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Thinking Inside the Box: Moritz’s Critique of the Philanthropist Project of a Non-Coercive Pedagogy

In 1785, at the end of his career as a school teacher, Moritz presented two penetrating critiques of the pedagogical movement of Philanthropism. Philanthropist pedagogy claimed to foster the natural progression of children’s cognitive development, and thus to eliminate the need for coercion in education. While Moritz’s novel, Andreas Hartknopf: Eine Allegorie, unmasksthe hypocrisy of this claim, his Versuch einer kleinen praktischen Kinderlogik probes deeper, unfolding a powerful critique of the epistemological principles at the basis of the Philanthropist movement. His Kinderlogik reveals all education to take place within coercive frameworks that at once enable and constrict learning. These frameworks may indeed be broken down and reconstituted in alternative ways, but they cannot be transcended.

In 1778, when Karl Philipp Moritz completed his studies at the University of Wittenberg, a pedagogical reform movement was sweeping through Germany. Founded by Johann Bernhard Basedow, the Philanthropist movement promoted a method of education that claimed to foster the natural order of children’s cognitive development. Drawing on both Lockean empiricism and Cartesian rationalism, Basedow and his followers believed cognitive development to begin with sense perception, to continue with analytic reasoning, and to culminate in verbal cognition. To facilitate this natural order, and to prepare their pupils for careers beyond academia, they shifted the focus of elementary education away from the study of texts and toward the study of realia. They made use of one pedagogical instrument in particular, namely the Naturalienkabinett, or natural history cabinet, a carefully organized collection of natural and man-made objects. By supporting the natural course of children’s cognitive skills, the Philanthropists believed they had eliminated the need for the coercion that, in their view, teachers in the traditional Latin schools exerted upon their pupils.

Basedow’s school in Dessau, the Philanthropin, quickly expanded, and its progress was eagerly tracked by admirers such as Kant. Writing in 1776, Kant appealed for the public’s financial support of this institution, about which he raved, “Niemals ist wohl eine billigere Foderung an das menschliche Geschlecht getan und niemals ein so großer und sich selbst ausbreitender Nutze davor uneigennützig angeboten worden”.¹ Its greatest value, he claimed

a year later, lay not simply in educating students according to a natural method, but also in training new teachers to use this method, teachers who could then spread an educational revolution throughout the land.²

Even before completing his university studies, Moritz became one of many aspiring or established teachers to make the pilgrimage to Dessau to participate in Basedow’s pedagogical revolution. Though his encounter with Base-dow proved disappointing, he continued to pursue a teaching career (first in Potsdam, then in Berlin) that was oriented by Philanthropist principles. I shall argue here, though, that Moritz, at the end of his career as a school teacher, formulated an incisive critique of Philanthropism that illuminates an underlying coercive framework of instruction. In his novel, Andreas Hartknopf: Eine Allegorie (1785), Moritz satirizes the conflict between Philanthropist theory and practice that he had observed while visiting the Philanthropin in Dessau eight years earlier. Not only do the violent physical acts of Hagebuck, Hartknopf’s adversary, hypocritically contradict his advocacy of an education that is free of coercion, but the force of his advocacy itself serves as a means for him to impose the principles of this education upon others, and thereby to exert his authority over them.

While acute, this critique is limited, leaving open the possibility that teachers of good faith could actually translate Philanthropist educational theory into practice. But in the same year that Andreas Hartknopf: Eine Allegorie appeared,³ Moritz advanced a far more probing critique, albeit one that has hitherto gone unnoticed. His Versuch einer kleinen praktischen Kinderlogik⁴ intervenes at the epistemological foundation of Philanthropist pedagogy, questioning the very existence of a natural order of cognition. From its incipience in childhood, Moritz shows, human cognition necessarily takes place within the parameters of pre-fabricated analytic spaces such as the Naturalienkabi-nett. Such spaces do not merely facilitate cognition; they constitute its condition of possibility. Teachers cannot help but discipline children to think within their confines, and the Philanthropist promise of a natural education free of coercion thus proves to be illusory. We can only learn to think inside the box.

Moritz’s critique of Philanthropism at once supports and complicates Foucault’s well-known claim in Discipline and Punish that just as corporal punishment was being curbed in institutions such as prisons and schools during the Enlightenment, more subtle disciplinary measures were being introduced. “In the first instance”, Foucault argues, “discipline proceeds from

³Though the date 1786 appears on the title page of both books, scholars have dated their appearance to the previous year.
⁴The full title is Versuch einer kleinen praktischen Kinderlogik, welche auch zum Theil für Lehrer und Denker geschrieben ist.