Richard Kearney, Post-secular Continental Philosophy and Education

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This paper presents and discusses the philosophical writings of contemporary Irish philosopher Richard Kearney. The thesis is that Kearney's work has useful implications for educators. Kearney is well known as a Continental philosopher in the hermeneutical tradition. He is a leading thinker in what has been labeled the "post-secular turn" in Continental philosophy.[1] Kearney's work is not, however, a common topic for scholarship among American educational philosophers. It may be that Kearney's work is relatively recent but I also suspect that the religious themes of Kearney's writings may repel many American philosophers. In addition, he is not a philosopher of education nor is education a focus in his work. Kearney's work is postmodern in orientation and tradition (if there is such a thing) and Romantic in style. In regards to education, I suggest that the value of Kearney's work is ethical, aesthetic, and teleological. That is, Kearney's work is about living life and he writes and speaks of ethical living for a transformed world. In this sense, there are many similarities (and differences) in Kearney's writing and the American pragmatic tradition but this is not the topic of this discussion. This paper examines the hermeneutical philosophy of Richard Kearney with a focus on ethics, social justice, and the meaning of the other. I argue that Kearney's ethical philosophy, while theological in context, nonetheless provides an appropriate, unique, and valuable perspective for thinking about education.

This overview of Kearney's work and discussion of its relevance for education begins with an introduction and brief biography of Kearney.

This is followed with a rationale for including post-secular conversations in what is traditionally the secular arena of public education. In support of my thesis, the paper examines some of Kearney's views on social justice and is meaning for education, particularly some of his writings on the *other*. This part of the paper begins with a postmodern critique of the current Leadership for Social Justice movement in America.[2] The remainder of the paper is a focused examination of Kearney's deconstruction of the other in *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion*[3] as an example of relevance of his work.

Born in 1954, Kearney is a relatively young man; yet, he has achieved a remarkable combination of accomplishments in philosophy, the arts, and public life.[4] Kearney received his MA in 1976 from McGill University in Montreal where he studied with the Canadian communitarian philosopher Charles Margrave Taylor. Later, he studied under Paul Ricoeur and received a Ph.D. from the University of Paris X: Nanterre in 1980. Kearney's writings on *otherness* build on the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas with whom Kearney engaged in frequent conversations and correspondence.[5] Much of Keaney's work is also influenced by Jacques Derrida and contemporary Derridian scholar John Caputo.[6]

The post-secular turn in Continental philosophy is unexpected but perhaps, nonetheless inevitable. Post-secularism follows and expands on the work of perceived and celebrated atheists such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, and Derrida.[7] Regardless, much of the writings Heidegger and Derrida at the end of their lives focused on spiritual themes.[8] In addition, as John Manoussakis describes[9], Continental philosophy has always maintained a theological perspective. Nonetheless, the development of a vigorous school of postmodern post-secular philosophy at the beginning of the 21st century is a remarkable turn of events. Today, Continental philosophy has unapologetically embraced religious texts as legitimate and worthy arenas of philosophical discourse within the postmodern philosophical tradition. Of interest to me, however, is that much of this work is relevant to education. Considering the work of Kearney, I wonder if educational philosophers who usually distance themselves from anything "theological" may be missing one of the main currents of contemporary philosophy with profound ethical and teleological possibilities for educational dialogue and change. In thinking about the oldest and most foundational philosophical questions in education, why are we educating and what are we doing when we educate, post-secular philosophy offers intriguing and I believe new insight for meaning and purpose in education. While the relevance of post-secular philosophy to education is indirect a key theme discussed

in this paper is the active quest and belief in the possible impossibility of true and sustained social transformation.

Given the context of this discussion, it is important to clarify the meaning of post-secularism and why it is both an appropriate and relevant arena for secular conversations on public education. I want to be clear that my purpose is not to advocate any form of publicly-supported religious education that promotes someone or some group's religious dogma or ideology. Post-secular philosophy is unabashedly postmodern and post-secular authors make a clear distinction between modern onto-theology (also known philosophically as Christian apologetics) and postmodern post-secular philosophy.[10] The key to the distinction between modern onto-theology and postmodern theology is the meaning of secular. While space prevents a full discussion of this claim, the abbreviated version is that onto-theology is an epistemological metaphysics of the sacred that embraces the modern objective metaphysics of the natural. Thus, onto-theology posits two realms of Being/being, Divine and natural, heaven and earth, sacred and secular. The common secular and non-secular distinction, and the similar philosophy and theology distinction, is historically a product of the Enlightenment and modernism. Secularism is a modern movement that, epistemological in purpose, distinctly divides objective knowing from subjective spiritual belief. Regardless of their modern origins, the dichotomies between philosophy and theology, and secular and non-secular, are seemingly reinforced by the postmodern rejection of metaphysics. Moreover, even though postmodern critique challenges the subject/object metaphysics of positivism equally, if not more so, than it does religious dogma, the assumption that objective secular thought is the unique purview of philosophy remains. The emerging post-secular philosophical conversation, however, challenges and rejects the metaphysical truth claims of both positivism and onto-theology while simultaneously opening the examination of sacred texts for philosophical meaning and knowing. A result of this is the emergence of a post-secular philosophical tradition that refuses to reject spiritual texts, spiritual word views, and meaning-making as anti-philosophical.

A key theme of the post-secular body of work is central to the argument presented in this paper. Post-secular writing is consistently grounded (albeit in acknowledged subjective faith) and affirmative. As a result, it tends to reject and counter assertions that postmodern thinking is hopelessly relativistic and nihilistic. Kearney is no exception and his entire body of work is an empowering, optimistic, and positive voice for social justice and meaningful transformation of human society. Kearney locates grounding and purpose in hermeneutical interpreta-

tion of sacred texts for meaning as opposed to "Truths." There is logic in this approach because before modernism and the advent of objective epistemology, knowledge was textual and expressed through narrative. Thus, when ancient texts are examined from our modern (subject/object) world view, the narratives are bound to the mythical world-views of pre-modern cultures. The epistemological project of the Enlightenment was essentially an effort, a method, to get passed narrative-dependent knowledge to the real, natural world beyond subjective culturally-bound interpretation. A problem arises when objective epistemology is used to interpret ancient texts. There is a tendency towards misinterpretation in one of two ways. The first is fundamentalist and is inconsistent with subject/object metaphysics and positivist epistemology and seeks to declare privileged ancient texts as Divine revelations of Truth. The second, Christian apologetics, seeks philosophical consistency with positivism and building on the dual realities of Plato, Augustine, and Aquinas,[11] grounds the truths of selected ancient texts in a different reality (Kingdom of heaven). In contrast, Kearney views ancient texts as culturally embedded ways of knowing rich with pre-modern wisdom, experience, and social meaning.

From the post-secular perspective, the central issues of our time are problems of knowledge and interpretation. In the case of this paper, the focus is on knowing and interpreting the *other* as it relates in education to issues of social justice. A primary hermeneutical project, embraced by Kearney, is to seek right interpretation. Thus, how do we as educators interpret the meaning of the *other* in promoting social justice? The problem, for Kearney, and I believe educators, is how to get at the *right interpretation* without a metaphysical/epistemological foundation. This is hermeneutics—meaningful interpretation without foundational truth claims—tricky business.

Hermeneutics breaks down the dichotomy between secular truth and religious dogma by positing the world as text.[12] This is not a form of nihilistic solipsism (there is text, and nothing but the text); rather, it is the idea that there is no objective knowing outside of the bounds of textual interpretation. Text always mediates between the world and human thought. We think in language and language is interpretive. Thus, the question becomes, how does one interpret (in the right way)? In response, Merold Westphal[13] cites Friedrich Schleiermacher's[14] hermeneutic circle. For Schleiermacher, (right) interpretation is a two-fold task. Interpretation of the whole requires a priori interpretation of the parts, and interpretation of a part requires a priori interpretation of the whole. Westphal explains: "But in order righty to read any part we must know the whole, but how can we know the whole, since we have yet

interpreted the parts from which alone such knowledge can arise?"[15] Overcoming this paradox is partially possible, Westphal believes, by developing a provisional sketch of the whole. Anticipation of the whole, although incomplete, nonetheless allows and interpretation of the parts.

This is a brief summary of Westphal's presentation of Schleiermacher's hermeneutic circle and space permitting I would certainly add discussion of the role of levels of interpretation and the relationship between levels of interpretation. The key point is that hermeneutic interpretation is what we are left with in the face of what Westphal describes as the death of epistemology. Westphal is blunt about the state of the epistemological but leaves open an epistemological possibility through hermeneutics:

> As the attempt to provide human knowledge with solid foundations, to prove that it (knowledge) can transcend the limitations of its perspectives and be adequate to the reality it intends, it is widely perceived to have failed… the notion that epistemology is a bad habit that needs to be broken has increasingly carried the day. But as an investigation into the nature and limits of human knowledge (with special emphasis on limits), epistemology lives on, frequently under the name of hermeneutics, signifying both the interpretative character of pre-philosophical human understanding and, correspondingly, interpretation as the central theme of a certain mode of epistemological reflection.[16]

Westphal does not go so far as to condemn human knowing to personal opinions competing in the ruins of modern epistemology. Still, interpret narratives and texts we must and Westphal's key point is that hermeneutics is inescapable.

Kearney grounds his work in hermeneutics and using hermeneutics presents a nonetheless well-supported and reasoned call for social justice. Kearney does not, however, avoid the theological language of his self-acknowledged faith as he laments:

> How ironic it is to observe so many monotheistic followers still failing to recognize the message: that God speaks not through monuments of power and pomp but in stories and acts of justice, the giving to the least creatures, the caring for orphans, widows, and strangers; stories and acts which bear testimony—as transfiguring gestures do—to that God of little things that comes and goes, like the thin small voice, like the burning bush, like the voice crying out in the wilderness, like the word made flesh, like the wind that blows where it wills.[17]

For Kearney, the knowledge of the text he is interpreting (the Bible in *The God Who May Be*) is bound in the meaning of "stories and acts of justice." If, as I hope and assume, education is fundamentally an act

of justice, what might a "transfiguring gesture" mean? In colleges of education, this is not an abstract question.

For example, there is a new American Educational Research Association Special Interest Group called Leadership for Social Justice (LSJ). The goal of LSJ is to better prepare school leaders to be agents of social justice in both the manner in which they run schools, and the development of schools as learning institutions that will serve to promote a socially-just and democratic society. While I applaud and support the work of this group, there is something missing that offends my postmodern sensibilities. Simply, social justice is frequently essentialized and viewed as a defined goal. This seems an overly positivist perspective that assumes there is some quantifiable and objective meaning of justice and injustice that may be measured, modified and corrected in a certain way. The resulting moral imperative for those who prepare educational leaders is to increase the *capacity for social justice* within the practice of school management. In addition, this effort necessitates an *other* in need of social justice that is defined; typically as a member of a group, or a subject of a specific identity, that has suffered injustice (I want to be clear that I am not minimizing the terrible historical and ongoing reality of injustice suffered by human beings based on their culture, sexual orientation, gender, and ethnic identity; rather, my purpose is a limited deconstruction of the term "other"). Thus, injustice is a collective act perpetrated by one group against another rather than some individuals in a group against some individuals in another group. The solution to injustice, dependent upon relatively fixed social/cultural groupings, becomes something to be realized through an identification of the *other* that allows for identity politics to systematically, through policy and defined praxis, promote justice. The *other*, oppressed and oppressor, requires definition and centered meaning in order for an authority (an educational leader perhaps) to prescribe a solution. The results of this orientation toward justice is often realized in practices-of-the-absurd where, for example, professors who prepare educational leaders end up measuring dispositions of students to ensure that future school administrators have the correct attitude towards social justice. My concern with this type of project is that justice itself is left dependent on the social construction of pre-determined group identities. Injustice, in the modern lens, is the essentialization (objectification) of the other; and the modern response is to essentialize (objectify) justice.

As an alternative approach, Kearney's hermeneutical response to injustice is a call for poetic imagination. In an early work, *The Wake of Imagination*,[18] Kearney calls for a restoration of human imagination in the wake of deconstruction as an ethical responsibility: "If the decon-

struction of imagination admits no epistemological limits (in so far as it undermines every effort to establish a decidable relationship between image and reality), it must recognize ethical limits."[19] Poetic imagination, for Kearney, is an ethical imperative. Mark Gedney provides a clear explanation of Kearney's connection of ethics and poetic imagination:

> (Kearney's) rather existential account can be developed in a more concrete fashion if we focus on the power of the imagination to reconfigure our current reality in order both to recognize new possibilities inherent in our self-conception *and* to make *possible* new relations to others whose voices had heretofore remained unheard. Along these lines, Kearney speaks of the ethical power of the possible as an alternative to the traditional preference for the actual in both metaphysics and theology.[20]

The problem Kearney addresses, Gedney points out, is that poetic imagination expressed through art ("story-telling, painting, singing, sculpting, etc.") relies on an image(ination) that is a likeness but nonetheless other than the reality that is depicted. In other words, there is clear distinction between art and knowing.

Gedney addresses this issue by considering Kearney's mentorship from Paul Ricoeur. Gedney suggests, based on Kearney's 2001 conversation with Ricoeur,[21] that Ricoeur's influence is pronounced in *The God Who May Be*. Specifically, he points to Ricouer's view of the fragmented and incomplete understanding of ourselves and the world we live in. Gedney continues that Kearney and Ricoeur both have a hermeneutical passion for encountering the *other* as a source of new opportunities for critical reflection. Gedney explains:

> In that book (*The God Who May Be*), Kearney developed an alternative account of theism that defends a notion of God's power grounded in the notion of possibility rather than in traditional categories of actuality and omnipotence. Such a God, who appears, for example, to Moses in the desert and who, rather than simply snatching out His people with a display of mighty power, prompts the timid Moses to act in His name, encourages cooperation in the building of the Kingdom.[22]

For Kearney, injustice is a problem of recognition of the other and he hermeneutically interprets Biblical texts for the meaning of justice (building the Kingdom).

Looking further into *The God Who May Be* for understanding of the other, Kearney engages in what he calls a phenomenology of the *persona*. *Persona* is defined as "this capacity of each of us to receive and respond to the divine invitation"[23] (for justice). This invitation is to transfiguration and Kearney addresses what he calls the "crucial contemporary debates on the notion of an eschatological God who transfigures and desires."[24]

Biblical transfiguration is a symbolic language of knowing that describes the possibility of the transfiguration of the *other* as the "otherness of the other." Persona is there but cannot be grasped; it escapes our gaze. There is an enigma of presence-absence. Thus, the future possibility of the *other* is impossible to know: "The *persona* is always already there and always still to come."[25] Regardless, there is a desire to fuse or to appropriate the other's persona that is related to the desire to fuse with God. This requires, however, a present God. But the presence of God requires transfiguration, a God, who according to Kearney, may be to come. In contrast, Kearney suggests: "To this fusionary sameness of the One I would oppose the eschatological universality of the Other."[26] Thus, one's capacity to lead for justice through defining and knowing the *other* is shown to be impossible and attention is turned toward an ethical call for transfiguration of the self: "The fact that universal justice is an eschatological possible-still-to-come creates a sense of urgency and exigency, inviting each person to strive for instantiation, however partial and particular, in each given situation."[27] Kearney is saying that universal justice is a possibility to come but justice resides in every individual act in every moment.

Kearney provides examples of the meaning of transfiguration and the *other*. In his biblical interpretation, the human role is the acceptance of the gift of universal justice (the Kingdom of heaven on earth) or transfiguration. Kearney interprets Moses and the epiphany of the burning bush. Recounting the story and describing Moses as a man who longed for a God of justice and liberty, Kearney deconstructs common interpretations from the Biblical text of the meaning of God's name. He suggests that a more meaningful (true) translation might be "I am who may be" rather than "I who am" or "I who am not." Kearney contrasts his view of the signature of a God of the possible with the onto-theological reading of the story that views "the proper name of God revealed in Exodus 3:14 is none other than the absolute identity of divine being and essence."[28] In the onto-theological view, God is conceptualized as a categorical being with substance (definable yet remaining transcendentally undefinable). The divergent eschatological interpretation emphasizes "the ethical and dynamic character of God."[29] The focus is placed on the I/Thou relationship whereby the promise of the Kingdom from God is realized through human ethical living. Kearney explains:

> Here God commits Himself to a kingdom of justice if his faithful commit themselves to it too; the promise of Sinai calls forth a corresponding decision on behalf of the people. To phrase this otherwise: the I puts it to the Thou that the promise can be realized only if those who receive it do not betray its potential for the future. Not that this is a matter of

conditional exchange—turning the Exodus revelation into an economy of give-and-take. No, the promise is granted unconditionally, as a pure gift. But God is reminding his people that they are free to accept or refuse this gift. A gift cannot be imposed; it can only be offered. A gift neither is nor is not; it gives.[30]

Because of this, Kearney calls for a new hermeneutic of God as May-Be, an onto-eschatological hermeneutics, or a *poetics of the possible*.

Kearney further explores the Biblical meaning of transfiguration through the narratives telling of Mount Thabor and the four paschal apparitions. At Mount Thabor, according to Kearney, the person of Jesus is "metamorphosed" into the *persona* of Christ. Among the many meanings of the transfiguration, Kearney emphasizes the call to avoid making Christ an idol:

The disciples' effort to fix Christ as a fetish of presence, imposing their own designs on him, make it necessary for God to intercede from the cloud and bid them attend to Christ's otherness: "Listen to him!" In this manner, the voice of transcendence speaks through Christ as divine persona, thereby arresting the idolatrous impulse of Peter, James, and John to fuse with his person or possess him as a cult object.[31]

This story allows, Kearney suggests, for a messianic persona of Christ beyond the finite person Jesus of Nazareth providing a preview of the kingdom to come, a call to/from God. Again, however, "this eschatological promise requires not only grace but ethical action on our part."[32] Kearney supports this by recounting the four accounts of the narrative paschal testimonies. In these accounts, Christ was not recognized at first by those who knew him even though there was a common sharing of food. But, most importantly, Kearney reminds us:

The post-paschal stories of the transfiguring persona remind us that the Kingdom is given to the hapless fishermen and spurned women, to those lost and wondering on the road from Jerusalem to nowhere, to the wounded and weak and hungry, to those who lack and do not despair of their lack, to little people "poor in spirit."33

May those working for peace and justice be known by our fruits, our "fruits of love and justice, care and gift."[34] But if my reading of Kearney is fair, my work for the justice begins with the self, in each moment, and in each interaction; not as an essentialized prescription to transform/transfigure the *other*.

Kearney's work is relevant to education because its end purpose is social transformation. In the words of Jeffrey Andrew Barash:

If, as Richard Kearney is the first to point out, the disjointedness of our contemporary world is in large measure due to a human condition

bounded by the inexplicable quality of that which brings us before extreme and apparently inexplicable situations, namely God, death, radical otherness, we at the same time belong to a postmodern context in which the disarray is partly of our own making, the disarray of relentless and ever more rapid change, of an even greater threat of biological, chemical or nuclear means of mass destruction….But does all of this condemn the narrative as such to a loss of potency? According to Kearney's bold argument, the contrary holds sway; our sense of disarray calls upon us to reinterpret the meaning of the lives we live by relearning to *tell* our experiences in light of the sacred texts and grand narratives whose symbolic significance has lost nothing of its latent force.[35]

It is hard for me to imagine a more eloquent purpose for a life of education.

Notes

[1] For an informative overview of the post-secular turn, see James K. A. Smith, *Introducing radical orthodoxy: Mapping a post-secular theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), especially Chapter One, "Inhabiting the Post-secular" (31-61).

[2] This critique is brief and consequently over-generalized. LSJ is a broad body of work with many different views and philosophical perspectives. It nonetheless does have a theme of defining justice and developing "capacity for social justice in schools." See Catherine Marshal and Maricela Oliva, eds., *Leadership for social justice: Making revolutions in education* (Boston: Pearson, 2006).

[3] Richard Kearney, *The God who may be: A hermeneutics of religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001).

[4] The following bio is from Kearney's Boston College webpage, http://www2.bc.edu/~kearneyr/:

Richard Kearney holds the Charles B. Seelig Chair of Philosophy at Boston College and has served as a Visiting Professor at University College Dublin, the University of Paris (Sorbonne) and the University of Nice. He is the author of over 20 books on European philosophy and literature (including two novels and a volume of poetry) and has edited or co-edited 14 more. He was formerly a member of the Arts Council of Ireland, the Higher Education Authority of Ireland and chairman of the Irish School of Film at University College Dublin. As a public intellectual in Ireland, he was involved in drafting a number of proposals for a Northern Irish peace agreement (1983, 1993, 1995) and in speechwriting for the Irish President, Mary Robinson. He has presented five series on culture and philosophy for Irish and/or British television and broadcast extensively on the European media. His most recent work in philosophy comprises a trilogy entitled 'Philosophy at the Limit.' The three volumes are *On Stories* (Routledge, 2002), *The God Who May Be* (Indiana UP, 2001) and *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters* (Routledge, 2003).

⁵ For Kearney's own description of the relationship of his work to Levinas, see Kearney's essay, "Epiphanies of the everyday: Toward a micro-eschatology" in John Panteleimon Manoussakis, ed., *After God: Richard Kearney and the religious turn in Continental philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 3-20. This relationship is also detailed by Brian Treanor, "Quis ergo Amo cum Deum Meum Amo?" in the same volume, 139-154.

⁶ See John D. Caputo, *The prayers and tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997). Also, a conversation, Jacques Derrida, John D. Caputo, and Richard Kearney, "Desire of God: An Exchange" is included in Smith, *After God*, 301-08.

⁷ For a discussion of the atheistic or nontheistic debate on Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida and Foucault, see the "Introduction" of Marold M. Westphal, *Overcoming onto-theology: Toward a postmodern Christian faith* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), xi-xii.

⁸ See Westphal, *Overcoming onto-theology*, xi; and Caputo, *The prayers and tears of Jacques Derrida*, xvii-xxvi.

⁹ John Panteleimon Manoussakis, "Introduction" in Manoussakis, ed., *After God*, xvii.

¹⁰ For an overview and critique of onto-theology see Westphal, *Overcoming onto-theology*. For a discussion of Christian apologetics, see Smith, *Introducing radical orthodoxy*, 179-81.

¹¹ Westphal, *Overcoming onto-theology*, 246-49.

¹² For the seminal work on the hermeneutic process, see Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the human sciences*, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

¹³ See Westphal, *Overcoming onto-theology*, xi; and Caputo, *The prayers and tears of Jacques Derrida*, xvii-xxvi.

¹⁴ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and criticisms and other writings*, ed. Andrew Bowie (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

¹⁵ Westphal, *Overcoming onto-theology*, 112.

¹⁶ Ibid., 128.

¹⁷ Kearney, *The God who may be*, 51.

¹⁸ Richard Kearney, *The wake of imagination: Ideas of creativity in Western culture* (London, UK: Hutchinson, 1988).

¹⁹ Ibid., 361.

²⁰ Mark D. Gedney, "The hope of imagination: Richard Kearney's conversational journeys," *Religion and the Arts, 10*(1), (2006): 89-100.

²¹ Richard Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur: The owl of Minerva* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing Co., 2004).

²² Gedney, "The Hope of Immagination," 98-9.

²³ Kearney, *The God who may be*, 2.

²⁴ Ibid., 9.

²⁵ Ibid., 12.

²⁶ Ibid., 15.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 23.

²⁹ Ibid., 25.

[30] Ibid., 29.
[31] Ibid., 42.
[32] Ibid., 45.
[33] Ibid., 51.
[34] Ibid., 49.
[35] Jeffrey Andrew Barash, Critical notes, after onto-theology: The ethics of narration. *International Journal of Philosophical Studies, 11*(2), (2003): 225-234.