

Theorizing a Pedagogy of Ontological Courage: *Be Not Afraid!*

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“To see is to forget the name of the thing one sees.” Paul Valéry

INTRODUCTION

Three years ago, *Frontline* broadcast a special titled *The Merchants of Cool*.¹ It focused on teenagers and the tactics advertisers use to lure them. “Cool” refers to that real but elusive quality vendors seek to commodify in order to promote their goods. With an eerily pastoral approach and cash incentives, young, “cool” executives (formerly cool kids themselves) work their way (literally) into the homes of teens to find out directly from them what’s in and what’s out. Paraphrasing one marketer on the success of their methods, “We are effective because we meet kids where they are at, we understand them.” Yet this understanding is far from sympathetic to the difficulties of teenage life and is rather purely instrumental. Armed with “cool” knowledge, advertisers craft the most alluring combination of words, music, and images to capture not just the wallets of teens but their hearts and minds as well. With cheap yet compelling aesthetics they fashion a cultural ideal that exerts a strong hold over the imaginations of young people, inculcating a vision that shapes how they look at themselves, their family, and the world.

In light of this ubiquitous and disturbing reality, Justen Infinito’s call to courage as indispensable for ethical self-formation is timely and important. The normalizing and hegemonic forces that suppress and co-opt individuality that Foucault alerts us to seem to pose an ever increasing challenge to becoming a self, to developing one’s own identity. Infinito’s Foucault-inspired “care of the self” offers a direct and necessary response to these forces that block us from “asserting an identity, a self, and a future of our own making.”² For it involves, as she explains, “a practice of freedom that subverts anything which prohibits or denies self-construction.”³ This practice of ethical self-formation, though, is impossible without courage. Hence the need to think through or theorize a pedagogy of courage so we are clear about what it is we are calling forth from our students and how best to call it forth. This is the noble task Infinito takes up. In what follows I briefly appraise her account, noting the rich understanding of courage she puts forward. I then note an unresolved tension that exists between Infinito’s understanding of courage and her project of ethical self-formation. Finally, I suggest a resolution of this tension with the help of Josef Pieper.

When thinking about courage, there is, as William Desmond notes, a temptation to overlook its deeper sources and focus merely on its external heroic manifestations. This temptation, explains Desmond, “reflects a desire to stake a mastery over self and the precarious conditions of life.” Yet this control of self or one’s ethical formation is illusory. As pragmatist William James notes, “We are all such helpless failures in the last resort. The sanest and best of us are of one clay with lunatics and prison inmates...[and] our morality [is mere] plaster hiding a sore it can never cure, and all our well-doing...the hollowest substitute for that well-being that our lives

ought to be grounded in, but alas! are not.”⁴ Desmond, I think, would agree with James, contending that there is “a source of strengthening other than us at work in the most intimate recesses of our willing.”⁵ This source, which Infinito describes as ontological courage, we do not produce ourselves, but only “give witness to its already being at work in us.”⁶

Ontological courage, as I understand Infinito, involves an affirmation of Being and beings; a “choice to move purposefully in a certain direction” toward the meaningfulness of life; the “decision to be oriented toward the search for meaning through participation in shared creative acts, not knowing for sure if meaning can be found.” In contrast to defending or protecting one’s ground, ontological courage involves vulnerability, receptivity, and openness to the meaningfulness of being. Its stirrings can be seen in Walker Percy’s *Moviegoer* who finds himself “on to something,” “aware of the possibility of a search,” coupled with the awareness that not being “onto something is to be in despair.”⁷ This courageous affirmation of being is the ground and precondition for existential and moral courage.

Far from a mere stoic acceptance of reality or a necessary surrender to the contingencies of life, ontological courage involves a loving embrace of creation and others, a rushing out to greet life with a deep sense of gratitude for what is. The self-important grandmother in Flannery O’Connor’s *A Good Man is Hard to Find* awakens to this kind of courage, when, confronted by an escaped convict known as the Misfit, she utters the following realization, “Why you’re one of my babies. You’re one of my own children!” The grandmother is overcome and humbled by a profound sense of communion with and responsibility for the world and everyone in it. As Infinito beautifully elaborates, ontological courage views otherness and “the solicitation of the other...not as an intrusion but as an invitation to appreciate the full disclosure of being.”

For its opposite, consider Dostoevsky’s ridiculous man who, after much misery, reaches what he describes as a calming awareness: “I suddenly felt that it was all the same to me whether the world existed or whether there had never been anything at all...I gave up caring about anything.”⁸ Soon after this insight he vows to kill himself. Somehow life for the ridiculous man had become utterly dull and indifferent, without meaning or purpose, in contrast to the mysterious possibility that arises in Percy’s *Moviegoer* and loving mandate that inspires O’Connor’s grandmother. Bereft of ontological courage, the ridiculous man is without desire to pursue existential courage in earnest, and without attachments, there is no reason for him to be morally courageous either.

Infinito’s notion of ontological courage entails a dynamic understanding of the source of courage. It implies a dynamic ontology and epistemology of the human person in her emerging selfhood that is pedagogically significant. Yet Infinito’s account of ontological courage seems to be in tension with her project of ethical self-formation: on the one hand Infinito advocates *à la* Foucault a project of ethical self-construction whereby we are enabled to produce ourselves, in dialogue with and in sensitivity to the needs of others, our own creative and unique self, rejecting discourses, whether Christian or psychoanalytic as well as the normalizing forces thus mentioned, that limit existential possibilities; yet on the other hand this project

is sustained by an invitation into being that surpasses our own abilities for self-creation and yet is essential for the success of our ethical self-formation. Infinito seems to admit uncertainty about how one wins through to ontological courage, suggesting any number of ways by which “one comes by it, whether through reason, by grace, a will to believe, desperation or some other means.” However it is realized, it is, as noted, the ground or precondition of existential and moral courage, and thus merits special attention.

This juncture brings us to one of Infinito’s key questions for education: “How do those who do not feel compelled to celebrate being come to value it?” How do we cultivate ontological courage in our students and ourselves? How do we reach the ridiculous man? Can we, like Gnostics, reason our way into such a state of being? Would the right arguments persuade the ridiculous man? Or is it something that we can, with Pelagian strength of will, desperately grab hold of? Would a motivational speech a la Tony Robbins do the trick? If, however, this disposition is a gift, as Infinito implies, that would suggest that reasoning or willfulness is insufficient. As a gift, is it something that one person can give to another? It would seem to be too great a gift for any one person to give to another. Perhaps we might be a channel or conduit of ontological courage, but certainly not its source, which, as Desmond suggests, runs much deeper, entailing “a *willing* that predates *will*, inseparable from [the] basic and elemental love of being.”⁹ Herein lies the rub and thinking through this rub is pedagogically significant for how we seek to cultivate ontological courage.

Infinito began her section on ontological courage with a quote from Alven Neiman that also underscores the giftedness or gracefulness that funds the philosophical quest, which we do not earn, but as a gift can perhaps better prepare ourselves to receive. Since Kant, and perhaps earlier, I think we have forgotten how to receive gifts or to dispose ourselves to being as a gift.¹⁰ That is to say we have inherited an epistemology that pokes and prods at being more than it savors or wonders over it.

For Kant the human act of knowing is exclusively discursive: a busy, active capacity that sizes up, compares, abstracts, proves, and investigates to produce knowledge. His is an epistemology that views knowing solely as an active mental effort. All knowing, according to Kant, is the result of discursive mental activity. Prior to Kant, ancient and medieval philosophy held a very different view of the human act of knowing. The human intellect included Kant’s discursive capacity, which it referred to as *ratio*, but also included the *intellectus* or as Pieper describes it, “the ability of ‘simply looking,’” to which the truth presents itself as a landscape presents itself to the eye.”¹¹ Abraham Heschel beautifully describes what *intellectus* consists of:

the person meets the world, not with the tools they have made but with the soul with which they were born;...it is not an object, a thing that is given to the senses, but a state of fellowship that embraces her or him and all things; not a particular fact but the startling situation that there are facts at all; being; the presence of a universe; the unfolding of time.¹²

While the discursive mind is busy and active, the *intellectus* mind is passive or better still receptive. While the discursive mind questions the nature of being, the

receptive mind savors, appreciates, and is gifted by being. *Ratio* knowledge is obtained through human effort, while the vision of *intellectus* is a gift that “surpasses human limits.” The one calls us to action, the other to contemplation. All knowing, it was thought, involved the interplay of both of these capacities, but it is this second capacity, this ability to receive, that has been overlooked.

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An exclusively discursive view of human knowing is one-sided and misses something essential. And pedagogy so informed, that overlooks the *intellectus*, risks Pelagian or Gnostic extremes, whereby students fall into the illusion that if only they were smart enough or willful enough they would become the self they long to be. Pieper and Heschel offer a richer account of the human act of knowing that in turn addresses the tension in Infinito’s discussion thus noted. The *ratio* encompasses the critical questioning, self-reflection, and critique that form the heart of Infinito’s pedagogy for ethical self-formation, while the *intellectus*, the capacity to be in communion with all of being, keeps in view the preparation needed to receive the gift of ontological courage. A pedagogy that hopes to inspire and cultivate ontological courage must be informed by an epistemology that, as Heschel explains, goes out “to meet the world not only by way of expediency but also by the way of wonder.”¹³

1. See PBS’s “Frontline” website at: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cool/> This site also contains excellent resources for teaching media literacy.

2. Justen Infinito, “Ethical Self-Formation: A Look at the Later Foucault,” in *Educational Theory* 53, no. 2 (Spring 2003): 160.

3. Ibid., 160.

4. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 47.

5. William Desmond, “The Secret Sources of Strengthening: Philosophical Reflections on Courage” in *Courage*, ed. Barbara Darling-Smith (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 14.

6. Ibid., 14. Italics in original.

7. Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer* (New York: Vintage Books, 1960), 13.

8. Fyodor Dostoevsky, “The Dream of a Ridiculous Man,” in *The Short Stories of Dostoevsky*, ed. William Phillips (New York: The Dial Press, 1946), 594.

9. Desmond, “The Secret Sources,” 14. Italics in original.

10. For this analysis I am indebted to Josef Pieper. See *Leisure, The Basis of Culture*, (Indiana: St. Augustine’s Press, 1998), 8-14.

11. Pieper, *Leisure*, 11.

12. Abraham Heschel, *Man is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1977), 38. Although Heschel does not use the term *intellectus*, but in his distinction between knowing as expedient and knowing as wonder he captures its meaning.

13. Ibid., 36.