

Destiny and Self-Formation

Ann Chinnery

Simon Fraser University

First let me thank René for the invitation to respond to his Presidential Address. I found his essay provocative in the very best sense of that word, and I appreciate his calling us back to what is arguably the first question for philosophers of education: “What is the nature of this thing we call education?” For those of us familiar with René’s work, it comes as no surprise that he turns to art—in this case, Camille Pissarro’s painting, *Two Young Peasant Women*—as an example of the kind of imaginative work that can help us reorient our thinking about the very nature of education.

There is much I appreciate in René’s paper—for example, his proposal, about midway through the essay, that we come to see “our existence from birth as one extensive process of dying,” within which formation refers “not to the history of our lives, but to that of our deaths.”¹ While René may not be the first to propose education for, or toward, death, this notion has particular poignancy in the context of his larger project on “education as destiny.” I also appreciate and share René’s belief in the educative potential of novels, movies, paintings, and other artistic forms to shape not just what we know, but who we become as people. However, I have a nagging concern about René’s conception of education as destiny. Specifically, I worry that education on this account could become such an all-consuming project of self-formation that it risks eclipsing our concern for, and responsibility to and for the other. In other words, I worry that his conception of “my education *as* my life,” could slide too easily into the kind of self-formation where, as Zygmunt Bauman puts it, the other becomes “the contradiction incarnate and the most awesome of stumbling-blocks on the self’s march to fulfillment.”² Of course, this is not a necessary outcome of René’s proposal—and it may simply be a question of emphasis—but I think the potential for a focus on one’s own self-formation at the expense of the other remains a risk, and I will say more about my concerns below.

Arcilla begins his paper by examining the overused term “lifelong learning” and what it has come to mean in schools, universities, and everyday life. As I read that section I was also reminded of Gert Biesta’s critique of what he calls the “learnification of education,” and the ways in which the language of learning has overtaken the language of education. In Biesta’s view—and I don’t think Arcilla would disagree with him on this point—we should reclaim education, taking a stand, as he says, against learning and for education.³ As both Arcilla and Biesta make clear, it’s not that learning isn’t important, but learning in and of itself cannot substitute for education insofar as education is concerned with the overall formation of human beings and humanity. Despite the prevalence of the discourse of learning, they argue, no amount of knowledge one can acquire, or list of credentials one can earn, or years one spends in school can be said to constitute an education. None of these things, or even their sum, as Arcilla puts it, can help us to answer the question, “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?”⁴ For Arcilla, education properly understood is all-encompassing; it is the living of one’s whole life and a way to give coherence to that life. He therefore does not discard the term ‘lifelong learning’ altogether, but rather seeks to radically reframe it.

As I pondered his idea of education as destiny, the work of Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor also came to mind, and, sure enough, Arcilla has engaged previously with Taylor’s work—most notably in his chapter titled, “For the Stranger in My Home: Self Knowledge, Cultural Recognition, and Philosophy of Education,” in Wendy Kohli’s edited volume, *Critical Conversations in Philosophy of Education*.⁵ While Taylor is primarily a political philosopher and does not spend much time explicitly addressing education, I think there are some resonances between what Arcilla is proposing in education as destiny and Taylor’s ideas about the self.

Central to Taylor’s work is the concept of authenticity: “There is a certain way of being human that is *my* way. I am called upon to live my life in this way, and not in imitation of anyone else’s life. But this notion gives a new importance to being true to myself. If I am not, I miss the point of my life; I

miss what being human is for *me*.⁶

I sense a similar commitment to at least a thin form of authenticity—to discovering the purpose of one's singular life—in Arcilla's conception of education as destiny. But an important difference between the two, and one of the features that appeals to me about Arcilla's conception over Taylor's, is Arcilla's insistence that the self that we discover along the path of our lives is not a substantive, stable kind of authentic self. As he puts it in the chapter in Kohli's book, "the most honest name we have for that thing"—i.e., the thing that answers the question, "Who am I?"—is an "indefinite mysterious self. This self has no positive features, and so cannot be judged to be 'authentically truer' than other 'fictive' identities we assume."⁷

That said—and this brings me to my niggling concern about Arcilla's argument for education as destiny—there is frequent mention in his essay of *my* education and *my* life, and almost none about an education in which the needs and desires of others are taken to be of at least equal, if not greater, importance than one's own. Take, for instance, the section where he says:

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 lyrical 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."⁸

For Carl Anders Säfström and Gert Biesta, on the other hand—and theirs is a view I share—education ought not to be so much about my affirming *my* life, but about "how we can respond responsibly to, and how we can live peacefully with what and with whom is other."⁹ On this Levinasian account, education is about investing our freedom in the freedom of the other, and the self that is being formed is a self that comes into being only in responding to the call of the other—a call from the outside, as it were.¹⁰

But it is precisely this kind of heteronomy that Arcilla rejects: "I worry,"

he writes, that conceiving of education as a calling “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 ... 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.”

As I said at the beginning, our point of departure may simply be a matter of different emphases, because, a bit further on, Arcilla says that “[e]ducation as destiny’ is meant to complete the sense of being called with the understanding that what is formative is what one does.” And indeed, in the kind of education that Säfström and Biesta commend, and with which I concur, what matters most is one’s response to the call of the other. But, I think the kind of “responsible response” I have in mind is different from what I read at that point in Arcilla’s paper, and throughout much of the discussion that follows on Pissarro’s painting, where he seems to shift to a spiritual register. Arcilla describes the calling as an encounter with grace, and one’s response as an affirmation “that one’s whole, mortal, historical life led up to this moment ... 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.”¹¹ My concern is that, taken fully to its end, education in this vein could too easily become all about me.

Unfortunately, I do not have space here to take up René’s thoughtful exploration of Pissarro’s painting, so I will have to leave that for another day. But, in closing, let me thank René again for his engaging essay and for his strong, steady, and caring leadership of the Society. I will leave the last word to him, quoting the final lines from his “Stranger in My Home” chapter. In a passage that, in my view, captures the best of PES, René invites us to:

appreciate philosophy less for its power to reach conclusions than for its power to unsettle presuppositions, less for its capacity to reduce differences to a single argument than for its capacity to use multiple perspectives to raise questions that put everybody, teacher, student, and surprised onlooker, at a loss for an answer. In the silence that ensues, we may then remember that before we are anything, we *are*, mysteriously

side by side.¹²

1 René Arcilla, "Education as Destiny," *Philosophy of Education* 2018, ed. Megan Laverty (Urbana-Champaign, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2019).

2 Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 84.

3 Gert J.J. Biesta, *Beyond Learning: Democratic Education for a Human Future* (London: Paradigm, 2006), 19-20.

4 Arcilla, "Education as Destiny."

5 René Arcilla, "For the Stranger in My Home: Self Knowledge, Cultural Recognition, and Philosophy of Education," in *Critical Conversations in Philosophy of Education*, ed. Wendy Kohli (New York: Routledge, 1995), 159-172.

6 Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 30.

7 Arcilla, "For the Stranger," 169.

8 Arcilla, "Education as Destiny."

9 Biesta, *Beyond Learning*, 15.

10 Emmanuel Levinas, *Outside the Subject* (London: Athlone Press, 1993), 125; Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981).

11 Arcilla, "Education as Destiny."

12 Arcilla, "For the Stranger," 171.