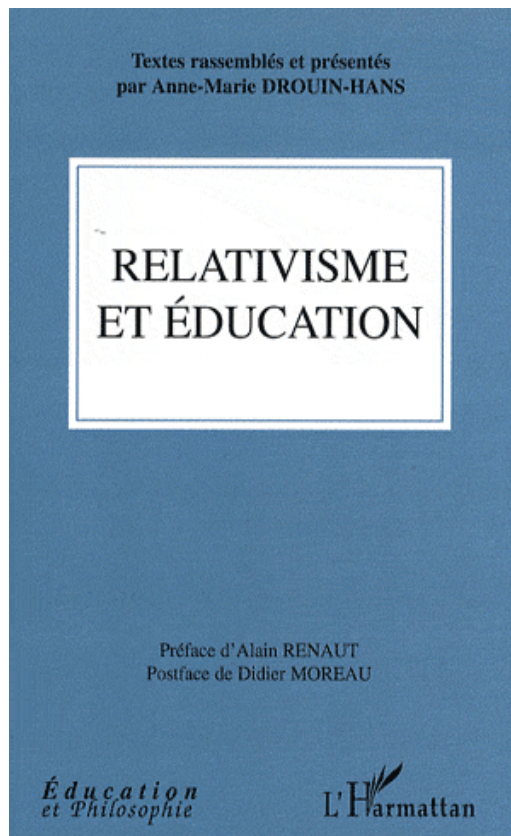


Relativisme and Education *[Relativisme et Éducation]*

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Paris : L'Harmattan

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Assembled and presented by Anne-Marie Drouin-Hans, *Relativisme et éducation* is comprised of 16 articles, as well as a preface from Alain Renaut and an afterword from Didier Moreau. The book offers a contemporary French perspective on philosophy of education. It focuses on the place of relativism within education and thought about education. In this context, relativism refers to the theory according to which certainties and truth are impossible, and ethical and epistemological standards are absolutely relative to time, space and other contextual elements. This theory, very present in actual ways of thinking, rests on a critical aversion to universalistic and potentially dogmatic pretensions (as evidenced in some religious and imperialistic thought). Clearly, relativism is in danger of falling into a form of nihilism where everything has the same value, ideas as well as values, where no criteria could help us judge what is worthier of belief or action.

In the field of education, this weakening of certainties has tremendous impact. This crisis concerns educational practice as much as thought about education. Some of the tasks of philosophy are then, to interrogate: 1) the meaning of the concept of relativism; 2) the tensions provoked by the spirit of relativism; 3) possible ways to surpass relativism. This is the task this book tries to fulfil.

Renaut, in the preface, discusses critically political and moral liberalism (the principles of respecting individual freedom and not being harmful to others) as being the actual response to today's spirit of relativism. This minimization of all ethical content appears to be the most defensible way to deal with our plural societies. French schools thus have the mandate to educate to promote the principle of tolerance, excluding any more substantive content concerning how to live a good life. Renaut argues for the necessity of reintroducing abstract entities (for example the idea of Humanity) in our judgments.

1. The meaning of relativism

Trying to define the concept of relativism more extensively, Drouin-Hans simply declares the impossibility of being a relativist. No one claims that he or she is a relativist. Relativism is always the extreme from which we distance ourselves. She questions the relationship of education to truth and concludes that it is an intrinsic task of education to teach to master the relativity of things. Brigitte Frelat-Kahn prefers to speak of the "resistible" character of the concept of relativism rather than of its impossibility. This displacement is important to her in the sense that relativism can be dangerous to culture and that we must then "take it seriously". One must recall that in France, there is only one School, the same for everyone and that this unity is the very foundation of the republican conception of knowledge, equality and democracy. Drawing on Rorty, she suggests not to think of democracy as a fixed experience in order to learn to dominate the transitory and not prostrate oneself before the eternal. Education should have to train for this type of experimentation.

2. Shakings and tensions

The tension, inherent to education in post-modernity, between the necessity of transmitting a culture, knowledge and thus a stabilised construct, and the necessity of always calling into question established certainties and resisting false beliefs, is at the centre of the articles of this section.

Heléna Théodoropoulou analyses the paradoxical character of the “soft relativism” that characterises our age. Education, she claims, is a dialectical movement between the transmission of stabilised values (orthodoxy) and the destabilisation of these values (relativism), by the exposition of its provisional and conflicting character. She uses the case of environmental ethics to illustrate this paradox and the critical role of philosophy of education in resisting the institutionalisation of beliefs into *truths* and *common sense*. Patrick Berthier takes a similar approach and asserts that contemporary relativism is a form of “deterritorialisation” (*a deleuzian concept*), a permanent becoming without prescribed aims. He opposes a deweyian naturalistic (based on the value of experience) and a symbolic (based on linguistic value of human reality) approach as two ways of conceiving what can be accounted for as a relevant education in this open context. Alain Trouvé reflects on the place of “elementary” knowledge (which presupposes cultural invariants) in the postmodern school culture. Éliane Ricard-Fersing analyses the problem posed by constructivism in education. Can an epistemological theory legitimately be turned into a pedagogical approach? Finally, Patrick Boumard exposes the paradox of the “libertarian educator”. How can one speak of the freedom of the *infans* (him who cannot speak for himself) when the role of the educator is precisely to initiate him to (not to say impose on him) language and knowledge?

3. Surpassing, bypassing relativism

This third section explores ways of overcoming or bypassing the menace of relativism. Those who try to overcome it present alternative perspectives which suggest that the way out of relativism is by our engagement with the world. Many authors take a hermeneutical approach. For example, Michel Fabre, says the educator’s role is to prepare people to enter a problematic world through rigorous interpretation. Fabre asserts that there are some implicit elements in a text (in the world) that can be analysed, which limit the interpretative possibilities and thus provide a regulated frame of analysis. Such an education would help us exit the crisis of meaning we are undergoing, in which all solutions are counted as good (relativism), while avoiding the danger of insistence on the goodness of a single solution (integritism). His purpose here is to offer a epistemological norms that would limit the hermeneutical movement and could otherwise lead to some undesirable consequences of perspectivism. However, one wonders whether this quest for a supposed hidden meaning of the world a reflex of the western metaphysics, for it seems to contribute to a certain form of disengagement. According to Josep Lluís Rodríguez Bosch, hermeneutic is indeed a perspectivism, however this does not mean that it leads to relativism. On the contrary, perspectivism bounds the interpreter to the necessity of choosing and being responsible for the perspective he or she chooses. Didier Moreau also offers an interesting contribution showing how the creation of myths is valuable to fight against relativism as well as dogmatism by providing a sense of direction without claiming its inescapable truth. In a world where, myths have more or less disappeared, hermeneutic dialogue provides a space for the pupil to forge his own significations.

Although the hermeneutic perspective is very present in this volume, some alternative perspectives are also offered. For example, Giuseppe Mari explores the challenge posed by the reunion of objectivity and subjectivity as a mean to surpass relativism, using an Aristotelian approach: the idea of the multivocality of the Being and the theory of virtue are used to defend this pragmatic view. According to Mari, one can unite subjectivism (including emotions) and objectivism (the rational community) through communication. Dialogue provides a space for rational argumentation where the subject is free to make its own decisions in a responsible way. Finally, other contributors have claimed that relativism is simply a chimera because we still have very deep beliefs regarding education. Roger Monjo points out that the value of the project of equality of opportunity is unanimous in our contemporary world. The project in itself is not submitted to relativization as we all accept it. Instead he states, there is a conflict of interpretations about the meaning of a principle that nobody questions.

In the afterword, Moreau concludes that one paradoxical verdict of this volume is that relativism in education is only a metaphor, and actually, does not concretely exist. He also offers an interesting synthesis of some guiding questions of the book: questions regarding the place of humanism in contemporary education, the actuality of the emancipation value, the meaning of our finitude, fallibility and incompleteness. Clearly, this volume offers precious insights into some of the very pressing questions of our time. It should be of interest to anyone who wants to engage philosophically with the challenges posed by education in our post-modern time. Unfortunately, it might seem a little bit too abstract to a more pragmatic audience. The jump towards more practical issues is rarely attempted.

While I have not reviewed all of the contributions presented in the volume, I have tried to draw a general picture of the questions and approaches covered. Although the juxtaposition of many articles concerned with the same topic did create some unfortunate repetitions, especially regarding the tensions created by relativism, this book offers a wide and interesting account of the state of philosophy of education in France.