

## Idolatry, Happiness, and the Pursuit of the Educational Ideal

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### INTRODUCTION

Alexander Sidorkin offers a bracing yet remarkably balanced critique of the pose that so many us (educational scholars generally, perhaps philosophers particularly) adopt as we relate the realities of educational practice/policy to our sense of an evasive yet animating ideal. It is this engagement with the ideal that prompts his invocation of the historical and philosophical debate between iconoclasts and iconophiles, using that religious imagery as a model for understanding our own circumstances and potential salvation.

Though the move toward religion and iconography might be surprising, Sidorkin's text challenges the expectations that we might have of our practice and illuminates previously veiled features of our work. To my reading, particularly impressive is the degree to which Sidorkin suggests humility as a scholarly virtue. Experts though we may think ourselves to be, Sidorkin commits us to practicing restraint in the activity of visiting pious judgment upon educational reform efforts. That this humility preserves the possibility for productive critique evidences the fullness and nuance of Sidorkin's account.

In the service of questioning — and being questioned by — the imagery that Sidorkin employs, I would like to dwell in his metaphor while pressing against his conclusions. In that activity, I shall remark upon idolatry, happiness, and the pursuit of the ideal.

### IDOLATRY

Sidorkin states that “[t]he idol is a representation of power, of potency, but it can also be . . . destroyed; it is about . . . mortality.” Sidorkin suggests that the destructibility of idols offends the creationist religions, as these idols mock the abilities of the divine creator. I wonder if this is so. Perhaps the offensive element of the idol is found instead (or also) in its insistence upon a measure of permanence.

Sidorkin cites as the “strangest of all . . . commandments” that “[t]hou shalt not make thee any graven image . . .”<sup>1</sup> We might read this command — instead of barring all images — as ordering adherents not to produce *graven* images in particular. If, as Sidorkin suggests via Marie-José Mondzain, the principle of economy allows for images of the ideal in an imperfect world, the commandment can be understood as suggesting the illegitimacy of certain types of images, idols as identified by their method of production. Graven images are those that have been chiseled or engraved, that is to say, they have been “fixed” upon a surface of stone or metal, for example. Perhaps then, to engrave or fix an image is to create an idol of an icon and to render permanent something that is necessarily fleeting; something best glimpsed rather than gazed upon intently. As Sidorkin claims, Christ stands as the archetype, the natural image. Indeed, the Christian tradition describes that figure as “the image of the invisible God.”<sup>2</sup> That tradition also identifies the figure with a necessary (though

temporary) mortality that services a more universal immortality. Perhaps it ought to be so with all unnatural images and icons lest they become idols.

What then of educational ideals? It would seem that our tradition is in danger of producing idols whenever we fix an image, confusing it for the ideal itself, rather than allowing it to conform to the fragility of our ephemeral and imperfect world. Idolatry is found in the denial of change and context, the denial of nuance and novelty. As Sidorkin suggests in relation to the PARCC standards, an overreliance upon the specific is the essence of idolatry. Following these insights, Sidorkin's abiding question of justifiably productive ideals might instead be reframed as a quest to produce legitimately powerful and impermanent icons while also avoiding the fixity of idle idols.

#### HAPPINESS

In light of my comments upon temporality and impermanence, I would like to briefly explore the notion of happiness that I find intimately related to Sidorkin's carefully constructed set of concerns.

Sidorkin suggests dissatisfaction and unhappiness as features of our work as educational scholars. In truth, his essay is an exercise in addressing the ideal insofar as it relates to that larger set of concerns. The larger problem of unhappiness that results from a continued critique of a seemingly endless stream of disappointing educational reforms across competing conceptions of the good in a pluralistic democracy is then potentially, partially overcome via a solution to the tension inherent in the ideal's difficult yet necessary representation.

But, ought that initial tension be a source of unhappiness? To my reading, Sidorkin's solution to the problem moves toward changing our identification of the image (as inspirational icon rather than a fixed and falsely ideal idol). I wonder if we might instead or also wish to change our interpretation of ourselves in relation to both types of representation? Rather than arguing that our unhappiness is total and inescapable as we strain to reach consensus regarding the ideal, we might realize happiness in the recognition of our essential incompleteness, both individual and collective.

If we embrace our finitude, recognizing that we are of this imperfect and non-ideal world, we would perhaps engage anew the questions of ideality. Sidorkin writes that "iconoclasts in education dwell on limitless critique, on disproving all images of the ideal" and goes on to suggest that this view undercuts the productivity of our scholarly work. I would argue that we might characterize the perpetuity of that experience as an occasion for a sublime happiness: one that recognizes and accepts the nature of our context and thereby strengthens the impact of our labors therein. If, as Sidorkin suggests, the icon opens us to questions, we might engage with those questions in perpetuity, never reaching in this world the ideal that they indicate, but being delightfully challenged by our attempts to get ever closer.<sup>3</sup> Recasting our efforts in this way does not see us obtaining singular perfection (which seems to be Sidorkin's initial criterion for happiness among others) but instead finds us fulfilled in the pursuit of that necessarily elusive educational ideal.

## PURSUIT

Finding happiness in this continued occurrence may require some further study of the nature of the experience. How do we better engage with philosophizing about educational ideals in a world of idolized reforms?

Sidorkin find the principle of economy encouraging as it suggests “a theory of presenting the non-representable”; it brings the ideal to the imperfect. I would like to suggest that we concern ourselves peripherally with that presentation, instead focusing primarily upon the guiding question of pursuit.

How do we pursue knowledge of the ideal? As Sidorkin notes, the icon can be suggestive and open; it need not name the ideal directly to imply that it exists. That suggestion of existence brings us closer to knowing the ideal by way of the questions that it inspires in us. Sidorkin calls this “hopeful questioning” and locates it in the circumstances of a debate. The unsettled nature of this context mirrors our own imperfect world as icons then regularly emerge and fall away with the conversation still incomplete and unsettled. It is this constant rhythm — this process of emergence, destruction, and nostalgia — that becomes a comfort.

In reply to Sidorkin’s description of agonistic unhappiness, I would like to assert that this unsettled and open stance of hopeful debate need not be mournful. According to Sidorkin, it is the iconoclasts who “deny there is any solution, any hope for education.” We might avoid their pessimism in the imperfect world and commit ourselves to embracing the difficult truth that the hope for education lies directly in our inability to realize the ideal as a solution in this world. Challenging though this may be, it avoids the unhappiness that Sidorkin describes and prevents us from falling into idolatry. This hopeful pursuit is an end-in-itself and is not distracted by claims of the fully perceived ideal; it knows that the fullness of the ideal is unknowable in this world.

This is not to say that the iconophile is unproductive. Indeed, we need not commune directly with the ideal to know what it is not. As mentioned earlier, avoiding the fixity of images (idols) does not entail their impotence. The careful selection of icons might move us ever closer toward an unreachable ideal. We may never grasp the divine, but we may be better able to orient ourselves to its brilliance through the creation, contestation, and destruction of contextual icons.<sup>4</sup> Sidorkin asserts that we are most effective when we inspire rather than clarify, but I would like to suggest that we do both, as it is our pursuit and clarification (often through negation) of the ultimately unattainable that is most inspiring.<sup>5</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Sidorkin has crafted for us a fine set of images to ground our understandings of our work as philosophers of education. We would do well to pause in reflection upon all that he has proposed. I hope that my comments stimulate an increasingly hopeful exchange, even if no final conclusion is achieved. I offer these remarks as fluid yet powerful icons that may bring us closer to happiness in our humble work pursuing the educational ideal in a blemished world.

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1. Sidorkin refers to Deuteronomy 5:8 (KJV).
  2. Colossians 1:15 (KJV).
  3. See a compatible line of argument via Paul Tillich in Philip Jackson, *What is Education?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).
  4. Perhaps the “Western” monotheistic traditions struggle with this notion more than those that resist dogma and allow for greater embrace of uncertainty and multiplicity.
  5. For example, we might follow the template of monotheistic mystics such as Howard Thurman toward unexpected partial recognitions. See Howard Thurman, *The Creative Encounter* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1954).