

## Idolaters, Iconoclasts, and Iconophiles: The Productive Ideal and Philosophy of Education

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Within classical liberalism, we are free to pursue our private ideals of the good life, as long as we do not infringe on the rights and interests of others. Whether politics can really be non-teleological is debatable.<sup>1</sup> It is difficult to see how the contemporary state with its broad social policy agenda can be confined to the boundaries set by the classical liberalism theory. However, even assuming it can, the same principle is simply inapplicable to education. An educator by definition must embrace a shared ideal of the good life. Education is unthinkable without teleology; we cannot help dealing with aims and by extension with ideals. An aim of any human effort is an ideal; it is the “not-yet-existing,” but taking priority over the “already-existing.” Explicitly or implicitly, we must agree with each other on the destination of our journey with children. We need to tell *them* something about the destination, too.

However, social liberalism has a problem. An educational ideal seems to be impossible to describe and implement without limiting students’ possibilities, and without excluding some from the enterprise. However broadly an educational ideal is described, it tends to exclude at least one group: sometimes by its innate characteristics, and sometimes by the virtue of the group’s preferences. Educating is doing something about other people’s lives, their choices, their development, and their notions of good and bad. There is something illiberal about the very idea of teaching; it is revealed in the act of expressing aims of education. Defining an aim is excluding other aims, and consequently, excluding people who may find the excluded aims appealing. Humans have the ability to choose, and it seems to conflict with our collective need to educate our young. The need for an ideal as both essential and inexpressible is a problem, which this essay intends to help solve.

Can we treat the ideal as both non-representable and real (and thus *productive*, that is capable of impacting actual practices), as transcending and yet applicable to all circumstances? We need an ideal that would mobilize, organize, and yet not impose and exclude. We need means of formulating aims of education acceptable to a pluralistic democratic society.

I will rely on Marie-José Mondzain’s account<sup>2</sup> to show how Medieval Greek philosophers solved a very similar problem. They learned to present the divine in such a way that it could both affect people, and yet not be specific to the degree that it excludes and disappoints. A heuristic scheme based on the distinction among idolatry/iconoclasm/iconophilia can be helpful in establishing aims of education.

### THE ECONOMY AND THE ICON

In the first thousand years of Christianity, the Greek-speaking Eastern Church Fathers used the term economy — in a sense different from both Aristotle’s, and

from our contemporary use. The meaning of the word included “incarnation, plan, design, administration, providence, responsibility, duties, compromise, lie, or guile” (*IIE*, 13). To the Greeks, the underlying concept was sufficiently coherent without denoting which of these meanings they were seeking to convey. Economy was about the workings of the divine in the fallen world; it was a particular method of action, which recognizes the reality for what it is, while managing and transforming it according to an ideal.

The importance of a philosophical debate can be measured by whether it comes to blows. The concept of economy was central to the struggle between iconoclasts and iconophiles that tore the Byzantine Empire apart *twice* in the eighth and ninth centuries. The iconophiles held the middle ground, defending against both idolatry, and against the iconoclasts’ accusation of idolatry directed at them. The iconoclasts gained influence both inside the Byzantine Church and in Islam, Christianity’s then newest and mightiest rival. The iconophiles needed to reconcile the practical need to use images of the divine to influence people’s behavior with explicit scriptural prohibitions of them. “The economy is the solution to inconsistency; it is the art of enlightened flexibility” (*IIE*, 14). Having made virtue out of necessity, the iconophile philosophers arrived at an approach that is applicable not just to the images of Christ and saints, but to all images, and by extension to all representations of the ideal. It is a theory of presenting the non-representable.

The basic argument was this: The son of God was thought to be a particular kind of an image (icon) of the Father; he was Logos made flesh. This was the act of the divine economy, the condescension of God to humanity, both a compromise and a plan for salvation. The incarnation itself has allowed the use of icons, not just by creating a precedent, but mainly by introducing the very principle of economy. Christ is the natural, and an icon is an artificial image; they are not the same, but they both are instances in the divine economy. Theodore the Studite put it rather poetically:

The Inconceivable is conceived in the womb of a Virgin, the Unmeasurable becomes three cubits high; the Unqualifiable acquires a quality; the Undefinable stands up, sits down and lies down: He who is everywhere is put into a crib; He who is above time gradually reaches the age of twelve; He who is formless appears with the shape of a man and the Incorporeal enters into a body, ... therefore the same is describable and indescribable.<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, if it was okay for God to present itself in the flesh, it is okay for us to present Jesus in icons; the rules on how to do that constitute the knowledge of divine economy.

The key insight is that there is no simple and direct relationship between the ideal and the real. We cannot just know (or create) and express the ideal, and implement it. There has to be a mechanism, a drive, a system of pulleys and gears that connect the unknowable ideal to the reality we live in. One cannot ask, “what are the aims of education?,” and expect a set of utterances that can be directly converted into curriculum, policy, or pedagogies. This is not to say that the ideal is *completely* inaccessible or non-presentable; only that there are certain intermediary steps and rules of access and presentation. The ideal expresses itself through the economy principle, as an icon.

To arrive at a vision of philosopher-iconophile, we must explore the distinction among idols, icons, and iconoclastic signs; those represent three distinct strategies of dealing with the ideal. It is important to note that the difference is not absolute: “it is about a distinction in an imaginary relation to invisibility. The same object can pass from one status to another; the question is purely one of interpretation and custom” (*IIE*, 185). Therefore, all examples and metaphors that appear below are *interpretative* events, not comments on the signs and phenomena as such.

#### IDOLATERS

A philosopher of art, Boris Groys, calls our time ultramodern:

Throughout the modern era, we saw all our traditions and inherited lifestyles condemned to decline and disappearance. But neither do we today trust our present time — we do not believe that its fashions, lifestyles, or ways of thinking will have any kind of lasting effect. In fact, the moment new trends and fashions emerge, we immediately imagine that their inevitable disappearance will come sooner rather than later. (Indeed, when a new trend emerges, the first thought that comes to one’s mind is: but how long will it last? And the answer is always that it will not last very long.)<sup>4</sup>

Although a characterization of the art, the passage fits well to describe educational reforming. Educators and policy makers are engaged in this sort of thinking, launching new reforms faster than the old ones had a chance to bear fruit. Groys is mistaken, however, about all of this being new. Idolatry is at least as old as the humanity itself. We may live in a new age of revived idolatry, but it has been with us all along.

“Thou shalt not make thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the waters beneath the earth.” This is certainly the strangest of all Hebrew Bible commandments. Where does the prohibition of images come from? What is an idol? Mondzain begins with the fact that the idols can be smashed, physically destroyed. “This implies two things: first, that they are feared because they have power, and second, that it suffices to smash them in order for that fear and power to disappear” (*IIE*, 178). And further: “those who are called idolaters expect a real service from their idol and will destroy it if the contract is not fulfilled, if their expectation is disappointed, or if it is replaced by a new, stronger divinity to whom they will then turn” (*IIE*, 182). The idol is a representation of power, of potency, but it can also be vulnerable and can be destroyed; it is about both power and mortality.

In creationist religions, idols cross an important divide between the creator and the created; those who create idols are thought to usurp the power of God the creator. Therefore, God loses its power of the universal ideal the minute it takes a concrete physical form, and can be directly identified with it.

Idolatry can be described as misunderstanding of the economy principle. It is an assumption, a hope that the divine can be directly accessed, known, and made to perform miracles. The educational idolaters fervently believe in one or another “solution;” they erect idols of Progressivism, of scientific efficiency, of accountability, of achievement and of teacher quality. The idols claim to *identify* with the ideal in a sense of offering a specific path, a specific powerful solution. The idols are

contractual; they are contingent upon *evidence*. The evidence is proof that something is actually *working* — toward a goal that was defined as the direct expression of the ideal. This manufactures a permanent crisis, because no evidence is ever strong enough, and we are forced to smash one idol to be immediately seduced by another even more promising idol. Thus the site-based management is replaced with outcome-based education; Adequate Yearly Progress is replaced with a value-added teacher evaluation model, *ad infinitum*. Looking back, nothing seems to be ideal, but the new things ahead appear to be promising.

At every turn, each fresh and new solution already contains the seed of death. All turn out to be powerful and yet powerless, to be first worshipped, and then destroyed, and replaced by other idols. Accepting an idol is sensing its imminent death; it implies looking for yet another idol to replace the current one. Idolaters engage in constant vicious warfare with each other, attempting to prove their idol is the true representation of the ideal. Many are waiting impatiently for the current idol of managerial accountability to be finally smashed. And yet they dream of bringing back some of the older idols they find particularly powerful; anxious to trade Arne Duncan for John Dewey. Others dream of different, newer idols that will deliver the Kingdom of Heaven to every classroom very soon.

I happened to attend a couple of meetings of the PARCC consortium, an interstate organization involved in the development of the Common Core standards and assessments.<sup>5</sup> The project is a sensible one, and should have been completed half-a-century ago, if not before. Indeed, what can be wrong with creating national K–12 curriculum standards and a common, better set of assessments? I could not, however, resist voicing my opposition to touting it as a revolutionary development that is going to solve every problem in American education. But implicit in my speech was that I know what the real solution is to be. I may not have openly touted it, but it was implied. It does not really matter what my solution was; let us just say it was another silver bullet. In other words, I was trying to sell the comparative advantages of my idol over theirs. And of course, if my idol is embraced, it will shower me with reflected power. The idolaters' race is not by any means disinterested, which is exactly what the commandment was meant to prevent.

Educational idols contain answers. Few of us can offer something other than another idol, and thus we perpetuate the cycle of idolatry. People who smash idols are not destroying idolatry; the smashers are the most fervent idolaters who inevitably carry a replacement idol in their back pockets. There is an idolater in most of us.

#### ICONOCLASTS

Iconoclasts are the opposite of idolaters: they take the biblical prohibition against images very literally, and take it to the logical conclusion. According to Mondzain, iconoclasts sacralize mourning. “They produce both works and discourse about melancholia, privileging the emblems of lack and the yawning gap in the name of an irreparable absence. These are often works of tearing, opening, and incompleteness. They are also often works of insolence, laughter, and derision” (*IIE*, 186). Iconoclasts in education dwell on limitless critique, on disproving all images

of the ideal, both idols and icons. They do not care to replace the smashed with anything else.

The breed of iconoclast educators includes both jaded practitioners and ironic theorists who rejoice in doubt and cynicism. The author of this essay can certainly brandish some iconoclastic credentials, too; with less and less pride as the time goes by. “Look, it is another idol,” I often enjoy saying. “It will be exposed and smashed.” Smashing idols and icons is an immensely satisfying activity, whether or not one has one’s own candidate to replace it with. And yet it is not creation. The iconoclasts deny there is any solution, any hope for education.

The iconophiles, with whom we will deal next, accused iconoclasts in being hidden atheists, although both groups were professed Christians. Why? Because the iconoclasts denied the Holy Spirit any possibility to perform its work in the world. They protected purity of the divine to the degree that made it unproductive and ineffectual. The divine that is completely inaccessible ceases to have any influence on human affairs. The completely unknowable ideal does not perform any useful work; the exclusivity of the divine creativity stunts human creativity.

The failure of iconoclasm is in denying the very possibility of the ideal in education. It is in indiscriminate smashing of all images, idols and icons alike. The difference between the two, as I mentioned, is not contained in the actual object, but in interpretative stance of viewers. Iconoclasts fail to notice other people’s relation to the image; they assume that other people perceive all ideas in the same way as they do. In other words, PARCC may be an idol for some, but it may be an icon for others, and I failed to recognize that. The inability to see other people in their particularity by concentrating on the idea/image in question makes iconoclasts ethically deficient. They often equate the relativity of views with irrelevance of multiple points of view.

The iconoclasts are not identical with the postmodernist thought, as some may suspect. For example, in Gert Biesta’s (perhaps excessively generous) interpretation,<sup>6</sup> at least some postmodernist writers appear to move beyond the iconoclastic impulse and toward text that points at the ideal without representing it. Indeed, sometimes the act of deconstructing an idol contains an implicit hope within itself, because it may be motivated by the possibility of a productive ideal.

#### ICONOPHILES

The icon is an image of a special kind. The Church Fathers described the icon’s relationship with the original as that of “relative similitude” (*IIE*, 34). The icon does not depict or represent Jesus; rather it indicates his absence; it is a “relation to the presence of an emptiness” (*IIE*, 92). The icon refers to the ideal that is no longer there, to the space where it used to be and will be again. “Thus the icon, made in the image of this image, will no longer be expressive, signifying, or referential. It will not be inscribed within the space of a gap, but will rather incarnate withdrawal itself” (*IIE*, 81).

It is not an object of a gaze, but a representation of the divine gaze directed at the believer. “What the icon imitates is not the vision that humans cast at things but

God's imagined gaze that is cast upon humans" (*IIE*, 176). This feature of icons has sometimes been the source of misunderstanding among Western art historians. They were disappointed by how rigid the icon canons have been over hundreds of years, and how little individual variations were found. But that was exactly the point of writing an icon. It was the original non-representational art, specific enough to recognize who is behind the icon, but abstract enough to avoid perceiving it as a unique piece of art. In other words, the icons are meant to be asking questions rather than providing answers.

Who are today's iconophiles? I will use Mondzain's poignant description of iconophile artists:

Technicians of the transfiguration, the producers of icons hold forth either openly or secretly about truth and salvation. Partisans of a redemptive art, they begin to be the redeemers of art by themselves.... Their violence is not that of insolence but that of the call to order and a return to sources. All through the ages, these artists have had the ability to put to the image the question of its own origin and destination.... This is a form of that economic reasoning that historically has managed the visibilities of our incarnation.... It is a spiritual and virile art, always faithful to its iconic mission. (*IIE*, 188)

How can philosophers of education become the technicians of transfiguration? How can we bring the productive ideal to work on actual educational practices? Let us assume that the icon can also be a text of a certain kind. It is a text that implies the existence of the ideal without directly naming and describing it.<sup>7</sup> It is text that is animated by economy, where the ideal is absent in a productive, consequential, and hopeful way.

I am now coming back to the meetings of the PARCC consortium. What should I have done to invoke the nostalgia for the truth rather than the melancholy for the unobtainable? What words would create a verbal equivalent of an icon, calling out to the ideal without representing it? How could I have acted as a post-religious<sup>8</sup> iconophile at the PARCC meeting?

Here is where the genre of essay writing comes into a direct conflict with the principle of economy. The genre calls for an example, an image of one specific answer that would illustrate to the reader what I mean. I need that one sharp and revealing sentence. Yet the icon is the incarnate absence of the prototype; it is not what I see and imagine, but an imagined gaze of the divine, a question rather than an answer. Should I have I asked why we are doing this PARCC thing in the first place? Perhaps asking *myself* the right question would then allow grace to enter that entirely idolatrous/iconoclastic conversation.

What can the larger purpose behind the Common Core standards be? Instead of implying that there is no purpose, or that I have a better answer to your questions, I should have asked myself and others what the question is. How do we approach the project if there were a larger, higher purpose in it? I know how such a conversation begins: we need common standards, so that the states can really compare their students' academic achievements. This is the only way of identifying which states' policies are better than others. But how the conversation *turns* into something else?

I will appeal to my audience's personal memories of cases where one question or one story suddenly turned an otherwise dreadful conversation into something uplifting, where the reflected light of the ideal can be seen. These personal stories cannot be summarized or averaged, but their interactive totality gets me closer to defining iconicity. In fact, what I just gave the reader is the untold story, the story that remains unspoken, as the incarnate absence of an ideal. The iconic text is one that represents the absence of a specific communicable meaning; not the absence of the non-existent, but the absence of the withdrawn.

The philosopher's task with respect to educational reform is to iconize the idol, not to destroy it. It has something to do with inserting my words productively into the relationships between other people and their idols. It cannot be done by purely intellectual criticism or endorsement of their idolatrous ideas. It also has to do with fighting iconoclastic impulses in myself and in others.

Simplifying to the extreme, an icon is a question; not the question we ask, but the question we are asked. We all learn the value of questioning, but not often the value of being questioned. And it is not just any kind of questioning, but the questioning by the ideal. Imagining the question directed at oneself is not a trivial matter. Such a question originates from a specific position, with the background of a narrative that opens up an interpretive framework, but does not close it. In other words, I want you to tell yourself a story where the ideal is both personal and yet not finalized.

In the Christian tradition, the questioner is a concrete person — Jesus, Mary, or one of the saints — with his or her narrative vantage point, but pointedly unfinalizable, irreducible to the sum of their deeds. Jesus himself and other philosophers working within the tradition made a big deal out of the idea of personhood, irreducible to a set of rules and acts, and yet capable of creating a framework for questioning. Knowing the person's story is not the same as knowing the moral commandments, guiding principles, or direct instructions. The icon viewer must know something about the story behind the piercing gaze of the depicted to experience the effect of the question. It is simply knowing where the question is coming from, recognizing the voice of the questioner. Construction of the questioning framework is not easy to replicate in our culture where mythologies are contested and divided. However the most productive disruptions of iconoclastic/idolatrous discourses occur through narrative. Fundamentally, only a story, a parable can create an ideal questioner. We have the innate ability to discern the working of the ideal through a story, even though we are not able to agree on what it means. We may be hardwired with the sense of the divine economy.

#### CONCLUSION

Of course, the Greek solution was partial and pre-modern. After all, the iconophiles prevailed by excluding both idolaters and iconoclasts. And because they operated from within the Eastern Christianity worldview, they excluded Jews, Muslims, and eventually Roman Catholics from their vision of the ideal. I would not

pretend to know how the principle of economy should work in philosophy of education. This essay is rather a call to begin this conversation.

A philosopher should write like an iconographer, and be mindful of dangers of iconoclasm and idolatry. Our writings should assume the tension between the reality and the non-representable ideal. We should try to iconize the idols, which is to say, to bring hopeful questioning into the debate. And it is not just our own personal questioning, but rather from a vantage point outside of us. In order to do that, some work first has to be done to imagine the questioning, productive ideal through the economy of narrative. Our writings should come from a specific narrative background; contain references to a story that has evidence of the machinery of the ideal working in the world. And finally, iconic writings should contain a call to the reader to act, without giving a precise prescription of what to do.

To think of it, some of the best writings in our field are like that already; we just need to learn to write icons for those outside as well as within our field. This essay is not simply one long endorsement of the use of stories in philosophical writings. Rather, I am after a specific type of comment on educational practice, a comment that inspires practitioners to assume there is a larger purpose of education that is greater and more profound than any particular reform or movement may assume. The idea of personhood, of irreducibility of each child and adult, is an important assumption we should defend, even though we may not know what it practically means.

The ideal is not representable, but it can be made iconically present. Maintaining the iconic flame is perhaps what the best of philosophy of education has been doing all these years — not letting the ideal be completely wiped out from the discourse on education. It is putting all these questions out there, yearning for something non-representable but real.

It is common to call for the philosophers of education to become more relevant. We want to translate our ideas into simpler, more accessible form, to provide philosophical analysis of the current issues of educational policy, and reach out to policy-makers. This is supposed to bring more respect to our field, and perhaps translate in more jobs. I do not believe this is going to work, because simplifying the position often deems it indistinguishable from common sense. We also cannot have a common position. But more importantly, the simplification usually wipes out the productive ideal, the potent yet undefined question that often is present in some of our work. Yes, we need to speak to those outside of our scholarly field, but aim to inspire rather than clarify.

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1. See, for example, Charles Taylor's critique of classical liberalism in "The Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

2. Marie-José Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy: the Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary Cultural Memory in the Present* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005). This work will be cited in the text as *IIE* for all subsequent references.

3. Cited in John Meyendorff, *Christ in Eastern Christian Thought* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1975), 186.



4. Boris Groys, "The Weak Universalism," *e-flux* (April 2010), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/view/130>.
5. Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, <http://www.fldoe.org/parcc/>.
6. Gert J.J. Biesta, *Beyond Learning: Democratic Education for a Human Future* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2006).
7. The tradition of iconicity of text goes back to Jesus and surely precedes him: "Therefore speak I to them in parables: because seeing they see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand" (Matthew 13:13). Rather than implying that the people are stupid, he commented on the problem of conveying the ideal.
8. It is my belief that all religions are on an irreversible path to retreat into the private sphere. While there are philosophical treasures found in religious thought, the discourse itself should never regain its place in public life. The failure of the major monotheistic faiths is rooted in the inability to deal with pluralism, democracy, and modernity in general.