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Manufacturing Coherence: On the Ricoeurian Symbolism of Grading

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Abstract

Grading is one of the most recognizable and pervasive practices of formal education. Still, many philosophers have failed to offer an effective framework through which to interpret the meaning of a student's academic grade–at least in the sense of what both students and educational stakeholders ought to take a given grade to mean. For several decades, scholarship has come to revolve around being "pro" (grades are meaningful) or "anti" (grades are meaningless) grading. It is proposed here that conceptualizing grades as Ricoeurian symbols resolves this debate. Grades are symbolic in that they are denoted by a direct, primary, literal sign, but the sign (e.g., "A," "B") points at a second, "inexhaustible intentionality" produced by interpreting one's cultural milieu. The symbolic meaning of grades can be understood properly, yet imperfectly through the dialectic of Ricoeur's "ideology" and "utopia." It is shown that grades are subject not to some transparent, yet polysemic, meaning to be accepted or rejected *simpliciter*. Rather, grades are inevitable cultural symbols and must be subject to hermeneutic interpretation. Ricoeur's dialectic is a powerful framework for educators to use utopic thinking to critique social ideologies in pursuit of the common good–even though a non-ideological approach is impossible.

Keywords: ideology and utopia; critique of grading; grading practices; Paul Ricoeur; symbolism; meaning of grades

1. Introduction

Recent educational literature has once again taken aim at standardized testing and the uncritical use of the normal distribution in educational decision making (e.g., Dudley-

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Marling 2020; Bloniasz 2021). However, standardized assessments typically overshadow the analysis of grades. Graded homework, presentations, and unit exams are all examples of assessment at work in the much more familiar setting of the everyday classroom. The present paper is concerned with how the results of those non-standardized assessments are communicated to educational stakeholders, particularly in the form of symbolic grades.

Here I will argue that grades ought to be thought of as Ricoeurian symbols that operate between ideological structures and utopic social imagination. In doing so, I will offer an account of what grades ought to be taken to mean after applying an interpretive framework borrowed from 20th Century philosopher Paul Ricoeur – namely the dialectic between ideology and utopia. Ricoeur provides a strong theoretical basis for moving beyond the basic empirical question of what grades have been taken to mean and instead his collection of work offers one initial toolbox for how to predict and shape the meaning of grades in the future to produce desired educational outcomes. In the end, it should be clear that grades 1) are not transparent or easily interpretable, 2) perpetuate negative power structures, and 3) are not removable because they are merely proxies for other cultural structures. However, through utopic visions, the functions of grading can improve in utility and impact.[1 and 2]

2. The Symbolic Character of Grades

In the simplest sense, grading refers "to the symbols assigned to individual pieces of student work or to composite measures of student performance on report cards" (Brookhart et al. 2016). For now, I intend to use the word "symbol" in the colloquial, non-Ricoeurian sense, where there is some signifier that stands in for some definable judgment of the supposed merit of a student's behavior in achieving a prescribed task. Most traditional grading models tend to determine the grade, regardless of the grade symbol used, via a weighted percentage, where some assignments are deemed to be more important (e.g., a final exam) and others less important (e.g., homework). These performance scores on assignments are then combined in

some way into a symbol to communicate, more or less, how the student did in the semester on a transcript or report card. It should be noted that there is enormous variation in how grading is actually done, not only in terms of metric scales but also what ought to count toward a final grade and how they should be communicated to educational stakeholders–those stakeholders being parents, students, other teachers, companies, and so forth (Brookhart et al. 2016).

While grades are typically referred to as symbols, the word "symbol" in this context is typically taken to mean something that stands in for something else–mainly "A," "B," or "C" is standing in for some reference. Grades are certainly symbols, but I claim we ought to look to the work of Paul Ricoeur to understand the complexity found in symbolism proper. Rather than a symbol merely being something that stands in for something else, Ricoeur defines a symbol "as any structure of signification in which a direct, primary, literal meaning designates, in addition, another meaning which is indirect, secondary, and figurative and which can be apprehended only through the first" (Ricoeur 2007, 13). As such, we can make a distinction between a sign and a symbol; every symbol is a sign, but not every sign is a symbol. In Ricoeur's words, signs "are expressions that communicate a meaning; this meaning is declared in an intention of signifying which has speech as its vehicles…[e]very sign aims at something beyond itself and stands for that something" (Ricoeur 1972, 14). The sign in grading is the actual signifier of some transparent reference (i.e., the letter grade itself might refer to a 50/50 on an exam). Signs hold only manifest meanings and, therefore, are first-order predicates (e.g, ① is an "A"). A symbol, on the other hand:

> conceals in its aim a double intentionality...a first literal intentionality that, like every significant expression, supposes the triumph of the conventional sign over the natural sign…[b]ut upon this first intentionality there is erected a second intentionality...[which is] opaque, because the first, literal, obvious meaning itself points analogically to a second meaning which is not given otherwise than in it (Ricoeur 1972, 15).

As such, the meaning of the symbol is "inexhaustible," in that it must be contextualized and interpreted within its proper symbolic universe which has no 'ground floor.'

We see here why interpreting grades as we normally do is problematic. If one is convinced that grades are symbolic in the Ricoeurian sense (i.e., the literal "A," "B," etc. points at some transparent meaning beyond itself that then allows for the emergence of inexhaustible interpretable meaning), we cannot accept the idea that an "A" is better than a "B" or an "A" represents expertise, *simpliciter*. In doing so, we collapse the symbolic character of a grade into the Ricoeurian sign, which "naturalizes" the symbol and makes the intrinsic ambiguity of the symbol transparent. The richness of its meaning is reduced and lost and we come to value the phenomenon "picked out" by the sign over the double intentionality not produced *in* the sign but *through* the sign. In this way, naturalizing the symbol to the sign makes it clear why students cheat, why they memorize and forget content, and so forth: the rich interpretive experience of learning is collapsed into being one and the same as the mark on the page.

The defense of pitching grades as Ricoeurian symbols is remarkably practical. The opposite of my claim is that there is a transparent, exhaustible interpretation of grades. Several recent papers have systematically investigated this question through thorough literature reviews. Schinske and Tanner (2014) reviewed major themes for what grades are thought to mean: "transparent institutional communication tool," "motivator for student performance," and "feedback tool." They demonstrated through extensive educational and psychological research that no single or combination of these produces a valid interpretation for the function of grades. In response to this study, an even broader, more systematic review looked at the purposes of grading. Brookhart et al.'s (2016) 100 year empirical and theoretical review of grading was able to conclude that grades are a "multidimensional measure that reflect mostly achievement of classroom learning intentions" (i.e., a symbolic universe in a given cultural milieu) and "not unidimensional measures of pure achievement." Thus, grades empirically have been shown to be more than merely signs,

because they are not transparent, nor readily interpretable across contexts. They must, however, have a sign, which is where our shared assumptions come in and threaten to reduce meaning to that sign.

3. What is a Symbolic Universe?

We must now consider the meaning of a "symbolic universe" before returning to the symbolic universes that give grades interpretable meaning. For the purposes of this paper, "[a symbolic universe is the system of] intuitive assumptions [which] channel lower generalized meanings, namely specific concepts and opinions concerning facts and objects of the social and physical world, values...beliefs, [and] attitudes" (Salvatore et al. 2018). A symbolic universe has at least two critical characteristics relevant for the present study: 1) their effect is pre-semantic in valence (Valsiner 2013; Salvatore et al. 2018) and 2) a symbolic universe functions as the "universe of sense" in that they "envelope the entire field of experience, rather than single parts of it" (Salvatore et al. 2018).

A symbolic universe is pre-semantic in that its constitutive assumptions are socially implied *prior* to us articulating them and therefore tint our linguistic prowess. As Ricoeur argues in a 1978 article, "[i]n other words, a pre-symbolic...stage of real life can nowhere be found. Symbolism in general is not a secondary effect of social life; it constitutes real life as socially meaningful" (Ricoeur 1978, 51). A symbolic universe encompasses our cognitive sphere, in that it mediates our agency in the world because it is being taken as an assumption–it is pre-semantic. Borrowing from Ricoeur's idea of symbolically mediated action, we need to recall that "[t]he so-called 'real' process already has a symbolic dimension" (*idem*); in fact, as he writes in *Time and Narrative* "[b]efore being submitted to interpretation, symbols are interpretants internally related to some action" (Ricoeur 1984, 58).

Though there are broadly held pre-semantic assumptions, that does not mean that each of us has the same interpretive meanings based on those assumptions. Rather, in a given milieu, there exists "a plurality of symbolic universes" (Salvatore et al. 2018). Each symbolic universe emerges as a

single instance of interpretation of a given cultural milieu which emphasizes some dimensions, but de-emphasizes others (Salvatore et al. 2018; see also Cobern and Aikenhead 1997). When considering how grades are interpreted in the United States, the best we can do is use abductive reasoning–there is nothing straight forward about a grade as its meaning comes from a plurality of symbolic universes.

Grades are literally the weighted culmination of a student's performance on predetermined (either explicitly or implicitly), normative educational tasks. Those tasks are teleologically directed toward some end defined by their educational context. Thus, the symbol of a grade is the interpretation of the student's ability to behave in accordance with a milieu's teleological end; the symbolic dimension of a grade emerges from a given symbolic universe that extends beyond the transparent, definable reference. The meaning of the grade is interpreted via the social milieu and is not clear from the sign. This raises the question of how to analyze, critique, and improve the meaning and function of grades given any social milieu.

4. The Meaning of Grades Using the Ideology and Utopia Dialectical Framework

Conceptualizing grades as a Ricoeurian symbol is valuable because we can draw on other frameworks to understand the indirect meaning of grades from a milieu, rather than concerning ourselves with the empirical question of whether a given grade means ①. Ideology and utopia is the dialectical framework I believe provides the most practical hermeneutical analysis for what a given grade means and how to critique or improve the functional use of grades.

Both ideology and utopia are seldom concepts that are carefully defined. Less frequently are they presented to have congruence with each other in terms of social reality. Paul Ricoeur and Karl Mannheim remain the only two 20th century thinkers to treat both concepts as a dialectic in a systematic way (Sargent 2008). While each thinker's treatment of each concept and how the concepts interact with each other deserve close analysis, for the purposes of this paper a mere paraphrase

is sufficient.[3] It should also be noted that I will not concern myself in this work with the argumentation supporting or refuting these frameworks, as the undisputable truth of these frameworks is not essential for my project as pitching grades a symbolic but aids the reader as a helpful guide (i.e., consider them to be methodological in character).

On the surface, ideology can be seen as any structure of beliefs, set of images, or implicitly and explicitly stated norms or narratives that determine the identity of a group. More specifically for Ricoeur, ideology has three characteristics: one negative and two positive. In a negative sense, Ricoeur draws on Marx in claiming that ideology is *prima facie* the "distortion" or "inversion" of a given symbolic universe, but ideology is not distortion *simpliciter* as Marx would argue (Ricoeur 1986, 1-4). In the positive sense, ideology acts as a mechanism for "legitimation" and for "identification" in a social space (Ricoeur 1986, 310).

Grading has all the poles of ideology (i.e., distortion, legitimation, and identity). Distortion, as mentioned, is the ability of an ideology to close the gap between what the narrative says and how things really are–with the narrative either being explicitly false or something that improves on the truth. Ideology's distortion answers the question of why we have meanings of grades that are empirically false but *feel* as if they were true. Saying grades are a function to determine and communicate educational merit and something that motivates students to fulfill the promise of schooling is attractive. The reality is much more troublesome.

The first remnant of marks to differentiate students were first referenced in the historical record of the United States by the 7th president of Yale University, Ezra Stiles, in a diary footnote which described the differentiating marks as descriptive adjectives (Smallwood 1935). The truth of the grading narrative that is typically left out is that grades were not a novel idea: they were the standardization of evaluation techniques already used. Most early colleges graded students not with letters or numbers, but by the social standing of their family (Smallwood 1935); Harvard University was an example of this practice (Eliot 1923).

When grades became normalized at the turn of the 19th century as education became a widespread practice, grades and formal schooling became part of the same ideology. When dramatically expanding a program and making that program compulsory (which started in 1852 in Massachusetts), how do we know whether or not school is worth the resources and time? Grades closed the gap between the truth that schools taught material in a formalized, pastoral-like setting (e.g., lecture) and the narrative dealing with the value of school.

These realities might make us question why grades were not rejected outright or at some point in the past. The reason is because grades *legitimize* the bureaucracy of formal schooling and provide an *identity* for a specific group. Formal school becoming legitimized in part by grades is because they give us a tangible, commonsensical metric for what the task of formal school is taken to be. Regardless of the content picked, we go to school to learn something. With grades, if we wanted to, we could test students on a topic when they enter school and then retest them when they're done with their lessons. If that mark goes up, we can assume school had something to do with it.

Since we do not expect people going to school to already know the material they're supposed to be learning, we just assume students do not have that knowledge. As such, as the narrative goes, a grade is just a metric of 1) how well the school was able to teach a student and 2) assuming students always try to learn the material, how much the student learned and how capable they are at learning in a given area. If a school can produce students who get As, Bs, Cs, etc, we can supposedly know a school is doing its job; thus, since a good number of students do well, then a given student's particular performance is a reflection on something about them (i.e., the school is working just fine, the poor performance says something about the student).

The most important component of ideology for Ricoeur is that ideological narratives create an identity; likewise, this is the most pressing component of the ideology of grading in contemporary education. As Lampert (2013) and Lemann (2000) note, modern education and so called "Meritocracy" are fundamentally linked. The winners of education, in a

meritocracy, are the ones who supposedly ought to have prominent social positions; those who get the highest grades and best test scores appear to be the smartest and hardest working and, therefore, are then thought of as being qualified to help run the course of society in some prestigious role. Recalling that grading marks were originally used for the purpose of ranking students by their family's social status (Smallwood 1935; Eliot 1923), grades were a natural fit.

The ideology of grading stems from their creation of an in-group of those who have succeeded based on their capability and merit and an out-group of those who have failed based on their inability and foolishness; this trend plays out on a broader educational, sociological, and moral level as Sandel (2020) accounts. Grading practices are incredibly difficult to reform, because the unmasking of ideologies is only bad for those who benefit from them the ideology the most–namely, those who justify their standing in society based on their supposedly superior intellectual and general ability as legitimized by grades. In Mannheim's words, "the decline of ideology represents a crisis only for certain strata, and the objectivity which comes from the unmasking of ideologies always takes the form of self-clarification for society as a whole" (Mannheim 2015 [1936], 236).

When it comes to trying to reform grading, not only are some of the most powerful at risk of losing part of their legitimacy if anything was meaningfully dismantled, it is incredibly difficult to imagine a world with a different ideological structure; we, ourselves, operate within and internalize such a structure. The mentality that "we don't know how to do school without grades" is a strong one; how do we think of reforms if we are products or discarded members of grading-as-ideology? For Ricoeur, the solution for this paradox is in utopia. As he writes, "the only way to get out of the circularity in which ideologies engulf us is to assume a utopia, declare it, and judge an ideology on this basis" (Ricoeur 1986, 172).

Utopia is an initially, non-ideological narrative that is logically distant from the present circumstances but is theoretically realizable. Utopias are non-ideological in that they exist, to use Ricoeur's word, "nowhere" in social reality but are

instead a plurality of narratives that interact to challenge what presently is the case. More specifically, a utopia can be thought of as having three characteristics: offering escapist fantasy, portraying "an alternate form of power," and allowing for "the exploration of the possible" (Ricoeur 1986, 310). Utopias do not distort reality since they have no concrete degree of reality (i.e., they do not "improve" on facts), they do not legitimize affairs (i.e., they delegitimize ideology), and they do not create identity (i.e., they do not usually say *who* is going to take positions of power in an alternative, but merely an ambiguous "we are going to be better off").

The negative side of utopia comes via fantasy. For someone at the bottom of an ideological power structure, those who benefit from an ideology can be lost in a utopic vision without taking tangible steps to enact change (Ricoeur 1986, 310). At the top of an ideological power structure, "[f]antasy is the way a utopia is seen by someone who rejects the utopia" because it is not a utopia *for them* (or maybe be led to believe that the utopia is not for them; Sargent 2013, 7).

Let's explore each of these cases. Suppose the present world with standard grading practices. Someone who is systematically devalued via grades might consider this utopia and internalize it. She might say to herself "there's nothing wrong with me, I'm not stupid grades don't matter." While it is true that there is nothing wrong with her from an intellectual standpoint, it is not empirically true that grades have no bearing on that person's future or perceived value in the United States, generally. As such, she might reject the ideology of grades for emotional self-esteem, but still allow for the ideology to perpetuate and classify her in or out of the identity group created by grades.

From the perspective of someone who is at the top of the grading ideology (e.g., a technocrat), she might be sympathetic to arguments against grading for having been through the process, but, explicitly, she might claim that we "must be practical" and grades "serve a lot of important roles in society." In looking closer at these statements, it is not that she is painting herself as benefiting from grades being in place, but rather she is willfully preserving the legitimacy of the

ideological social structures that grading perpetuates (e.g., hierarchical business structures, high paying, technocratic jobs, and so forth).

The positive components of utopia are that we can imagine what life could be like under different hierarchical and non-hierarchical power structures, as well as exploring those power structures in possible, but not real, worlds. Utopia in these forms allows us to juxtapose possibilities with our present ideological structures and pick out what specifically is problematic. When we consider a world with no grades, we can ask "what are we being relieved from"? Perhaps it is having our value essentialized by a symbol that is a proxy for our potential value in the market. Perhaps it is a society who perpetuates the wealthy in positions of power based on the guise of hard work in merit. Perhaps it is the idea that we can pinpoint, more or less accurately, the intellectual capability of someone and then compare that person to someone else–essentially making an existential claim about their personhood. There is no correct answer and will depend on the person doing the reflecting within the ideological and utopic dialectic.

5. (Inevitable) Issues of the Ideology and Utopia Framework

There are two risks of this ideology and utopia framework: 1) the case of someone offering a heavily tainted utopia or 2) the case of a utopic vision becoming successful and collapsing into an ideology. The first I am less concerned about than some might be. Like Ricoeur, Mannheim, and Sargent, I believe that "[a] utopia reflects hope, desires, a dream of improvement" (Sargent 2013, 11). As such, even one that is tainted is one worth considering and potentially working toward. For example, a utopia might be one where the effects of global climate change are mitigated. To work toward this utopia, perhaps we use the forces of capitalism to try and bring about green technology. This utopia might be severely tainted in that it doubles down on the very economic system that drove the climate crisis to begin with, but the component that "we want a world without climate change and global catastrophe" is a thread that may lead in the right direction. As such, I feel no

need to advocate a sense of purity in hoping for the future, because ideological structures make any type of hope increasingly difficult as its hegemony increases.

The second worry is more troublesome, namely because it is inevitable. Specifically, there is an inevitability that a utopian vision is successful and becomes an ideology. This can presumably take two forms: one where a utopia is achieved but reinforces the strength of an existing ideology or the utopia dismantles an ideology and becomes an ideology in and of itself.

Let's apply each case to grading. First, consider that we remove grades all together without really rejecting the components we are trying to reject (e.g., meritocracy, increasing the commodification of education); grades, as an inherently interpretable symbol, will just be replaced with something else. Consider those who reject grades and instead advocate for standards-based grading using "excellent, satisfactory, unsatisfactory" on a rubric. Is such change distinct from current grading in a way that makes a difference? I should think it is not, since the symbolic universe, which gives the meaning to the symbolic "thing" (e.g., letter grade or something of the sort), is still there.

The other way a utopia can become an ideology is by "shattering" an ideology and then replacing it with new narratives (Ricoeur 1986, 273). For example, suppose for the sake of argument that part of the Enlightenment's project was to supplant religion in order to live a rational, evidence-based life (i.e., create a complete account of Naturalism). Western society, in small parts, has come to reject religion for being non-objective and instead embraces science. The irony, of course, is that science as a general enterprise is based on the assumption that induction is true–which we have no rational reason to think is true due to David Hume's famous is/ought distinction. As such, if the reason for rejecting religion is that it requires faith and science was the alternative because it is "purely objective," the utopia of a scientifically driven world collapsed into an ideology that shares many of the same features as previous theologies (for example, see Otto 2012 [1904] for a thorough comparison of naturalism and theology). The important thing to note is that ideology and utopia are

constantly in a dialectic. We should not expect utopian thinking to bring about an end of history, as others have thought, but rather expect those possible alternatives to shed light on what is not working now.

6. Conclusion

This paper must restrain from giving a final word on how we ought to proceed with grading as an educational practice, because providing a "correct" direction would undercut the exact framework that is being argued for here. However, one thing is clear: grading plays a drastic role in many societies and is poorly understood. I intended to demonstrate that grades are Ricoeurian symbols that take their interpretable content from a social milieu and, presently, operate as an ideological narrative and tool that support unjustified meritocratic hierarchies. I cautioned that getting rid of grades will not solve the problems we have uncovered hermeneutically as long as the systems that grades are used to prop-up continue to exist without being questioned. I then finished by proposing a framework, based on the work of Paul Ricoeur, to evaluate proposed meanings of grades that are created by people or institutions and show how interpretations can be improved upon through utopic visions. While grades will stick around, educators have an obligation to be aware of the work they take on and how they as practitioners, and the institutions they work for, partake in many of the United States' social ills.

NOTES

[1] An earlier version of this paper was presented in 2021 at the "Paul Ricœur on Collective Identities" conference. Feedback was incorporated to this paper where appropriate and I thank the attendees for their comments and general reception.

[2] I have constrained myself to the United States for the purposes of this paper.

[3] See Sargent (2008; 2013) for comprehensive reviews of Ricoeur and Mannheim in relation to the field as a whole.

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