Education as Destiny

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I know, the title sounds like it belongs on an alumni fundraising brochure. But marketing aside, what *do* we mean when we utter the word "education"? Of course, it depends in the end on the specific circumstances to which a particular speaker is responding. Nevertheless, some typical possibilities spring to mind. "My education" could refer to the nature and amount of what I know. It could summarize the nature and amount of my time in schools. It could point to some experiences outside of school that taught me key lessons. It could refer to my teaching of others. No doubt we can think of still further ways of using the phrase.

All of these meanings imply that however valuable education may be, there are other things in my life besides it. Now in contrast, consider the phrase, "my fate." It evokes the totality of my life. It makes little sense to talk about areas or degrees of fate. Fate cannot be placed in relation to other parts of one's life; it cannot be housed in special institutions; it cannot be measured. The topic of my address, then, is roughly this: Why don't we mean by "education" something more akin to fate? Especially when we consider that the word's Latin root, "*ēdūcere*," translated as "to lead out," makes no mention of acquiring knowledge but does suggest some sort of path?

I hasten to acknowledge that I lack any expertise in linguistic history and have nothing to say about what caused the meanings of these two terms to be so sharply differentiated. My question is rather future oriented and is meant to encourage speculative and experimental probing of the possibilities it broaches. How might we plausibly revise what my education means? What else could change if we did? Are there reasons for believing that the results would be good for us?

Conclusive answers are of course beyond me. The aim of my preliminary discussion this morning is simply to interest others in refining and building on it. In particular, I'm going to claim that promising guides for redeveloping the

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meaning of education lie in novels, songs, movies, paintings, dances, and other works of imagination. "Education as destiny" is my awkward, but hopefully initially helpful, designation of the genre composed of these works. It points to a frontier for educational scholarship rooted in the humanities, scholarship that would place a growing list of such works in critical conversation with each other and with the conventions that they share and play off of. My argument for why you might want to join me in exploring this frontier will be elaborated in four sections. Its point of departure is a phrase in which education and life are explicitly juxtaposed.

A SYMPTOM

Lifelong learning. Few slogans are as familiar as this one to those of us who have sat through public celebrations at schools and colleges. At a graduation ceremony, for example, some speaker is bound to proclaim her belief in the idea. It's only a slight exaggeration to say that we're apt to be more surprised by the omission of such a declaration than by its predictable recitation once again.

What does "lifelong learning" mean? The answer lies as much in the term's tone as in its content. It usually has a hortatory edge; it not only broadcasts what we presumably all count on and what the institution stands for, but it summons us each to put that faith into practice. In effect, it's telling us to keep on learning, indefinitely.

Now since most exhortations push an audience to act in a way that to some degree it resists, it's a bit odd that this one's content is so truistic. Nobody in the world is objecting to lifelong learning. No one is contending that there's only childhood learning; no one is trying to pile up evidence to clinch the issue. It's not clear, then, why we need to be told to keep at it. Imagine how we'd react if our physicians incessantly urged us to believe in lifelong breathing.

But even if we unanimously agree that lifelong learning is a good thing, we're bound to encounter serious obstacles in our efforts to walk the walk. Chief among these is the very nature of learning itself: namely, that every instance of it has a beginning and is all about coming to an end. Learning is the activity through which someone gains possession of a piece of knowledge or know-how. In certain cases, this activity is aided by a teacher; in others, not. Either way, at

some point, in principle, it must be possible for the learner to realize that the acquisition process is over and she now knows this specific thing. Retrospectively, she should be able to say that her learning in this instance can be traced back to a moment of origin when she first responded to a need for this particular knowledge. Now of course, I don't deny it makes sense for someone to claim that she's still learning something she does not yet fully possess, as I would say that I'm still learning French. My point is just that it would vitiate the very concept if we *never* experienced our learning bearing fruit. Built into the meaning of learning is confidence that it is generally possible. If we believe, then, that every learning activity is normally supposed to come to an end, why should we believe that we will always want to start another? Suppose I'm content to live by the light of the knowledge I already have. Is that so problematic?

What gives meaning to the exhortation is the real possibility that we may each reach a point someday when we no longer feel like learning anything. Lifelong learning, then, refers to something that at such moments we *ought to* desire. What's the basis for this prescriptive claim? I don't need to remind this audience of the many voluminous answers to this question. Let it suffice to note that most modern ones spell out our sense that activities of learning, beyond bringing us knowledge, cultivate in our lives certain intellectual virtues like open-mindedness, adventurousness, a problem-solving intelligence, a love of social diversity, and so on, virtues that help us individually and collectively cope with the changing world. Continuously engaging in such activities resembles continuing a regime of exercise in order to enhance and maintain the quality of our lives. When we turn our attention from what feels comfortable in the moment to our ongoing health, we're apt to realize that we do desire mental as well as physical fitness. The reason we regularly whip ourselves to keep learning, then, is because life always has to struggle against entropy—that's what it means to be alive.

The slogan "lifelong learning," in sum, affirms a link between learning activities and general quality of life. It does this in the teeth of our tendency to deathlike inertia and degradation.

Once we understand the phrase in this way, however, we find ourselves in a position to raise a critically reflective question: Do our learning activities

really improve the quality of our lives? To be sure, legions of our colleagues have been empirically testing every angle of this issue. But I want to pose the question with a somewhat different stress: Do our learning activities really improve the quality of our *whole* lives? When we add the seemingly redundant adjective "whole" to the formulation, the issue becomes pointed in a more conceptual way. Because our learning activities are parts of our lives tied to particular pieces of knowledge that advance particular practices and foster particular qualities of character, and because we can easily observe that these activities, like most of the practices in which we participate, are becoming more specialized every day, it's far from obvious how they *could* enhance each of our lives as a whole. To the contrary, it's at least understandable to suspect they are inviting us, teaching us, to view each of our lives as merely a shapeless bag of reified qualities and abilities like a runner's body or a knack for logic. Some of the latter may exist in historical or functional relations with each other, but perceiving these various relations doesn't necessarily enable a person to give coherent shape to his life. Indeed, Georg Lukács explains that without his own unifying sense of purpose, the person is prone to accept that life breaks down into "things which he can 'own' or 'dispose of' like the various objects of the external world"; a default direction for living it, then, is determined by the market value of these commodities.[1] Our gurus are often career counselors.

A glance at the work of Donald Judd, a prominent minimalist sculptor, may illustrate this concern. Although he started out as an easel painter, Judd eventually rejected the traditional painting because he saw it as a "vague whole" consisting of "definite parts" in some kind of intricate order. What he wanted to pursue instead were works that project the sense of a "definite whole and maybe no parts, or very few." As he grasped it, "The big problem is to maintain the sense of the whole thing."[2] Analogously, no matter how many things we have learned and continue to learn, we may feel that none of them or even their sum enables us to address the big problem: How do we not only determine and perform the right actions appropriate to a particular set of momentary circumstances, but also live meaningfully a whole life?

In light of this reasonable anxiety that anyone may experience, the uncanniness of lifelong learning may now be more striking. On the one hand, the

prospect of being caught up for a lifetime in acquiring discrete bits of knowledge for increasing one's mastery of correspondingly specialized practices may be precisely what arouses and fuels skepticism that such learning activities, or perhaps anything else, could ever help one comprehend one's singular life. "Lifelong learning," in this sense, would be a dispiriting term, alluding to something that such learning stifles and supplants. On the other hand, precisely by virtue of this allusion, this phrase could evoke the possible existence of some special, alternative kind of learning experience that begins at birth and stretches to the day we die. Perhaps this other learning could focus on an equally exceptional kind of knowledge, call it wisdom, that discloses an entire life's meaning. Taking thought of this strange double-sidedness, then, we may translate "lifelong learning" into "learning for life" which displays more explicitly two opposed meanings: learning one damn thing after another for the indefinite future and learning as a way of living a whole life. An ambiguous and contradictory phrase that can express both resignation and hope—it appears we're no longer talking about a mere platitude to pad out a graduation speech.

This suggests that "lifelong learning" is a symptom of a kind of cultural neurosis. Proclaiming belief in it so regularly and ritualistically enables members of our culture to express, and even celebrate, a longing to learn how one should live a coherent life. But because the meaning which is actually enforced by our institutional customs is that we should keep on learning more specialties, the phrase in effect denies the validity or even existence of this longing. Such a symbolic expression of a desire, combined with its practical repression, indicates that we are disowning a dimension of ourselves integral to our lives, while settling for a fantasy of what we want. Max Weber's portrait of the result can hardly be bettered: "specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart."[3]

Recognizing this neurotic in the mirror raises certain questions. Why do we repress this desire to learn how we should live a life? Besides our acceptance of this dimension of ourselves, what else is this repression costing us? And what could a more honest and constructive response to this longing look like? Because of space constraints, I'm going to skip to the last question in the hope that responding to it will shed at least oblique light on the other two.

A GENRE

As this article's title announces, my name for the more direct response to the desire is "education as destiny." Because its divergence from lifelong learning is hardly clear, though, I need to elucidate its meaning. As a mere designation, it eschews describing, let alone explaining, its object exhaustively, but it does try to point out the object well enough for us to interact with it. I shall explain how it directs us less to practices inside or even outside of classrooms than to a type of work of artistic culture.

Let me first go back to my opening question: what could we mean by the phrase "my education"? In light of the subsequent discussion, I recommend we employ the phrase to affirm that one is trying to live in a coherent way a whole life; the phrase means this affirmation. It thus echoes the existentially hopeful interpretation, so to speak, of lifelong learning. This resonance conforms to our conventional expectation that education and learning are closely related. However, I want to break from the notion they are synonymous by claiming that my education affirms my whole life non-contradictorily; it can do this precisely because it is no longer attached to learning. "My education" thus also means *not* the normal acquisition of knowledge. This negation registers the understanding that my learning activities tend to treat as nothing precisely what my education means to affirm. To be plain, I'm not at all denying that there are plenty of reasons to treasure and pursue learning. I'm merely noting that by my proposed definition, an education expresses an interest that is usually absent in such learning.

How it does this is an equally crucial part of its meaning. The words "my education" that come out of my mouth flow from the felt sweep of an entire life. Their utterance is backed by that kind of momentum and hence has a lyric quality. To register this, I postulate that my education, my affirming my life, *is* my living that life, as distinct from acting to master a moment in it. Hence when we unpack the phrase in a bit more detail, we arrive not at "my education about life," or "my education for quality of life." Rather, "my education *as* my life."

Part of what makes this formulation still obscure, however, is the term "life" which has many different associations. Let me try to consolidate some of the main ones. For instance, "life" can connote the energy which animates us,

on the one hand, yet which ebbs and flows, on the other. Since we're specifically interested in the quality of wholeness that lifelong learning only contradictorily affirms, perhaps we can fold this vitalist understanding of life into one that's focused less on momentary fluctuations and more on continuity across time marked by change.

Such a focus suits our conference theme, education as formation. Is this the concept of life I'm looking for? Formation happens over a period of time; it is caused by events that change us; these changes lead us to understand that our lives have a particular past and direction. Dewey would add that formation manifests our ongoing growth. It thus stresses our historical dimension. But does this dimension necessarily pertain to an entire life? For every Goethe composing a novel about *Bildung*, there's a job applicant composing a resume of his *formation professionelle*. In order to stipulate that formation concerns the whole of a person's life, we need to reach for a supplementary concept.

This is why I brought up in the introduction that of fate. The phrase "my fate" places my life in the shadow of my death and thereby acknowledges a limit that unifies it. A whole life is a mortal one. As mine takes place over time, it's marked by certain experiences and actions, on the one hand, and not others that I had no time for, on the other. The actual moments form my life's history as being meaningfully distinct from the alternative possible histories my death leaves unrealized. Moreover, in the visions of fatal formation articulated in ancient Greek theater and American film noir, what leads me to this history's completion are shadowy forces that do not so much kill me as ironically twist my intentions. I become the unwitting puppet of the gods or a femme fatale; such figures personify the way my actions to defer death may be exactly what hasten it. The history of my fate is thus one of blind self-destruction. No wonder, as Aristotle remarked, contemplation of it arouses pity and fear.[4]

The *Poetics* tells us furthermore where we should look if we want to understand our fateful struggles. They do not belong to a set list of battlefields. There are no fate-forming practices in particular for us to engage in and reform. Nonetheless, the struggles can be, and have been, captured in literary and artistic works that did not fall from the sky labeled "tragedy," but were assembled under that name by discerning audiences. When we join Aristotle and a tradition of

others in studying these works, we take part in a constitutive conversation on the nature and significance of education as fatal formation.

Suppose, then, we are motivated to equate education with fate because we appreciate that the formation of a whole life is rooted in a sense of mortality. Does it necessarily follow that this formation has to be focused on an end we all fear and strive in vain to avoid? Is this the only way of conceiving of death? The alternative I propose is that of understanding our existence from birth as one extensive process of dying. Let formation refer not to the history of our lives, but to that of our deaths. Seeing things in this way then prompts the question of what it could mean to die over a lifetime willingly and meaningfully. And one answer is that it would mean giving away your life to something. My active dying would be the constant sacrifice of my life to something more important than its preservation and enhancement. Works like Augustine's *Confessions* or George Eliot's *Middlemarch* testify to the possibility of this kind of devotion.

We often describe such a devotional life with the term "calling." As a revision of the concept of fatal formation, which stresses the finality of the noun, a formative calling is more explicitly open-ended. Identifying my education with it would entail my affirming and living my life not only as historical and mortal, but also for the sake of something beyond me that attracts me into the wondrous unknown. Indeed, the concept of calling also inflects the vitalist understanding of life: it suggests that as an animating energy, life does not push but pulls us. My dying need not be an experience of the loss of self-assertiveness; it can be one of inspired generosity. Admittedly, a work like *Middlemarch* or Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* alerts us to the tendency of a calling to become intoxicated with ascetic high-mindedness: flying close to the sun can be tragically blinding and destructive. But we can take these as cautionary words rather than as last ones.

Why, then, am I not theorizing education as calling? The reason is a matter of rhetorical nuance: I worry this concept suggests the most important feature of my life is that it is being drawn along in a certain direction from the outside, rather passively. In contrast, as I've repeatedly noted, I use the phrase "my education" to affirm my living a life. This implies that this affirmation matters and makes a crucial difference to me as such. Strictly speaking, my

devotional life is less a calling than my being actively true to one.

Education as destiny is meant to complete the sense of being called with the understanding that what is formative is what one does. One's calling may be defined more narrowly as an encounter with grace. In response, one affirms that one's whole, mortal, historical life led up to this moment; one tries to integrate all the events and features of one's life, including those that at first traumatically overloaded one, into a story of how this encounter took place. Furthermore, this history in turn forms a path for one to follow through on and live forward. My destiny is thus the speech-act of telling the story of my life, to others or myself, as one about a journey to and from grace. It's my reply to Zarathustra's challenge: "have you ever said Yes to a single joy?"[5] For Friedrich Nietzsche and me, this question can be meaningful only because my destiny is precisely *not* predestined or given in advance. I have to claim it by demonstrating my love of fate, that is, by authoring and committing my life to this kind of story; this is what it means to wholeheartedly say yes to anything. When I equate this storytelling with my education, then, I express my belief that it affirms more consistently the hope in lifelong learning. And that it spells out more clearly the realization that my life is an education.

Once more, though, the title phrase I've been elucidating is simply a name. "Education as destiny" is meant not to answer, but to evoke, the question of what its object feels like, of how it may be experienced. As this name invites us to dwell on this question, it steers us to a genre of works that share and illuminate the experience in concrete ways. I turn to one now in order to demonstrate how it may be read usefully in this light.

A WORK OF EDUCATION

Camille Pissarro's *Two Young Peasant Women* was first shown in 1892 and currently hangs in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art (Fig. 1).[6] Out of a brief reading of it, I shall draw two points. The first is that the painting allegorizes a key feature of an education: that its crystallization out of a moment calls for a turning. The second is that this educational interpretation conversely renders intelligible one of the work's more puzzling parts: a patch of paint to which the artist gives unusual prominence.



Fig. 1 Camille Pissarro, *Two Young Peasant Women*, oil on canvas, 1891-92, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

The eponymous figures loom monumentally in the picture's foreground. In the background stretches expansively the land they live off of. The women are dressed for summer work and one of them holds a tool, let's say a spade. It's a hazy, hot and humid day. But as the art historian T. J. Clark points out, if you look closely at the mottled light on the peasants and the dark passage connecting them at the picture's bottom, you can see that they're in shade.[7] They are taking a break for conversation. Pissarro zeros in on a moment when both interlocutors have stopped talking; he accentuates it with the literal motionlessness of his image. What has brought on this strange stillness?

The bareheaded woman rests her chin on the palm of her curled-up hand, covering her mouth. Rodin would have recognized the pose.[8] She appears to have been sent into thought by a question from her companion. It was evidently powerful enough to put The Thinker, as I will henceforth call her, at a loss and leave talk hanging. But as she struggles with her lack of knowledge and words, she shows no inclination to get up and walk away. A reason could be that the question concerns a matter of such importance, she realizes she must not run from responding to it. This reading inevitably recollects for me

the Platonic scene of philosophy, centered on Socrates' eternally provocative declaration that "the unexamined life is not worth living."[9] I imagine The Thinker has been momentarily paralyzed by the possibility she is living a life that's not worth the trouble.

What particular question it is that has had this effect on this woman I leave to your imaginations. Needless to say, it doesn't have to refer explicitly to something so abstract as the meaning of (any person's) life. Meanwhile, her companion too is silent. Is this because the latter is withholding the answer, subjecting her pupil to a humbling test? I discern nothing in the woman's demeanor that betrays an interest in demonstrating her superiority. More fitting is a suggestion of Clark's that the picture is an Annunciation.[10] The kneeling Gabriel figure, haloed in a kerchief, has just finished prophesying that The Thinker will give birth to something communally redemptive. She serves this woman by infusing her doubt with divine confidence. Let me moreover note that this interpretation does not at day's end stray that far from the Platonic register: The Angel, as I name her, also resembles Socrates the midwife of beautiful ideas. Having delivered her announcement in the form of a question, she now waits infinitely for a response. This suggests that she knows not the objectively correct answer, but simply that a subjectively true one, a Kierkegaardian one, can only come from The Thinker's own articulation of it, and commitment to it, when she's ready. In the meantime, she keeps her friend supportive company.

The stillness of the two figures, then, may be understood as their lack of a satisfying answer to the question of what makes a life worth living. Their equal ignorance on this subject is represented by their uniforms. They belong to the same class. Who can be surprised that their exploitative and alienating toil has exhausted their confidence that their lives have their own purposes? Furthermore, just as they are interchangeable as batteries of labor power, so the role of questioner and thinker, I surmise, can be occupied by either one of them in turn. This is another way of characterizing the conversational nature of their relationship, one that has a history.

Suppose, then, we see the painting as evoking the story of a conversation about worthwhile life that has led to a moment of suspended silence. Does the story end there? On the contrary, Pissarro marvelously depicts not only friends

fallen into stillness but also motion resuming in the fields. The source of the latter movement, to my eye, lies in the patch of ground beyond the shade but between the women. Clark's description captures its startling painterliness: "the soil is as fiery and infinite as gold leaf."[11]

Why would the artist apply such a sign of the sacred to this piece of earth? Formulating the question in this way naturally intimates an answer. Pissarro finds meaning for a life in the matter his characters overlook and take for granted. This earthy stuff, like paint, is beautiful in itself. For it to move the characters, for it to pull them out of their moment of aporia, all they have to do is turn their heads, so to speak. The very Socratic questioning that gets them concerned about life as a whole also has made them forgetful of what they're actually resting on and assuming. (Hence the picture cuts off at the women's skirts.) But if they could, like the Thracian maid in the *Theaetetus*, realize and laugh at this philosophical absentmindedness, they would be released into the sense that their present gives them a beautiful way forward.[12] They would be turned, converted, to a calling.

The history of a fall into stillness thus gives way to an inspiration for resuming movement. The painting mimes this by flowing from the static foreground scene into the wide-open distance behind and its breathing trees. Indeed, Pissarro, whose point of view is precisely turned in this direction, affirms this movement as destiny. Beyond being representational, his brushstrokes register his hand's active devotion. In the area to the right of The Angel's head, especially, they play off of a common trope in his work: that the painter assiduously cultivating the fruits of the earth is like a farmer. At the same time, these expressive touches and the image as a whole are circumscribed by a frame that acknowledges mortality. Yet as we discussed earlier, death need not be something simply feared. The frame's limit may represent the kind of perspectival humility which enables the larger conversation to which Pissarro gives himself, that among his art's precursors, successors, and audience, to continue and grow.

How does *Two Young Peasant Women* depict an education? It captures a still moment out of which a calling is perceived by someone who affirms it. Put more concretely, Pissarro visualizes the story of someone who reached an impasse in a conversation about the point of living, but who was then rescued

by realizing one can celebrate in paint the conversation's material basis. This celebration is inspired by a patch of sacred soil, not to mention a profound identification with the women who care for it.

THE PROJECT

My argument has been that "lifelong learning" expresses the cultural fantasy of each of us understanding and living our lives as whole; that a less contradictory, more helpful name for this affirmation of life is "education as destiny"; and that we can find concrete examples of it, like Pissarro's, in the arts. I'd like to close with a few words about how we can farm such works of education.

Directions for this project are implicit in the painting discussion. We should seek to draw attention to works of imagination that can flesh out recognizable details of the experience of education as destiny. This entails elaborating comparative judgments about these works that will hopefully stimulate insightful argument and discussion. Moreover, because many of them have already been the object of critical examination, we should try to explain how our educational readings address lingering problems or lacunae in their interpretation. By thus claiming, one case at a time, that certain works are useful for understanding education as destiny, and that education as destiny is useful for understanding certain works, we substantiate this genre's existence. We make it easier for others to converse with it and imagine that their lives too may be educations.

Of course, no one is born doing these things. The project calls us not only to cultivate the education genre but also to develop practices for learning how. Indeed, it claims that all our other activities of learning will be able to improve the quality of our whole lives only when they work in concert with the affirmation of education. In this same spirit, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Dewey argued that school learning should always take its cue from our extra-scholastic education. At the center of a school's teaching should be humanities learning, therefore, and at the center of a school of education's scholarship should be an interest in education as destiny. Such teaching and scholarship are no more difficult than that which keeps our culture alive to the wisdom of tragedy. What's much harder to persuade others to accept, though,

is the idea that we should prioritize this work. Fifty years ago, a piece of Paris graffiti challenged us to "be realist, demand the impossible."[13] Are we capable of being impossible today?

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1 Georg Lukács, "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat," in History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971), 100.
2 These quotes of Judd's come from Bruce Glaser, "Questions to Stella and Judd," in Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology, ed. Gregory Battock (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1968), 154.
3 Max Weber, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009), 96.
4 See Aristotle, Poetics, trans. I. Bywater, in The Complete Works of Aristotle, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).
5 Friedrich Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin, 1954), 323.
6 Camille Pissarro, Two Young Peasant Women, 1891-92, oil on canvas, (89.5 x 116.5 cm) New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Accessed August 2, 2019, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/437304.
7 See T. J. Clark, Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 65.
8 See Auguste Rodin's famous sculpture, The Thinker.
9 Plato, Apology, trans. G. M. A. Grube, in Complete Works, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 33.
10 See Clark, Farewell to an Idea, 68.
11 Ibid.
12 See Plato, Theaetetus, trans. M. J. Levett and Myles Burnyeat, in Complete Works, ed. Cooper, 193.
13 For a photograph of this work of legendary May '68 agitprop in situ, see https://larvalsubjects.files.wordpress.com/2017/10/img_0520.jpg.