

Teaching Dangerous Philosophical Ideas to High School Students: Using the Film *Rope* and Immoralism as an Example

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Abstract: Philosophy pedagogy undertakes great significance in high school teaching with its value in accelerating the maturation of students' cognitive abilities [1]. However, with the dangerous ideas hidden in philosophical arguments, teaching philosophy to high school students should be conducted with caution. Therefore, this paper focuses how to properly deal with those controversial philosophical ideas contained in high school courses, using the Immoralism in Nietzsche's philosophy as an instance.

1. Introduction

Philosophical ideas frequently appear in the education of children and teenagers, which take an irreplaceable and indispensable role in the maturation of students' cognitive abilities. They lead students to think about the historical question of where they are from and what is the meaning of their life [1]. However, some philosophical ideas are controversial and hidden in those arguments, which can lead students to a dangerous position [2]. Moreover, such a philosophical idea can even have a continues influence in students' adulthood, which deserves insight. Thus, an obvious research gap appears in the controversial philosophical thoughts in high school teaching. It is impossible for a single paper to discuss such a huge topic; so, this essay would only focus on the teaching of Nietzsche's Immoralism, using the film *Rope* as an instance. This article will begin by providing a description of the dilemma in the film *Rope* and Nietzsche's Immoralism. The next part is going to present the importance and urgency of appropriately teaching philosophy to high school students. Finally, it will focus on the pragmatic meaning of this topic with daily practices in teaching dangerous philosophical elements in high school literature classes.

2. *Rope*: a Tragedy from Misinterpreted Immoralism

Friedrich Nietzsche and his philosophy are common topics on the screen, and their trace can be frequently tracked in the history of cinema [4]. The film *Rope* is one of the films that focus on Nietzsche, which was first put on screen in the year of 1948. By telling a tragic story, it revealed the outcome of misunderstood philosophy and reminded teachers of the importance of appropriately handling controversial ideas [2]. Mass appreciation and discussion went to the director's unique technique and the love story, making it a classic; however, this paper will merely concentrate on the

philosophical part in this film, focusing on Immoralism from Nietzsche, the cause of the tragedy of the two well-educated young adults.

Rope tells an ironic story about a murder. The two killers, Brandon and Philip, are brilliant young people who are crazy about Nietzschean philosophy and follow the construction of their philosophical belief in everyday life. So naturally, as rabid fans of Nietzsche's Immoralism, they determined to behave against the commonly accepted morality. By doing so, they aim to prove their superior wisdom, which is highly appreciated by Nietzsche [5]. In this frame, the ironic meaning of this film appears as none of their acquaintances detected any indication of their twisted comprehension of Nietzsche, even their high school housemaster, Rupert, who led them into the world of Nietzsche's philosophy when they were still teenagers.

Having grown up as adults, the idea of conducting a perfect crime finally grasped their minds. The two define this murder as an intellectual exercise, which can prove their ownership of the overman intelligence [4]. In the beginning, they strangle their former classmate David to death and use the bookcase with his corpse as the dining table at a party, which they hold to celebrate their "perfect murder" and show off their superiority and immorality.

The party goes straight forward as Brandon's presupposed process. However, the atmosphere becomes peculiar when Brandon intentionally leads the others to focus on David's absence and kick off the discussion about the "art of murder". The strange and eye-catching behaviours of the two catch the attention of their high school teacher Rupert. With Rupert questioning the inconsistencies raised during the conversation, Brandon feels even more satisfied and proud of the crime and starts appreciating his superior intelligence. Rupert's suspicion is raised when accidentally seeing David's monogrammed hat.

After the end of the party, every guest leaves with peculiar and uncomfortable feelings. Only Rupert unexpectedly returns to the apartment, finding David in the bookcase. Ashamed of the behaviours of his former students, he calls the police. Hearing Brandon and Phillip using his rhetoric to rationalise this horrible murder and the immoral party, the high school teacher is astonished. Having recognised that the peculiar crime is logically an outcome of his teaching practices, he denied all his previous ideas and thoughts of superiority and inferiority.

This film, *Rope* (1948), was an adaptation of a real-world event. In that criminal case, the two killers owed their kidnapping and murder to Nietzsche's statement of the status of *Übermenschen*. Nietzsche defined this word as men who own transcendent superiority, which can exempt them from obeying the laws that bind the human populace [3]. The news has been adapted into a similar plot in this film. Upon hearing from their teacher, Brandon and Philip were addicted to Immoralism. Nevertheless, unfortunately, they mistake the concept as permission for despising other's life and conducting illegal things. A misinterpreted philosophy disrupted the living routine of all the characters and destroyed their living. The musician would never have a chance to hold a concert. The student could never be back to the university. The father lost his son, and the lover would miss her loved forever. All of these misfortunes arise from the twisted understanding of one philosophical idea. Thus, such an issue should have a careful analysis.

3. A Brief Review on Immoralism

Nietzschean philosophy does deserve repeated reading as it is undoubtedly indispensable in the world of philosophy [3]. Nonetheless, as a complex and sophisticated philosophy, his theories must be taught without suitable methods so as to avoid the potential danger and hazard rooted in it [1].

Nietzsche's Immoralism functions as a representative of his vituperative attitude towards Christian morality, which has selflessness as the central concept. In his masterpieces, *Beyond Good and Evil* (1966), Nietzsche clearly divided moralities that have been prevalent in the human history

into two types, naming slave morality and master morality [3]. The selfishness in the slave morality received the majority of his counterviews since it is obviously named from its continuing servile and inferior nature. Nietzsche blamed the Christianity for it was a beneficially tyrannical source of spiritualisation in mankind, which had selflessness as its centre. This morality appreciates the compassion for companions, the guilt for aggressive behaviours, and the suppression of expansive instincts. People are forced to believe that everyone's well-being is equally significant, which enables them to act similarly and to be blamed for failing to do so [5]. Though the statement tends to be aspiring and encouraging, it is actually deceptive. Most of the attitudes advocated by it are vague or contemporary attitudes for human beings to hold, which are artificial products that are invented to fulfil some given functions and needs. The bitterness and negative emotions referred to in it are reflection of inferiority morality, which is named slavery morality by Nietzsche [3]. The artificially created morality works to guarantee the stability of society; nevertheless, it can somewhat hinder the development of human history. Regarding this, the Immoralism in Nietzschean philosophy is reasonable to be constructed.

Nietzsche apparently expressed his view that the lightness of spirit is one of the primary components in the Immoralism. Nietzsche repeatedly praised this, and this view is commonly presented as the Dionysian Spirit [3]. With the emphasis on personal happiness and individual benefits, people are encouraged to pursue their unique life goals, guided by their nature. Thus, Immoralism still aims to accelerate human development, even though it is named for its disobeying Christian morality.

Similar to other so-called dangerous philosophical ideas, the controversies take advantage of the completeness of Nietzsche's text [1][2]. Some scholars intentionally locate distinctions on parts of Nietzschean philosophy; meanwhile, others dismiss the Nietzschean diagnosis to show that morality is unambiguously progressive. Readers' standpoints and opinions towards such a philosophical idea depend on the pieces read by them.

Mistranslation is another obstacle in the understanding and prevalence of Immoralism. Written in German, translation is necessary for his work, which unintentionally separates the public from the first-hand resources. Moreover, Nietzsche himself held a negative attitude to the people's willingness to read his words, limiting the distribution of his works. Consequently, he created some personal reading obstacles in his masterpieces.

4. The Meaning for Properly Teach Philosophy in High School

So far as *Rope* is an adaptation of an actual event, problems put forward by it are of pragmatic meanings, which ought to be carefully considered and tackled.

Philosophical content is gaining emphases in high school syllabus. To get teenagers better prepared for universities, a growing number of philosophical theories are transplanted into high school courses [1]. Nevertheless, students' cognitive ability may limit them from thorough digestion of the taught information. Instead of transmuting it into knowledge, they may follow these dangerous theories blindly, leading to ethical issues and social problems. More than that, the influence of accepted philosophy is long-lasting. In the story in *Rope*, Brandon and Philip mis-following the concept since high school [4].

In the high school period, teachers convey and interpret philosophical theories to students. In *Rope*, the two get familiar with Immoralism from their teacher. However, the information they gained is misinterpreted. Thus, the two use Nietzschean concepts to legitimise their illegal and immoral behaviours, and they wish that their teacher Rupert could understand or even applaud them. So, caution is needed when coping with the philosophy, perilous ideas in particular.

5. Teaching Philosophical Ideas in Schools

As a result, dangerous philosophical ideas should be taught with great attention and caution. Carefulness is required in every step in the class teaching process, including pre-class preparation, peer-to-peer discussion, and extra guidance.

Pre-sessional practices must contain the justification of the philosophical idea that is going to be taught. The canon of philosophy is not always “child friendly”. As a result, teacher's efforts are highlighted [3]. For instance, as in *Rope*, scholars and educators have already been proved that Immoralism is unfriendly to receivers in high school. Even undergraduates may lack enough comprehension ability to handle it, leaving behind students in high school [1]. Teenagers are always brilliant and talented; however, they should not be overlooked. To minimise the potential danger in such a concept, justification should be conducted within the discipline of philosophy [1]. Reasonable modification and deletion need to be allowed when tackling dangerous but indecisive information.

Additionally, extra reading materials may need to be prepared in advance in case any students are interested in the philosophy and want to go deeper into this concept. Even if they have already achieved the ability to comprehend the theories, extra materials prepared by teachers can ensure that they depart in a correct and safe direction.

The introduction of the philosophy planned to be taught needs special attention in the section of in-class discussion. Familiarisation is not enough as the teaching goal. Substantial progress, such as developing students' critical reasoning skills, should be taken into consideration [1]. Students should be guided to generate their own ideas from the given information and utilise it in the argument activity with classmates. This kind of dialectical exchange can help teachers ensure that students do certainly correctly understand the concept, which can decrease the chance of misinterpretation and the dangers caused by it. The benefits of a well-developed critical thinking ability can go far beyond the class itself. Students then obtain the ability to identify and evaluate given information. Thus, they would intentionally stop from following dangerous ones. It might be essential to include identification, reconstruction, and pertinently challenging the soundness of a given statement in the teaching process. Apart from the above, checks must frequently occur during the discussion so that teachers can control the direction of the discussion and pull students back from the logical traps [2].

Post-sessional guidance is an optional choice. For example, in *Rope*, Brandon and Philip's discussion and study of Immoralism happen after class, reminding teachers that after-class activities need supervision as well. However, whether the discussion and exploration will continue after class or not depends on the learning passion of students. If it happens, teachers might have to hold the direction of the conversations.

6. Conclusion

As philosophical elements gaining popularity in high school teaching, a growing amount of attention and effort might be needed to cope with the dangerous ingredients in them. The story told in the film *Rope* warns the audience of the jeopardy of misinterpreted philosophy, which may show their negative effects even ten or twenty years later. To better teach philosophical theories to students, teachers must justify it in the preparation, clarify it in the introduction, correct it in the discussion, and supervise it after class. However, research gap still exists, waiting to be filled, for instance, how to cultivate young children's interest in philosophy.

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