

Education towards Truth?

Reflecting on a Sentence of Josef Mitterer

Theo Hug ◇ University of Innsbruck (Austria) <theo.hug@uibk.ac.at>

► **Purpose** – So far, the work of Josef Mitterer has not been widely recognized in philosophy of education, even though it offers many points of contact not only for epistemological and methodological questions but also for empirical and educational issues. Among these points of contact there is an outstanding sentence (see motto), which can be taken as a starting point for conceptual considerations in philosophy of education. The article takes this sentence as a hub for some corresponding investigations.

► **Methodology** – The article seeks to make progress in these investigations through reflecting on Mitterer’s sentence in ten steps, beginning with translational aspects and ending with questions of power relations and inconsistency. The arguments are made through (a) reference to concepts that are currently being discussed in philosophy of education and constructivist discourses, (b) through contrasting various conceptualizations, and (c) through discussion of selected examples. ► **Findings** – The article proposes a translation of Mitterer’s sentence that may be from Mitterer. It points out several similarities with and differences to positions related to (presumed) positions of Mitterer. Furthermore, it shows innovative options for argumentations in educational philosophy on that basis.

► **Benefits** – The contribution sounds out some interfaces between Mitterer’s philosophy and current debates in philosophy of education. It contributes to differentiated understandings of Mitterer’s sentence and it opens up a new field of discourse.

► **Key words** – philosophy of education, philosophical constructivism, contextualism, non-dualistic philosophy, politics of truth, governmentality.

Die Erziehung zur Wahrheit ist immer die Erziehung zur Wahrheit des Erziehers.
Mitterer (1983), p. 273

The work of Josef Mitterer offers many points of contact and connecting factors for epistemological, methodological, ethical, theoretical and also empirical questions. In my contribution, I want to focus on one sentence that relates to both education and philosophy. The sentence, quoted in its German version in the epigraph, struck me right away when I heard it for the first time during a talk that Josef Mitterer gave in Innsbruck in the early ’80s. From then on, it has not lost its inspiring character for me.

Even though it is not unusual in the context of philosophy to think and to write about a sentence over a long period of time, I want to mention briefly Mitterer’s style of writing. In contrast to common trends in the academic world – such as publish or perish, working for evaluation and career, thinking with a stop watch and imparting instant

knowledge, valuing media presence more highly than thoughtful content, or putting financial success before critical thinking – Josef Mitterer rather rethinks a sentence thoroughly before writing it down and rethinks and rewrites it again before publishing it. The results of his judicious and sober-minded style has led to extensive paraphrasing and translations, and sometimes his work has been (mis)used by quoting his work without giving credit to the author (Mitterer 1992, p. 19).

(1) First of all, how can the German sentence “Die Erziehung zur Wahrheit ist immer die Erziehung zur Wahrheit des Erziehers” (Mitterer 1983, p. 273) be translated into English? As far as I can see, there is not just one translation. One could say, “Education for truth is always education for the truth of the educator.” Another option is the following: “Education towards truth is always education towards the truth of the educator.” There is at least a third version: “Education of truth is always education of the truth of the educator.”

Each of these translations places an emphasis on different aspects. “For truth,” for example, focuses questions about it in moral or imperative terms, whereas “towards truth” suggests various kinds of aiming for or directing to truth. “Of truth,” however, tends to imply that there is more a concrete truth at hand that has to be promoted in concrete ways. In recent email correspondence with me, Mitterer himself tended to favor the translation “education towards truth is always education towards the truth of the educator.” In my view, this translation points up an emphasis on bringing something in line with truth (whatever the concept, context and content of truth may be).

(2) If we interpret the German version literally, half of the content seems to be missing because of the gender-related wording. How about the multitude of cases of “the truth of the educatress” or “the truth of the governess”? Well, Mitterer is interested in the general relevance of “education towards truth” above gender-specific or other special aspects of “education towards truth.” Moreover, looking at the various contexts and examples Mitterer (1992, 2001) discusses in his books, his way of expressing himself is not only a philosophical kind of “undoing gender,” in terms of being sensitive to different structures of relevance, but also a kind of skepticism about *all* claims of omni-relevance of single categories or distinctions. In other words, in “truth of the educator” both “truth” and “educator” are used as placeholders for all sorts of strong beliefs, guiding themes, verities, trueness, rightness, etc. and for all kinds of caregivers – child or adult carers, educators, educatresses, legal guardians, parents – teachers, stakeholders, bosses, authorities, legitimized speakers or self-authorized players (Mitterer 2001, p. 67). The terms can be used figuratively and the meaning varies, depending on history, context, and situation.

(3) The fact that Mitterer uses the terms “always” and not “sometimes,” “now and

again,” or “from case to case” attracts attention. Is this related to a logical or pragmatic necessity? Elsewhere, he uses the term “also”, saying “Education towards truth is always also education towards the truth of the educator” (Mitterer 1992, p. 14). It seems that education towards truth *necessitates* education towards the truth of the educator. Even if education towards truth is not only but also education towards the truth of the educator, an inescapable connectivity is postulated here.

(4) The way this relation is formulated reminds me of Maturana’s starting point for the use of language: “*Everything said is said by an observer to another observer that could be himself*” (Maturana 1978, p. 30). So, if something is said, willy-nilly, so to say, it is said by an observer on the basis of his or her perspectives and distinctions. This understanding points to a necessary relation known as observer theorem in constructivist discourse and not to an optional relation. Even though Maturana and Mitterer do not characterize themselves as constructivists, they seem to take coactive relations as points of departure in both cases – the case of everything said being said by an observer and the case of education towards truth. As I understand these types of relations, they correspond to concrete structures at a definite time. The necessity does not refer to a specific content in the sense of strictly deductive arguments, even though we can observe certain probable inferences, for example when educated people tend to tell the truth of their educators and educatresses. So, in the long run, the chances of education towards truth increase as long as there are no strong contrastive experiences; and an observer may easily have the impression of necessary inferences and coerced results.

(5) The sentence “education towards truth is always education towards the truth of the educator” may lead to the assumption that Mitterer has an intentional understanding of education in mind and that he is thinking of the classical pedagogical motif of the pupil who autonomously does what others want him or her to do. In fact, some examples he discusses deal with children, pupils, teachers, students, professors and popes (Mitterer 2001, pp. 66–68), and, at least partly, these examples seem to follow instructional understandings of upbringing or learning, and educational concepts of goal-oriented influence,

preparation for “real life,” or acquiring the competencies for adult life. But if we take a closer look at the arguments and examples provided (pp. 66–75), we can easily see that Mitterer is thinking of wider concepts of education, too. For example, distinctions learned during early childhood or the use of expressions in everyday life are commonly referred to as contextual or developmental aspects in terms of socialization processes. So, the sentence does not refer to a special concept of intentional education but is rather open to various concepts of education, socialization, and enculturation. Mitterer’s critique of the widespread “objectifying mode of speaking [objektierende Redeweise]” (Mitterer 1978, pp. 3–4) speaks for this, especially.

(6) Concerning purposeful attempts at direct exertions of influence on the disposition of others, these are often announced in institutions’ programmatic statements. For example, on the website of the College of Education at Madonna University, which is “dedicated to providing high quality courses and programs for persons interested in becoming teachers,” we can find the following paragraph: “As an independent Catholic institution, the University remains committed to its belief in the spiritual, educational and service-oriented mission, education for truth, goodness and service. The College of Education explicitly works to develop teachers who care about their students and our nation’s schools. Faculty members nurture students through carefully planned instruction and thoughtful academic counseling.”¹ Of course, there are more secularized versions, too, such as the Truth In Education program of the University of Alberta, which also is an institutional member of the Center for Academic Integrity.² Here we can find the following programmatic statement: “Without Academic Integrity, an educational institution would suffer complete failure. At the University of Alberta, our top priority is to maintain the integrity of the degrees we offer. To that end, we have created the Truth In Education program. It is designed to promote integrity in all educational activities, including learning, teaching, research and community events.” So, what difference does it make? And how about the widespread mixes of all sorts of -isms in the academic world, whose agents and exponents call for scientific work at the cutting edge of all developments and at the same time often act like exponents

of dogmatic churches? Do educational institutions suffer complete failure if they don’t commit themselves to values such as integrity, honesty, and responsibility?

Well, on the one hand, Mitterer agrees with such commitments too, and every now and then he highlights harshly cases of academic *Betrayers of the Truth* (Broad & Wade 1982). On the other hand, he wants to point to those versions of problem-creating in the name of truth that think of themselves as solutions to a problem. Let me present an example. Nowadays a lot of money is spent in many institutions on plagiarism detection software, without taking much notice of the problems in understaffed departments or changing learning cultures. The chances of solving related socio-cultural problems by means of software technologies are not good, as experience shows. Needless to say, jittery plagiarism hunters are not much of a help, either, at least when they follow weakly-reflected programs of self-realization in the service of unconscious motifs rather than deliberate thinking or wisdom.

(7) Does Mitterer’s sentence express an anti-pedagogical position? Is it meant rather as a rejection or negation of education than a creation of a new positive educational model “beyond truth”? Well, Mitterer does not characterize his positions as “anti-pedagogical.” On the other hand, there are affinities, or at least compatibilities, with anti-pedagogical orientations, for example, in terms of questioning authorities, openness to future developments, and voting for a pursuit of change (Mitterer 1983, p. 276). Anti-pedagogical approaches have been characterized differently. As Smeyers and Marshall write:

“As knowledge can no longer be claimed to be applicable to a rapidly changing future, it is argued, the justification of present educational activities is called into question. For some philosophers of education this suspicion evolves into a full condemnation of all pedagogy” (Smeyers & Marshall 1995, p. 31).

I do not think that Mitterer would agree with a condemnation of all pedagogy. I assume he would rather problematize truth-oriented and also fundamentalist versions of it, as well as versions claiming validity anywhere and everywhere.

(8) So far, the sentence comes across as a condensed form of critique of different ver-

sions of education towards truth. In this sense, there is a clear core of the argument that features a certain ambiguity and manifold options of literal and figurative applications. Accepting that, we may ask if there is a corresponding argument for *education without truth* in the sentence being discussed in this essay. Among others, Friedrich Nietzsche, Richard Rorty and Jean-François Lyotard have brought forward arguments for education without truth: Nietzsche with his radical questioning of the value and objectivity of truth; Rorty arguing for the strengthening of solidarity and consensus; and Lyotard with his critique of “grand narratives” and universalist claims and his brilliant in-depth investigation of disagreement. Since Mitterer differentiates his positions from all philosophical positions that talk of objects differently from the language that describes the objects (Mitterer 1978, 1992, pp. 21–22, 2001 pp. 16–20), his sentence cannot be simply subsumed under a collection of postmodern perspectives of education without truth. At the same time, he would not follow the widespread critique of such perspectives in terms of arbitrariness, irrationalism, or unrealized support of neo-liberal ideologies.

It's quite obvious that he would not share the critique of Alexandra Deligiorgi (1998) either, when she says:

“In summing up, both Rortyan edifying philosophy and Lyotardian mathesis – perspectivist in their pragmatist (Rorty) or non-pragmatist (Lyotard) scope – seem to be incompatible with reflective reason only because their perspectivism is used as a step toward justification and legitimation of ad hoc and circumstantially formed schemes and patterns regulating all possible social practices. Such contingent and circumstantial schemes defined within the framework of extracognitive procedures, function blindly, given that they take no notice of the fundamental convention that binds the human condition with the quest for truth as the theoretical basis of evaluating judgments guiding decisions and practices” (Deligiorgi 1998, p. 4).

Although one might characterize Mitterer's philosophy in terms of “hyperperspectivistic prisms”³ he would rather take Deligiorgi's conclusion as a typical example of education towards truth if not as backsliding to a kind of modern scientism. She argues

“that post-modern perspectivism and the individualistic or collectivistic logic which nurtures its scope can be transcended through the construction of hyperperspectivistic prisms based on a logic of interrelation animated by the interdisciplinary spirit prevailing in the field of modern science. This latter serves as the leading thread for the foundation of a new canonicity which, without losing its historical and cultural character, can make claims to truth and validity of general acceptance” (Deligiorgi 1998, p. 1).

So again, what difference does it make if it is not about homogeneity eliminating differences or heterogeneity eliminating similarities? I think that it is very likely that Mitterer would use the same argument here that he uses when looking at situations where we lie and infringe bids of truth: “If we told the truth under all conditions, we would probably end up in a mental institution or in jail” (Mitterer 2001, p. 66).

(9) As far as I can see, Mitterer's core argument is quite in line with Frieda Heyting's critique of the problematic role of ideals in education, especially of if they should be “passed on” in educational processes (Heyting 2004a, pp. 245–246). Is it also in line with her considerations about the problems of justification in the context of post-foundationalist concepts of social sciences (Heyting 2001, van Goor et al. 2004)? Both Mitterer's non-dualistic philosophy and post-, non- or anti-foundationalist approaches in philosophy of education (cf. also Smeyers & Peters 2006) question the foundationalist procedures in rationalist, transcendentalist, and empiricist traditions. Both criticize the distinction between founding and founded utterances, implying a “vertical” relation between them, and both ask for reconsideration of justification procedures. Furthermore, both deny any epistemological privilege for a certain position, which implies a conception of “horizontally” structured knowledge, and both attach importance to discursive and contextual aspects as well as to aspects of temporality. Mitterer puts an emphasis on the distinction of descriptions “so far” and “from now on” (Mitterer 1992, p. 72), and Heyting defends historical dimensions and thinks of justification as a two-sided procedure in which every justifying proposition can only work as such for the time being (Heyting 2001, p. 259). Although both positions search for ways beyond certain founda-

tions and arbitrary allegations, and although both result in an open, context-sensitive, discursive, and learning-oriented view of justification with similar social practices, we should not overlook the different modes of reference to non-dualist philosophy, in the case of Mitterer (1992, pp. 49–86; 2001) and to a critical reading of philosophical constructivism, contextualism, and systems theory, in the case of Heyting (1992; 2001, p. 253; 2002; 2004b).

(10) In a similar way, some parallels could be made with reference to current debates on governmentality in educational sciences and educational philosophy (Weber & Maurer 2006; Bilstein et al. 2007, pp. 204–206). For instance, the search for new concepts and a new language of education that “articulates what is at stake in the care of oneself today” (Bilstein et al. 2007, p. 206) is in compliance with the problematization of education towards the truth (of others). Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons look forward to “creative acts” of forming new techniques and practices to govern oneself, locating their efforts in the context of governmentality studies as follows: “Within a broader perspective, these creative acts can be connected to an ‘ethics of de-governmentalization’ and can contribute, more precisely, to a ‘governmentality of ethical distance’” (Bilstein et al. 2007, p. 206). But on the whole, the differences outweigh similarities, such as the abstract level of argumentation, awareness of power relations or the focus on critique rather than on design proposals. This is, to a lesser extent, owing to the fact that contemporary governmentality studies refer to the work of Michel Foucault⁴ and not to non-dualistic philosophy. It becomes obvious in view of the re-localization of the question of truth in terms of a critical ontology of the present which “refers to a kind of truth-telling and true knowledge that cuts into our educational present and how we live the present” (Bilstein et al. 2007, p. 205). Finally, Masschelein and Simons think of teachers as “truth-tellers for others” in the sense that “e-ducational truth-telling takes care of others by opening up spaces to take care of oneself and to verify one's life (Bilstein et al. 2007, p. 205). In so doing, the analytical potentials under the auspices of Foucault are pruned and finally turned into moral stances. In other words, the concept of de-governmentalization emerges as concept of re-governmentalization on other levels.

Mitterer tries to avoid such traps and shortcomings. Moreover, he does not show the way out of the “escape from arbitrariness” (Mitterer 2001) of truth-oriented philosophy and education. Rather, Mitterer suggests disengaging from the search for truth. He shows that philosophy and education towards truth both try to avoid arbitrariness by creating general or universal (“non-contingent”) pre-suppositions on the basis of contingent assumptions. By contrast, his intention is “to make lines of argumentation, tricks, and principles of the functioning of dualistic modes of arguing transparent and thereby weaken them” (Mitterer 2001, p. 21).

These reflections on Mitterer’s sentence “education towards truth is always education towards the truth of the educator” show its connectivity to some other approaches in philosophy of education but also show its originality. I read it as an invitation to further investigations and elaborations on educational perspectives based on Mitterer’s non-dualist philosophy, the more so as there is a need for contemporary analysis of related forms of education towards autonomy, democracy, regard, respect, or towards technology. One may say that in all of these cases, problems of self-referential paradoxes are not solved or are not solvable. But who says that we have to think of these problems in terms of Aristotelian syllogism or modern forms of bivalent logic first and foremost? If one reduces thinking to the discourse of classical logic, one might rely on Epimenides’ paradox and remind us of his statement, “All Cretans are liars.” Is it a self-suspending statement since he came from Crete himself? Is Mitterer’s statement a self-suspending statement in the sense that he tells the truth and therefore is educating towards (his) truth himself? Or is he lying and therefore his statement is

meaningless? In my view the constellation is quite similar to Epimenides’ constellation. The self-referential paradox arises when one considers whether the truth is actually spoken and when one remains in the context of bivalent logic and does not take a tertium datur into account. But if we read Mitterer’s work carefully we are not tempted to stick to bivalent logic or Aristotelian syllogism. We are rather encouraged to think of all domains of knowledge and practices in terms of the “craft” or “art” that Aristotle has valued. Even if today’s discussions focus on new forms of what he called theoretical wisdom or science (*epistēmē*) and practical skills (*technē*), he also appreciated intuitive understanding (*nous*) and practical wisdom (*phronēsis*).

Especially, concepts of situated skillfulness and sagacity, context-sensitive intelligence and practical wisdom (*phronēsis*) seem to be underestimated today. And this is how I understand Mitterer’s discourse: bringing together and thinking across these different domains of knowledge and practices in order to overcome descriptions so far or keep them for the time being (In Mitterer’s books there is no “either – or”, no categorical rejection of arguments for keeping or for overcoming). Mitterer probably would agree on the “Incommensurability of scientific and poetic knowledge” (Glaserfeld 1997). But at the same I think that his philosophy also aims at those spheres where poetic and scientific knowledge meet.

In the same vein as von Glaserfeld, Mitterer offers thoughts and concepts and does not try to proselytize to others or to establish a new paradigm. With his work and the prosperous way of living his philosophy, he shows fruitful ways of dealing with the relation between the reality of experience and the experience of reality. Although he does not

explicitly formulate a philosophy of education or media theory, and although I do not know an explicit statement of his that refers to “Rashōmon” (Akutagawa 2006),⁵ he seems to have found viable ways of dealing with the Rashōmon problem, if not solutions to epistemological and ethical problems related to it (cf. Boyd 1987). But this may be discussed on another occasion.

THE AUTHOR



Theo Hug is associate professor of educational sciences at the University of Innsbruck and coordinator of the Innsbruck Media Studies research group. His areas of interest include media education and media literacy, e-education and microlearning, theory of knowledge and philosophy of science. He is particularly interested in interfaces of medialization and knowledge dynamics as well as learning processes. Some of his recent work is focussing on instant knowledge, bricolage and didactics of microlearning.

Notes

1. Retrieved from <http://www.madonna.edu/pages/collegeofeducation.cfm> on 28 January 2008.
2. Retrieved from <http://www.uofaweb.ualberta.ca/TIE/> on 28 January 2008.
3. Deligiorgi takes the philosophy of Rorty and Lyotard as examples of one-sided approaches (or “prisms”). In her view, one-sidedness “facilitates cynical or nihilistic

relativisation of values of truth, justice or freedom and leads to their gradual weakening and elimination” (Deligiorgi 1998, p. 6). She argues for a multi-sided prism of hyperperspectivism that is based on the ideas of interdisciplinarity and interrelation and that can function as a theoretical measure against cynical or nihilistic tendencies: “Both interdisciplinarity and interrelation are interwoven together with hyperperspectivism; this latter as a *telos* of-

4. With the concept of “governmentality” Foucault aims at a new understanding of

power beyond the problematic of consensus, will or conquest. He writes, “The relationship proper to power would not therefore be sought on the side of violence or of struggle, nor on that of voluntary linking (all of which can, at best, only be the instruments of power), but rather in the area of the singular mode of action, neither warlike nor juridical, which is government” (Foucault 1982, p. 221). Foucault advocates a concept of power that focuses on various forms of social control in disciplinary institutions (for example,

schools or hospitals) as well as on different forms of knowledge in contrast to widespread conceptualizations of power in the sense of hierarchical, top-down power of the state. Accordingly, the concept of “government” is not limited to state politics alone. It includes a wide range of control techniques that apply to a variety of phenomena, from one’s control of the self to the “biopolitical control” of populations. So, Foucault defines governmentality as the “art of government” in a wide sense that includes organized practices

(mentalities, rationalities, and techniques) through which subjects are governed, and that is linked to related concepts such as biopolitics and power-knowledge (Foucault 2006a, b). Mitterer’s and Foucault’s philosophy do not have a lot in common, but *grosso modo*, they have an interest in “politics of truth” in common.

5. See also “Rashōmon” by Akira Kurosawa, Remastered Edition 2008 (DVD, subtitled) Triad Productions LLC (Org. 1951) or other filmed versions.

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All translations from German are made by the author.

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Received: 22 March 2008

Accepted: 1 July 2008