



From “Nature” to “Norm”: The Pursuit of Transcendence in Educational Philosophy

Xiaohan Wang^{1,*}, Boyang Nie²

¹College of Education, Capital Normal University, Beijing, China

²School of Political Science and Law, Capital Normal University, Beijing, China

*2667985687@qq.com, 1113145534@qq.com

Abstract. Throughout the history of educational philosophy, there has been a quest for ‘transcendence,’ which initially manifested as a veneration of nature, represented by natural environments, innate dispositions, and natural laws. As humans gained sufficient capability to contend with nature, causing a shift in nature’s standing within human society, ‘norms’ emerged as the second object of ‘transcendence’ to be revered. The worshipful behavior towards both types of ‘transcendence’ objects implies a similar pattern of thought, that is, making a two-tier distinction between nature and society, and within human societies themselves. Presenting a challenge to this is profoundly difficult, but the philosophies of Latour and Rancière offer us a direction that can help in rethinking contemporary education based on the foundations of ‘agency’ and ‘intellectual equality.’

Keywords: nature; norms; education; Bruno Latour; Jacques Rancière.

1 Introduction

As we review the historical evolution of educational philosophy, we observe a common phenomenon: education is often linked to some form of "transcendent" factor. From the moment humans appeared on Earth, they had to learn how to survive in a dangerous environment. Faced with many inexplicable natural phenomena, humans had to learn to coexist with nature, and even to deify it, worshipping nature as a sacred entity and regulating their behavior accordingly. This phenomenon gave rise to corresponding educational models, where the object of reverence could be the natural environment itself, its essence, or its laws. Moving into modern society, the balance of power between humanity and nature has shifted subtly. Humans began to see controlling nature and transforming it into a resource as a crucial task. Nonetheless, the act of constructing social and educational models based on nature’s "transcendence" did not vanish but rather underwent a transformation, reflecting a new wave of pursuit for "transcendent" norms. In both pursuits, the shadow of a dualistic mode of thought separating subject and object can be seen. However, under the backdrop of globalization and multiculturalism, this dualistic mode of thought increasingly struggles to explain complex social

Given the current situation, education, as an enterprise with a future focus, has a responsibility to take on a new mission. Therefore, it is necessary to reexamine the pursuit of "transcendence" in education. This paper aims to explore this theme from the perspectives of "nature" and "norms," addressing the existing problems therein, and finally, attempting to propose a new conception based on the thoughts of Bruno Latour and Jacques Rancière. This conception takes "connection" and "intellectual equality" as its core principles, on which to build the educational philosophy of the future.

2 The Pursuit of Transcendence in the Concept of Nature

Throughout the exploration of the history of human education, discussions about the concept of nature have always constituted a rich and diverse field. It is well-known that these discussions often trace back to Aristotle's naturalistic philosophy. Through a profound understanding of nature, scholars over the ages have constructed a variety of philosophical and political theories, from which a series of distinctive educational thoughts have emerged. To this day, the exploration of the understanding of nature remains a key issue in the field of education. In analyzing the comprehension of the concept of nature by numerous educators, what stands out is the common, continuous element in these theories: the transcendental interpretation of "nature," endowing nature with "transcendence." This transcendence may relate to the essence of things, the divine governing the world, the natural state untouched by humanity, or the physical laws of nature. Regardless of its associativity, this "transcendence" suggests that human recognition of these domains has certain limitations, even to the point of being unapproachable. What humans can do is study the natural world through means such as experience and experimentation, expecting the "transcendence" of nature to be revealed without loss. Ultimately, this reverence for nature is documented, celebrated, and emulated in the educational process. However, we often overlook a fact: the voice of nature presented by humanity is filtered and translated by humans themselves. In retrospect of the application of the "nature" concept in education, three concepts recognized as belonging to the "real world" — the natural environment, The essence of nature, and natural laws — are continuously invoked.

Rousseau is considered a milestone in the history of educational development. For Rousseau, nature was originally an uncontaminated, pure haven untouched by human civilization. Thus, Rousseau sent the young Emile to be educated in the countryside, far from the city, where the influence of human civilization is less pervasive and the presence of nature more robust. Children, he believed, would develop in a manner closer to their natural disposition in such an environment. Perhaps due to the constraints of his era, Rousseau did not recognize an apparent dichotomy in his arguments concerning the breach between nature and society, the rupture between natural forces and social forces. In fact, humanity and its societies have always maintained a "hybrid" state with the natural world, continuously participating in each other's development and construction. The advent of the Agricultural Revolution is a prime example, bringing significant changes to human life and reshaping the cyclical struc-

ture of the natural environment. Initially, human life shifted from constant migration to settlement in certain places. Settled life led people to consciously cultivate food and store provisions, thereby altering the natural rhythms of human daily life as well as the regional appearance of the natural environment, its ecological structure, and the lifestyles of non-human life forms. For instance, wolves, endowed by Aristotle with "the soul of an animal," also changed their natural structure through long-term cooperation with humans, becoming man's most faithful companion. The changing nature also entered into the design of human life. Christopher Ryan commented that "agriculture is not just a way of obtaining food; it almost affects every element of human society (gender relations, parenting, government, class systems, militarism, human and other animal relationships with the natural world, etc.). As the story changes, so does the world" [1]. Yuval Noah Harari went further, asserting that during the Agricultural Revolution, "humans thought they were domesticating plants, but in fact, plants were domesticating Homo sapiens" [2]. Therefore, the nature that thinkers like Rousseau longed for was not an environment isolated from humanity but a hybrid entity thoroughly intermingled with human civilization. To base human education on a yearning for such nature can be seen as an idealization and simplification of education.

The second orientation in the discourse around the concept of nature pertains to the essence of things, specifically, the nature of "Goodness." In educational theories grounded in naturalism, which take nature's essence as their basis, the assertion of the inherent evilness of human nature is not permitted as a reasonable or effective factor. Since the transcendent nature of goodness is an attribute inherent in all things and within humans from birth, a range of excellent qualities such as kindness, fairness, and justice should be commonly manifested in everyone. Yet, historical errors abound, as with the Spartans who espoused deceit and warfare as virtues, even elevating them to a lofty spirit. Even in modern societies, qualities categorized as "good" within one culture may be seen as "evil" within another, and vice versa. Faced with this, modern scholars adept at dichotomizing nature and society, with naturalist thinkers like Rousseau among them, criticize by saying, "Everything that comes from the hands of the Creator is good; it only becomes corrupt in the hands of man" [3]. For Rousseau, not only does an independent natural world exist, but humans born into this world possess all virtues endowed by nature. However, when we further inquire into the origins of society, we face an unsolvable dilemma. On the one hand, we cannot deny that society is an assembly of humans; on the other hand, we struggle to answer this significant question: If human nature is "good," how do "good" individuals form a society replete with "evil" within the "good" of nature? A reanalysis of Aristotle's "Politics" offers a reasonable response. When Aristotle discusses the concept of "good," he first questions the essence of the "polis" and the "citizen." "All citizens must possess the virtues of good citizens, for only then can the city-state be the best it can be. However, if we do not specify further, demanding that every good citizen in this ideal city-state must also be good people, then it is neither possible nor necessary for all good citizens to embody all the virtues of a person" [4]. The goodness of a city-state depends on its good citizens, and the goodness of the citizens depends on the condition of the city-state as envisaged by Aristotle. Thus, "good" and "evil" are al-

ways defined by people according to practical needs. Nature's essence is displayed in human activities, where humans select and classify based on practical requirements. The "good" needs to be preserved, while the "evil" should be removed. By associating the "good" with the forces of nature, the argument becomes more persuasive, whereas the "evil" is not allowed to exist within it.

Finally, the third transcendent object sought by naturalistic education is "natural law". Scholars embracing the naturalistic spirit believe that just as plant growth strictly adheres to natural laws, human development follows similar patterns, thus turning to biological, psychological, and even physical and astronomical theories. This modern approach requires a further division within the poles of nature and society, where nature and society are forcibly separated. The natural part includes biology, psychology, etc., and the achievements of related natural sciences are considered to have universality, objectivity, and transcendence, forming the foundation of human society. The consequence of this dichotomy is that all transcendent natural entities constitute human society and give rise to the culture, modes of exchange, art, politics, etc., within it. Conversely, as Latour said that the Edinburgh School corrected this error by advocating that the "soft" parts within nature affect the "hard" parts, meaning religion, aesthetics, and politics will influence what are considered objective, transcendent theories of psychology, biology, and economics. The invention of the concept of childhood by American psychologist G. Stanley Hall provides ample illustration. For Hall, interpreting the concept of childhood required positioning it within a sequence of values pertaining to religion and state. "The task of modern school pedagogy is to carefully craft the child's soul, not static metaphysics. Hall's child studies aimed to complete God's latent design in every child, family, and citizen" [5]. Hall successfully integrated political life into the domain belonging to nature. Under the influence of Plato's cave philosophy, humanity views nature as an objective entity belonging to the real world, and the best we can do living in the human world is to pursue it as the sun and alter our activities accordingly. However, as Latour states, we face "a history where science and nature are intertwined, not a nature without history, and a society with history" [6].

On one hand, the rebuttal of the beliefs regarding natural environment, natural essence, and natural law does not indicate an orientation and faith towards a postmodernist path, intending to view all natural parts as social constructs of humanity, as if there's no fantastical life of Benjamin Button. It must be clarified that we cannot find a perfect way to explain things from a picture of a human society detached from nature and a natural world detached from humanity, just as we cannot discuss the concept of children detached from society's value hierarchy and the sequence of children's identities in society as if the natural role of children in a specific period is entirely endowed by transcendent nature. On the other hand, this rebuttal does not imply a desire to bring nature under human control, with the expectation that humans become the masters of nature, or to view nature entirely as a social construct of humanity like some postmodernists do.

3 The Construction of "Norm" and Their "Transcendence"

As humans harness the power to confront the perils of the natural world, the position of nature is transformed, yet the modes of action seeking "transcendence" within the interchange with nature are preserved. Similarly, within human society, a framework of distinction influences contemporary social actions and the functioning of educational processes. In considering educational issues, the concrete manifestation of the "transcendent" object is the "norm". Modern educational paradigms construct their edifice around "norms" and perform their role within society.

The philosophical understanding of "norms" in education reflects a significant avenue of thought concerning the existing structure of knowledge. The pursuit and reverence of natural essence or physical laws embody a yearning for "norms", which remain immutable regardless of human actions. In the process of the grand development of modern science, the quest for "norms" has not only become a model for human understanding of the world but has also formed the basis of an "ideal" societal model. However, as discussed previously, there is no "transcendent" nature or society; what needs to be recognized are the human social constructs within this ideal model. Professor Thomas S. Popkewitz from the University of Wisconsin's study on "reason" reflects this model. In Western traditional philosophy, "reason" is commonly believed to originate from the Greek "logos", which is both the object of pursuit and the foundation of human thought. Through "logos", people reach the realm of reality in the Platonic sense, and "reason" becomes a spokesperson for transcendence. In Professor Popkewitz's research, the term "reason" possesses both noun and verb characteristics, involving principles and methods of thinking and action. The cognitive space based on "reason" gives rise to a set of premises and norms for human practical activities. In constructing the concept of "reason" in America, elements such as Christian pastoral ideals, the values of Anglo-Saxon white middle-class males, and scientific and progressive ideologies have entered the framework, becoming premises and assumptions for social problem-solving, heavily laden with issues of power. In Carol Gilligan's research on women's moral development, she points out that American educational theory's norms for identity and moral development are based on research data pertaining to the lifestyles of white males. Psychologists "tend to view male behavior as the norm and female behavior as a deviation from this norm" [7]. Within the psychological foundation of educational teaching theory, whether it be Freud or Kohlberg, theories have excluded considerations of female experiences and moral development different from that of males, establishing scientific knowledge that reflects male cognition and solidifying a dominant position for males, making it particularly difficult for females to develop morally in schools or to advance in their careers thereafter. The Christian ideal of "salvation" similarly categorizes "those to be saved" according to the norms of the Anglo-Saxon white middle class, rationalizing middle-class values and using them as the norm to distinguish between "norm" and "non-norm" populations, making life difficult for those labeled as "non-norm".

In Popkewitz's research, we find that the values of the white middle-class male in America are treated as transcendent, akin to "nature", and pedagogy is designed to guide "non-norm populations" to become "norm populations" through a process of

absorption and assimilation, a process often destined to fail. This mode of division reflects a humanistic mode of thought, especially in the way it pushes "non-norm populations" into the ranks of "norm populations" under the "salvation" of the latter, through accepting the "knowledge" of the "norm population" and shaping themselves with it. In the comparison between "norm" and "non-norm" populations, the predicament described by Jean-Paul Sartre as "hell is other people" emerges, with modern ideologies inciting a struggle for subjectivity among individuals and populations, albeit with a vast disparity in power. Within humanity, which acts as an active subject, a second division between subject and object occurs, where the "norm population" continues to maintain its status as the subject, while the "non-norm populations" are relegated anew to the category of the object. Modern educational philosophy aspires to establish an idealistic static norm image of the professional teacher or the perfect student within school education. The ideal image exists in two directions of "purification" operations: on one hand, the images of "teacher" and "student" are purified at the "social pole", as Popkewitz points out that the norm image of the teacher and student needs to be planned according to social expectations, power relations, etc., to regulate the teacher's perceptions, reasoning, and modes of action. Once teachers achieve the norm through established assessment models in teacher education and training, they are granted teaching qualifications, to attest to their being socially constructed as norm teachers. Furthermore, teachers pass on a series of socially constructed patterns to the next generation to construct norm students and youth. On the other hand, people are equally willing to believe that "teacher traits" and "student traits" stem from "nature" or "transcendence"; a norm teacher, a normal student, is someone who can exhibit the virtues demanded by these natural traits. Especially when responding to questions related to humanism or answering other questions based on humanist beliefs, we must inquire: Who constitutes humanity?

4 A New Way of Thinking About Education

In the frameworks of nature and human society, and within the societal structures pursuing "norms," both the worship and control of objects manifest a belief in a transcendent subject-object dichotomy. Contemplating a new educational paradigm that challenges this belief is challenging, yet the works of French philosophers Bruno Latour and Jacques Rancière offer enlightening insights. Latour's philosophical endeavor aims to dissolve the binary division between nature and society, prompting a reconsideration of the interconnections between them. His concepts of "actors" and "networks" assist in rethinking the dichotomies between humans and nature, as well as within human societies. Rancière, on the other hand, seeks to disrupt the subject-object divisions of intellectual hierarchies, where intellectual equality suggests that no person should be subjected to another as an object, nor should anyone need to conform to another as a norm.

Latour's concept of the "actor" warrants significant attention for its role in leveling the divide between humans as subjects and non-human entities as objects. It's not merely about eradicating opposition between humans and non-humans but also about

eliminating the reclassification within humanity into "norm" and "non-norm" populations. For Latour, everything is capable of action without hierarchical ordering. The only "transcendence" in nature is the ceaseless connections within the ecological network. In these networks, humans and non-humans are considered equal-status actors capable of agency. The focus shifts from bridging the gap between subjects and objects to how formerly separated and hierarchized poles can act as equal "actors" within a network, manifesting their "presence." From the perspective of human societal structures, Latour's transformation of subjects and objects into equal-status "actors" aligns with Rancière's stance. The elimination of hierarchies does not aim to achieve a utopian equality of material conditions, as capitalist bastions of wealth and poverty remain solid. Instead, as Rancière suggests, our starting point should not be inequality seeking equality but should presume present equality and inquire the subsequent steps to be taken. The purpose of education is "to learn to become equal among equals in an unequal society,"[8] as stated by Rancière. To achieve this goal, we might need to relinquish the obsession with seeking "transcendence" and "norms," transitioning from a model of "unity in diversity" to an ideal of "diversity within unity," predicated on a firm belief in the intellectual equality of all individuals. It is this conviction in equality that allows for genuine connections within human society to emerge.

Rancière notes that traditional pedagogy is dominated by an "explanatory" model of social activity. Teachers, as explainers, and students, as the explained, maintain a subject-object relational pattern. In contrast, drawing from Latour's concept of "actors," an educational approach based on "networks" would disrupt the conventional explanatory paradigm, viewing students as agents within relationships that are formed and reformed, rather than as passive recipients. An education model informed by the concept of "networks" would differ from the "explanatory" model in two main aspects. First, there is no subject-object, no hierarchy between teachers and children, both enter the network as actors. Actors renew themselves through connections with other actors (children, teachers, knowledge, methods, etc.) within a network situated on a plane of equality and involving communicative action based on "value-rationality." This emphasis on communicative action has strong parallels with John Dewey's educational philosophy. Gert Biesta has described Dewey's approach as not "child-centered" or "curriculum-centered," but rather as "a thoroughly communicative-centered path"[9]. Deweyan communication is an activity based on "value-rationality" rather than "instrumental rationality." Through communication, such learning transforms the beliefs, emotions, and understandings of all participants because the process is not merely one-sided expression and reception, but an exchange of views leading to creative activity. It is not merely a dialogue where learning is unilateral but an activity that transforms all actors' perspectives and creates a shared situation. In Dewey's view, the outcome of joint action is the creation of a common, shared, not identical, world. In other words, "alliance" itself implies the recognition of interconnected "actors" as equal individuals. When natural scientists, social scientists, the general public, and politicians gather to discuss issues as equals, the opposition between nature and society, as well as the societal divisions into "norm" and "non-norm," will dissolve. Nature and society, norm and non-norm populations will once again intermingle.

The separation of factual knowledge from procedural knowledge, with value-laden knowledge acting as the connecting outcome, presents an educational paradigm where students are free to choose methods to investigate factual knowledge. In the "explanation" dominated model, knowledge imparted to students is a mix of "fact," "method," and "value," rather than purely factual. Here, the teacher acts as an "interpreter," guiding all activities towards the transmission of what Kuhn would term "normal science" — characterized by adherence to tradition, as opposed to the breakthroughs of "revolutionary science" that signify societal progress and innovation, such as the heliocentric theory supplanting geocentrism. Within this "explanation" model, the knowledge students acquire is not truly their own. Even under the constructivist approach, with the teacher as a "guide," the teacher's role as "interpreter" remains unaltered, albeit with the focus shifted from factual to procedural and value-laden knowledge. Consequently, students do not construct knowledge that is inherently theirs, which hampers the emergence of "revolutionary science." By contrast, the "connection" model of education prioritizes exploration over transmission of knowledge, embarking on an intellectual adventure. The advocacy for the "connection" model does not negate "normal science," but rather heeds Polanyi's caution that our use of a scientific model is akin to residing within it as we do our bodies, recognizing that an overemphasis on one model may overshadow the potential contributions of others. In this spirit of adventure, teachers should embrace "intellectual equality" by recognizing the abilities of their students, thereby fostering their willingness to engage in adventure and to work with them to connect different approaches and factual knowledge.

The "connection" based rethinking of educational philosophy responds to UNESCO's 2020 publication "Learning to Become with the World: Education for Future Survival" by emphasizing autonomous, creative activity over the traditional "explanation" led model. It focuses on power relations among human and non-human entities, eschewing a learner-centric approach in favor of emphasizing interconnections among agents, rejecting dichotomies like subject/object and nature/society that separate humans from the world. It heralds a potential different from Sartre's, where freedom is not at risk of being lost through conflict but can be created through "connections." Moreover, the "connection" model promotes cognitive diversity and the birth of "revolutionary science," addressing global and local challenges through cooperation extending beyond humanity, rather than through instrumental, technocratic fixes. However, we must be mindful of its limitations. Latour's ecological philosophy, with its focus on the relations between actors spread out in a network without an "essence," leads to an outcome that is inherently chaotic and contingent, lacking a stable foundation to grasp. We cannot discard current educational and psychological theories of teaching and child development until better theories emerge. The randomness of connections also means that the bonds formed between teachers and students could potentially lead to negative changes and risks. Educational risk can be "beautiful" or "dangerous." While education aspires to transcendence, it also contains elements of conservatism. The social function of education demands that the "connections" formed within the school are somewhat regulated to ensure that the freedom they engender does not breach the safe boundaries of education.

5 Conclusion

In the present globalized world, we are not only witnessing the globalization of economic trade and political exchanges but also facing a world rife with challenges and crises. Humanity can no longer dissociate itself from this world nor maintain a God-like perspective, where the world is an object to be managed and handled from a distance. Humans are inextricably linked to the world at every moment, much like our inability to fully comprehend our own subconscious, we cannot fully understand the world around us. This does not imply an abdication of our responsibilities; instead, it calls for the abandonment of our role as external "saviors" of the world. It signifies a deeper engagement with the crises that we are a part of, compelling us to take actions imbued with a sense of responsibility. In this context, education must convey pertinent philosophies—a vision of equality and cooperation among all actors.

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