor schemes,' Malabou 2010) or history (Malabou 2015b). What is of particular importance here is that we might spot the outline of a materialism without a telos, one which might allow us to think the encounter between the form 'education' and the form 'the student' anew.



The foundation for this rethinking is Althusser's insistence that the new materialism 'of the encounter' should be fundamentally biological and Darwinist, but in what Malabou sees as a 'plastic' interpretation: natural selection should be understood as an aleatory, non-intentional encounter between a species and its environment. According to this model, both the species and whatever the species encounters should be considered forms in the sense that they are recognisable as forms, that they have 'taken form' over time and consequently have a history, and that their fundamental feature is its changeability. In other words, natural selection, the extinction or survival of a species in face of environmental adversity, is a contingent encounter between plastic forms (Malabou 2015b, 52).

However, Malabou points out, what we usually understand as social selection does not parallel natural selection when it comes to this important point. Instead, social selection happens on the basis of an intention, organised around pre-existing criteria. Malabou writes,

Why—in the logic of exams, in competitions, or in professional selection in general, the discrimination of candidates regarding aptitude functions, of competencies, or of specific technical capacities—does selection seem to lack plasticity; that is, fluidity on the one hand and the absence of any predetermined selective intention on the other? Why, most of the time, does social selection give the feeling of being an expected or agreed-upon process, a simple logic of conformity and reproduction, whereas natural selection is incalculably open to possibility (Malabou 2015b, 51)?

In situations such as these, where you want to test whether the students know what they are supposed to, or check who runs the quickest 100 m dash, or find the best candidate for a job that consists of certain tasks, what we have is a fundamentally conservative type of selection. Such a type of selection is unable to select the most resistive, the one most apt for action or political struggle, or the one most likely to challenge fundamental structures. The only solution to the conformist structure of social selection, according to Malabou, is 'to know that criteria do not preexist selection itself' (Malabou 2015b, 56). This knowledge gives priority to the act of selection instead of setting criteria and selecting for those. This might help us focus on the plastic potential of the situation and avoid thoughtless reproduction.

However, plasticity needs a void, a space for thinking where 'unassignability' – the place where nothing is or can be assigned, placed, categorised – resides. Without that space, there is no 'nothing' from whence something new can arise. It is philosophy's job to identify and explain this void, even if we must also assume that it might not exist (else it would itself be a telos), because this void 'opens up all promise of justice, equality, legitimacy' (Malabou 2015b, 56).

## Conclusion

Identifying and explaining this void, then, is perhaps not only the next task for philosophy but the start (or continuation) of a continual process of rethinking the relation between justice and education. Perhaps keeping this void open is the most important task if we take it to be the place where something new is created. 'Plastic justice' as a metaphor for education might help us identify and create new attitudes and reactions to injustice by thinking beyond the ideals of justice that we know so well we have stopped thinking them. The void – the thinking of the unknown and unknowable – could be a source for a vital and continual rethinking of concepts and conceptualisations of justice and injustice, including the notion of 'plastic justice' itself.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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