

## On the Experience of School Study

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In “A Case for Study: Agamben’s Critique of Scheffler’s Theory of Potentiality,” Tyson Edward Lewis give us a very rich and thoughtful essay. I like very much the idea of the question mark as an invitation for stupefaction and I especially appreciate the way in which he criticizes two main discourses that seem to structure our actual educational regime: (1) the attractive discourse on the fulfillment of each individual’s true potential, which we know in Europe as the “development of one’s talent” — maybe to be translated as capability in Israel Scheffler’s terms — and implying that everybody has her/his particular talent or talents and should have equal opportunities to develop them; and, (2) the equally attractive discourse of “learning.” To go, so to say, beyond “capability/talent” and beyond “learning” (to use Gert Biesta’s phrase) seems to me indeed of crucial importance if we want to maintain something which we call “public education” or even “the school” (that is, I believe, what Lewis refers to when he mentions the threads of neoliberal educational reform). Let me say that I take the school here not as the institution we have known ever since the nineteenth century, which in my view is one of the ways in which “school” has been tamed, but as being the democratic invention of a particular esthetic arrangement — understood as a materializing and spatializing of “free time” (of undetermined, uneconomic, unproductive time), the original meaning of the Greek *scholè* — which, by its very acts of separation, profanation, and disclosure disrupts the connection between a certain social position or background, some body and particular capacities, propensities or capabilities. And which, thus, offers an experience of potentiality, which indeed is itself not to be understood in terms of capacities, propensities, or capabilities. One could consider the invention of school to be the disruption of Plato’s fable of the metals, saying that some are born mixed with gold, others with silver and still others with iron, each therefore being especially fit for particular positions in the social order. Plato himself says it is indeed just a fable or fairy tale told to maintain the social order (I suspect that not on the level of “theory” but of discourse the tale of potential often sounds like a perfected version of the tale of the metals). The disruption operated by the school has to do with the school being a place for study (and exercise) and not primary for learning.

Going beyond learning and capability and making a case for “study” in order to make this move, Lewis blames Scheffler for not having room for the act of study and he turns to Giorgio Agamben to describe this act of study as an experience of I can/I cannot and as an experience of freedom. In this short response, I will limit myself to one main comment: I would say that Agamben, and subsequently Lewis, are in fact taking as a starting point a very particular kind of study (and therefore also a particular kind of experience), which we may call “philosophical study or the study of the researcher,” which is to be distinguished from what I would call “educational study or school study.”

Lewis describes the act of study both as an experience of I can/I cannot, related to being stupefied (silenced) by what has “struck,” and as an experience of freedom. I have to move too quickly, but Lewis refers to “an open-ended quest with an indeterminate success condition,” and to an experience of “a pain not unfamiliar to anyone who has undergone intense and concentrated research — without clear direction, without clear methodology, without an end in sight.” Citing Agamben, Lewis refers to “Those who are acquainted with long hours spent roaming among books, when every fragment, every codex, every initial encounter seems to open a new path, immediately left aside at the next encounter ...”

Indeed what is described here as the experience of study is the experience of the solitary researcher/philosopher going through the library (in the literal and figurative sense), attracted by the dark. And maybe students today are indeed required, at least to a certain extent, to be “researchers,” but I think that thereby Lewis misses or forgets the experience of the school student. Moreover, he does not give an adequate account of the particularity of the experience of freedom in the classroom. The classroom used to be rather different from the library. It is not a piling up of books and objects, but just the contrary. It seems that the basic classroom, the classroom reduced to its essence, has simply a blackboard, some desks and chairs, and blank walls, but it contains also a teacher and a group of students. And this is indeed what it is about. The particular space of the classroom and the particular activity of the teacher before a group of students allow, when this arrangement works, (1) for something to become not only known but *present* (which means that it starts to address us), and (2) for an experience of potentiality. However, this experience is not the philosophical and abstract I can/I cannot, but the experience of *I can begin with something*. The weight of the context, the weight of the past, the weight of the projected future, which all define what I can, are for a moment suspended, and that is the magic of school study as event. The basic experience is not bewilderment and stupefaction, although there is a silence, but the silence is the silence of the beginning where nothing is decided yet. It is, therefore, the silencing of everything that, until then and according to the social or psychological order, defined who I am or what I can.

As Lewis writes with regard to study, “success conditions are held in suspension indefinitely,” there is no clear direction. However, while there is no clear direction, this may be different from the kind of suspension that is characteristic of the school form of study, where the suspension of the destination goes together with a profanation of something that is actively disconnected from its normal use. What happens in the school (when it is a school and not a “learning environment”) is, to use Hannah Arendt’s phrase, that something is “put on the table” (by the teacher), that is, its economy is suspended (the objectives and normal practices in which it finds its usual place and function). And this putting on the table is a double act: something is freed/disconnected from its normal usage and offered to students saying “this is interesting,” but simultaneously its destination is left undefined. School brings something (words, numbers, practices, things) into play and, thus something is given out of hands, it is put on the table as such (as valuable in itself)

and made into an object of public study. School contains the acts of separation, profanation, and making attentive in which the teacher plays a crucial role (besides the school architecture and technology), and precisely these acts are also the condition for “students” to appear, for the I to be disconnected or de-centered, being addressed as being able to begin with what is on the table. In this context, the experience of being able is the experience of being able to begin with: the issue in the classroom is not about being able or not being able as such, but about beginning or not beginning with the exercises. What the school does is suspend the weight of the social or psychological order — which attributes capacities and capabilities to particular positions and connects them with particular bodies — by getting us interested, drawing us out of our selves and into the world: “I would like to know that or be able to do that; it is possible to begin with it,” “I want to be able” and, accordingly, I have to study and exercise. The school constantly recalls: “I am not unable.” This potentiality is not attached to the individual body or to any body, but is the efficacy of the specific esthetic arrangement and practice of school education. This experience of “not being unable” in school is the experience not of a hypothetical imperative (something you have to do related to conditions or aims) or of a categorical imperative (something you have to do because of a pure will), but a pedagogical imperative (go ahead, try, look again, just start).

Therefore, I doubt whether the invitation of the school to study is a question mark that stupefies. It is maybe more about making something present and making attentive so that something can start not only to be better known, but to become alive, to become interesting. In that sense, the invitation is more related to putting something on the table and attracting us to the table, and thus it is related to the pedagogical imperative: look, go ahead, see here, try again. It might be rather the invitation of the “underscore,” which isolates, puts something on itself, disconnects it. Having said this, I am not sure whether my remarks are themselves a question mark or an underscore, whether what we are doing here is philosophy or education, or philosophy of education, or philosophy as education, but in a certain way, the setting and arrangement we are in here and now at the moment that I address you has also something of a school setting, of free time and public study. That the setting exists seems at least to have invited me to begin with trying to make some remarks.