

Education as the Hidden and Incomplete Resistance

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INTRODUCTION

A core ideal of education is to help illuminate certain truths of the world for the student. Educative truths for students do not only represent the packets of formalistic knowledge and information of certain subject areas. Rather, educative truths are also—and arguably more fundamentally—that which “contribute to perspective and understanding in orienting thought and action.”¹ In this sense, learning is intrinsically an existential enterprise, where the effectiveness of both learning and teaching is significantly contingent upon the selectively preconceived *meaning* of the curriculum to both students and teachers. Knowledge contents of the curriculum are not simply cognitively downloaded in their entirety as much as interpretively *oriented to*, based on the predeterminations of what the student finds meaningfully relevant to their identities and actions in the world. The condition of truths being effectively educative, therefore, demands the existential situation of students to be fundamentally involved and addressed as part of the curriculum. That is, given that the situation of the student and their learning are significantly existential, and that such existential dimensions considerably inform what and how they learn, it would follow that an important *ideal* of education would be to ensure that students experience learning certain truths and knowledge as meaningful.

My aim in this paper is to elaborate upon the specific and necessary existential situation to which this educational ideal (in sustaining the meaningful learning and curriculum) manifests—particularly in the context of the teacher-student relationship. My discussion is largely informed by philosopher John Russon’s account of dialectical phenomenology in addressing our existential situation as constituted by a perpetual “hermeneutical pressure.”² This hermeneutical pressure occurs during the mutual confrontation between a self-consciousness that recognizes the equal existential weight of other self-consciousnesses. And that such recognition harbours a pressure that compels a reconciliation between different self-consciousness as somehow all constitutive as a “center of desires”

and its experienced worlds—such that the process towards reconciliation is the meaningful self. Such an account is illuminating for educational discourse, as the relational situation between the teacher and student is often propelled (or hindered) by this very “pressure” to reconcile the power differentials of centers of desires and the existential worlds that stand in between them.

Through the Russonian discourse, I argue that the educative ideal is manifested and sustained through the “educational hermeneutical pressure.” This pressure reveals an intrinsic existential situation of contradictions within the commitments of both teachers and students. It is through sustaining this very contradiction, and therefore, the *pressure* to resolve it, that I present the normative argument for a necessary existential situation that allows the educative ideal to manifest. My argument will consist of four parts. First, I elaborate on Russon’s account of hermeneutical pressure and its role in facilitating the emergence of the meaningful self, actions, and desires in the world. Second, I present an account of the teacher and student as intrinsically constituted by an existential contradiction. Third, I provide a normative account of why such contradictions should be sustained to fulfill the educative ideal for the meaningful learning process. Fourth, I conclude by summarizing the main premises of my argument.

THE HERMENEUTICAL PRESSURE TOWARDS THE MEANINGFUL SELF

The self and its meaningful actions and desires do not emerge from a vacuum.³ Rather, our actions and desires carry a fundamental intersubjective history that plays itself out in the world, regardless if they are expressed socially or solitarily.⁴ These actions and desires are the expressions of foundational structures of certain existential answers that help confine and anchor otherwise unlimited possibilities of the world down to a graspable specificity.⁵ For the presence of unlimited possibilities is the absence of any possibilities for the self. Without specific and limited possibilities, the world does not emerge as meaningful and fails to pull us into purposive actions and desires—therefore, the world fails to emerge at all for us.⁶ The process by which such unlimited possibilities are confined to a meaningful specificity is not an individual choice

per se, as much as a continuous involvement in an intersubjective situation that directs us into a specificity.

We cannot simply will ourselves into meaningful actions and desires by ourselves existentially. Rather, possibilities become specified for us through our immersion in the history of shared habits and rituals with others. The habits and rituals carry our actions and desires into a specific orientation to the world. This specific orientation then sustains a world that pulls our habits and rituals *into it*. For many, a fundamental instance of this intersubjective initiation into shared habits and rituals occurs within the family. As Russon writes, “It is our family—our group of familiars—that first defines for us where we fit into intersubjective relations and, consequently, what will count as the values by which ‘we’ must approach the world, by which we must contact reality.”⁷⁷ It is through such intersubjective initiation that the self emerges as independent in its experienced actions and desires. That is, *shared* habits and rituals represent enacted specific relations to the world such that the self emerges in proportional specificity as an independent agentic center of actions and desires. Therefore, the experienced independence of the self is born from its very dependence on the culture of those around her. For Russon, “the new member becomes an independent person precisely through the process of becoming habituated to a series of intelligent actions, the intelligence of which is not explicitly self-conscious to her.”⁷⁸

My discussion on the phenomenological emergence of the self, however, does not mean to imply some linear trajectory of development *per se*. Rather, the emergence of the independent self is carried out *dialectically* insofar as the intersubjective situation compels a dialectical involvement as *hermeneutical pressure*. The hermeneutical pressure represents a pressure to reconcile the inherent contradiction that defines and facilitates our intersubjective situation. That is, on the one hand, the social others represent the source of the possibility of our experienced independence, yet, on the other hand, our independence confronts these others as competitively threatening other centers of desires and actions. The others are experienced as a threat because the confrontation of *other centers* of desires and actions contradicts the very reality of one’s centrism to which the world comes to be defined and lived in. Russon states,

Each begins as a desiring self, which means it begins as the immediate sense of its own importance in that it automatically construes whatever it encounters as “for it.” In encountering the other desiring self... each encounters another that resists this definition by the first self as “for it” and insists, on the contrary, that the first is “for it” instead.⁹

Directly put, others represent both the necessity for and threat against one’s independent meaning.

The contradiction pressures one into a hermeneutical cause tending towards a more existentially sustainable interpretation of the other, self, and the relations between them. That is, the intersubjective situation is sustainable insofar as the others are affirmed in their necessity yet mitigated in the risks of their overpowering center in overshadowing one’s center. Without the reconciliation of this contradiction, the unsustainable intersubjective situation manifests as what Hegel acknowledged to be a “struggle to the death”¹⁰ of the master-slave relation; that is fueled by the mutual need “to win the recognition from the other that she is the real center of the world.”¹¹ The hermeneutical pressure, in this sense, becomes expressed as the process of the self to remain vigilantly heedful of its own intersubjective situation to ensure that it becomes and remains sustainable.

The heedfulness comes in the form of what Russon discusses as a “self-interrogating” process where one’s way of orienting to the world are questioned and reviewed in its capacity to be existentially sustainable.¹² Because the independent self is formed by its dependence upon the shared cultures and rituals of predetermined traditions, self-interrogation is essentially an act of interrogating one’s tradition. Interrogating the tradition, then, means to not merely be its unreflective expression, but to stand outside of it (and therefore, one’s self) in perpetual evaluation. It is by standing outside of traditions that we can start to see how we are living interpretively in them and how such interpretations inform sustainable or unsustainable existential ways of being. As Russon puts it, “It is by interrogating our traditions that we find out who we have been as hermeneutical agents.”¹³ By recognizing our hermeneutical agency as situated within our traditions, we come to realize our power to reinterpret ourselves

and our traditions for the sake of avoiding their unsustainable manifestations

The hermeneutical pressure of our existential contradiction compels us to stand evaluatively outside of ourselves and our traditions, to recognize the traditions within us and vice versa, and to question and reinterpret them to ensure that they genuinely sustain us existentially. In other words, the pressure compels an independent agency of the self that comes to know itself and the power of *interpretive choice* intrinsic within that agency. It is this condition of knowing oneself and deriving interpretive power that represents the meaningful self. The emergence of the meaningful self, then, reflects a perpetual dialectical dance whereby one conforms to traditions only to compel an interrogation *towards a renewed conformity* and so forth. The meaningful self, then, is precisely the in-between process of the dialectical pursuit to address the existential contradiction. As Russon aptly writes, “What we are is the privileged location for the occurring of this self-interpretation, the space of dialectic.”¹⁴

The meaningful self is the dialectical positioning between specific existential possibilities and the resistance against that very specificity. In other words, I discuss the meaningful self as the very oscillating *movement* between embracing predetermined traditions and the interrogative distance away from those traditions in illuminating other possibilities as freedom. Therefore, the meaningful self is neither the predetermination nor the full freedom, but the very process that dances continuously between the two. In this sense, then, the meaningful learning process is the educative situation to which this dance is *brought forth and sustained*. Now that I have discussed the existential emergence of the meaningful self, we can transition into elaborating how such a process occurs as educational situations and relationships.

STUDENT AS CONTRADICTION

The role of the student does not begin as a commitment that is chosen by her. That is, the student is initiated into the school environment with all of its predetermined educational traditions without her consent or deliberation. Russon writes, “to the child growing up, all such institutionalized, customary behavior can only be taken up as rituals, that is, as demands for compliance that do not first present their own justification.”¹⁵ In other words, the student starts

her role before it comes to be a commitment. For a commitment to something requires the *chosen negation* of commitments to something else.

The student, however, gradually starts to awaken to her role as an explicit commitment by virtue of her very initiation into and conformity to the predetermined educational traditions. Namely, the expectations of school and the relationships with teachers enact a portrayal of what a student ought to be, and in an important sense, who *she personally ought to be* through such a role. The student learns important values in how to interact with peers and authorities such that these values provide the scope of judgement wherein her sense of self can emerge as an independent object of interrogation, and therefore, as a known independence.¹⁶ The self-interrogation of the student reveals her situation as a role amongst other roles, rather than as an inherent given fact of the world. In other words, the freedom to be (and not to be) a student is gradually illuminated through the very process of acting as a student. It is in this sense that the student recognizes her role also as an outcome of chosen commitment.

In the act of committing to the role of the student, one already demonstrates hermeneutical agency in the choice of negating other commitments. Yet the agency of the student is at the same time nullified by the very role of the student. That is, the agency to commit does not necessarily grant the freedom to choose another commitment in its place of being the student by direct implication. For the role of the student is also to be involved in the declaration of its own necessity through its connections to its defining educational traditions and relationships.¹⁷ In other words, to be a student is to already be caught up in the notion that it is *indeed necessary to be one*. Being a student in the institution of school is not commonly associated to be an ultimate end as much as a temporary means towards some other good.¹⁸ In this sense, a pressure of necessity of commitment is built into the role of the student insofar as schooling notably involves the concerns of cultivating the maturity of moral and civic agency. That is, education involves (or at least is known to involve) the concerns of ensuring that students are equipped with adequate knowledge and capacity to make *good choices* in their lives. It is debatable what such goods are and what knowledge and capacity are required to inform such good choices, yet it is difficult to regard education as fundamentally opposed or indifferent *to* the concerns of ensuring

such mature agency in students *as one of its ideals*.

Through such consideration, the choice to abandon the role of the student, then, would essentially be negated in its status as a choice by virtue of enacting such a choice *as a student*. To choose to stop being a student, in other words, would also mean to withdraw from the cultivating path to which agency of choice can be maturely exercised in the first place. The student, viewed in this light, is cornered into a conundrum of contradiction. On the one hand, the act of commitment to be a student already speaks to one's hermeneutical power in recognizing other possibilities and roles so as to negate them. Yet, on the other, the very commitment as a student already negates the choice for abandoning the role as legitimate in the first place. If only the choice to commit to the role is legitimate, then its commitment (by virtue of the logic of the role) is no longer an act of choice but an outcome of an imperative deemed by education. In other words, to choose something without any other legitimate options is to negate such an act to be a choice at all.

The contradiction of the student is that their role negates the very agency that sustains its commitment. Phenomenologically, the very reality of the centers of desires and actions for the student to committedly be a student becomes contradicted by the centers of the traditions of education that define her role as a student. The student is in a situation where she *cannot win* in her Hegelian struggle as the ultimate center of reality. Her initiation into education realizes the possibility for a hermeneutical agency which becomes the very target of negation by virtue of her involvement in education. It is through this contradiction that the role of the student is carried by an intrinsic hermeneutical pressure towards self-interrogation, and therefore interrogation of the traditions of education itself.

As previously discussed, the intersubjective situation carries an intrinsic hermeneutical pressure for the resolution of its contradiction. Yet, for the student, the contradiction is not only intrinsic to its role, but it is also inescapably *irresolvable* because of its status as a *necessary* commitment. The student cannot fundamentally effect a radical reinterpretation of her role and position within the institution where her role stands as the ultimate authoritative center of desires and actions. She may voice her perspectives and concerns and be successful in

advocating for certain changes in pedagogy and educative relationships, but she will fundamentally remain *a student* that conforms to the general expectations of her school and teachers which, in turn, circularly necessitate her commitment.¹⁹ As such, the student is cornered into a perpetual contradiction where radical reinterpretation cannot occur despite the availability of her hermeneutical agency, and it is precisely her agency *as a student* that the radical reinterpretation of herself becomes impossible.

The irresolvable contradiction of the student also essentially means that the hermeneutical pressure for the interrogation of the self and her educative traditions *never ceases*. The student is perpetually carried by a hermeneutical pressure insofar as her role is intrinsically contradictory. What this essentially means is that the student harbours an intrinsic interrogative resistance against her student role and the educative traditions that legitimize such a role. This interrogative resistance is not an added element of the exceptionally rebellious student. Instead, it is the existential fact to being a student. However, the perpetual hermeneutical pressure for an irresolvable contradiction is not a problem warranting elimination *per se*. Rather, I argue that the contradictory situation represents the very educative opportunity and reality in which the ideal for meaningful learning can manifest. I will now elaborate upon this in the next section.

INTERROGATIVE RESISTANCE AS HIDDEN AND INCOMPLETE

If the independent and meaningful self is the “privileged location”²⁰ of the process of resolving the intersubjective contradiction, the meaningful educative situation is one that preserves this very privilege. Namely, a meaningful educative situation must pedagogically engage with the student *as a contradiction* so as to sustain the hermeneutical pressure necessary for her interrogative resistance. The hermeneutical pressure is the fuel that facilitates the student in becoming cognizant of herself as a hermeneutical agent capable of reinterpretation towards her independent freedom. The educational importance of the hermeneutical pressure does not necessarily lie in its completion in resolving the contradiction. Rather, its educative condition lies in the allowance of its continuation as the student-teacher relationship. That is, interrogative resistance from the student *is* the exercise, and therefore, the manifestation of her

meaningful independence and agency. The realization of the meaningful agency of the student, in this sense, is the continual acting out of the interrogation from hermeneutical pressure insofar as the agentic self is situated in the act. As Russon writes, “Our freedom...will be found in the self-critique engaged in by the founding hermeneutical power itself...Our freedom is something we will always find occurring in us and as us.”²¹

This does not mean, however, that independent agency is present insofar as there is the act of its expression without any reciprocated outcome of its attempt at reinterpretation and resistance. For the confronted futility of resistance is also the deprivation of the power of hermeneutical agency for the student. The student cannot experience her reality as meaningful if her expressions of her center of desire and actions are completely denied in their significance. Yet, at the same time, this does not imply that the educative relationship should be one that infinitely invites hermeneutical agency towards radical reinterpretation without any restrictions from the teacher. Rather, I believe that the educative relationship through hermeneutical pressure is made possible by ensuring that interrogative resistance is both *hidden and incomplete*. It is hidden in the sense that interrogation is not overtly and openly invited as part of the educative relationship, and it is incomplete insofar as interrogative resistance does *not* resolve the contradiction that fuels the hermeneutical pressure. This is the case because the phenomenological situation for hermeneutical agency demands a dialectical exchange. For it is the *tension* between traditions and the resistance against this tension that constitutes the emergence and reality of the independent meaningful self at all.

The independent meaningfulness of the self is not a static and inherent fact of the world as much as an ongoing dialectical process. That is, the self is the tension between the traditions that inform its specific portrayal (and therefore, how to orient oneself in the world) *and* the resistance against such portrayal towards a perpetual renewal of one’s portrait. If the self is the “space of the dialectic,”²² the educative condition for meaningful agency becomes one that necessitates the preservation and (in certain ways) the imposition of traditions and, therefore, the authority of traditions. Yet, the dialectical demand for agency also necessitates the space to which the very resistance against such authority is

accommodated as a reality. This phenomenological situation puts the teacher at a particular position where they must ensure both the tradition and its resistance are present in order to fulfill the educative ideal for meaningful learning.

In essence, the situation of the dialectical demand *compels a structure of authority* as the foundation for the educative relationship. That is, the teacher should be positioned as the educational center of traditions that come to definitively portray how the student ought to act and be. However, the teacher's authority does not mean an open denial of the interrogative resistance of the student. Instead, the dialectical demand for the educative ideal positions the teacher as the one who should allow resistance *covertly*. The teacher's role is to sustain the necessary cover of authority so as to stimulate the hermeneutical pressure for an interrogative agency within the student. In other words, the dialectical situation compels the institution of the authority of the teacher as an imperative. For, without such authority, students come to lack a fundamental source of traditions that specify who they are and how they ought to act. Without such existential specificity, the student lacks the scope of values that allows her hermeneutical power to meaningfully manifest as an interrogative agency.

The covert nature of allowing resistance is warranted because the open and infinite invitation of resistance negates the presence of authority that stimulates the pressure for resistance in the first place. If, however, the allowance for resistance is attempted to be openly integrated with imposing authority for some ideal of a middle path, the inherent contradiction between them would only result in a mutual negation that (once again) removes necessary authority for the dialectical process. In other words, the authority of the teacher stands as a binary condition, where a "semi-authority" on the fundamental level is simply no authority at all. Negotiating and equal exchanges can occur in the relationship, yet this is not mutually exclusive from the authoritative position of the teacher. For such relational situations do not mean that the student can then freely reinterpret herself as the role that directs the teachers as *the convention*.²³ Essentially, the allowance for resistance must not present as a contradictory force in manners that negate the structure of authority in the relationship. It is through this consideration that compels the allowance for resistance to only exist covertly such that authority will avoid its open negation.

The covert allowance of the teacher, by extension, implies that the interrogative resistance of the student remains incomplete in resolving the contradiction. If the authority of the teacher is maintained in its necessary cover, then the pressure to resist such authority will always be maintained, and therefore, the contradiction will remain unresolved. If the interrogative resistance completely eliminates the presence of any intersubjective contradiction, then the space of the dialectic no longer dynamically moves through a hermeneutical pressure towards a meaningful agency. Yet, the incompleteness of interrogative resistance does not point to the fact of it being a futile act. Rather, the resistance of the student should be sustained by a continuous pursuit for its completion insofar as the teacher *preserves the possibilities* of such resistance without negating their own authority. This, then, leads back to the necessity of the teacher as ensuring that the allowance of resistance is done so covertly.

Essentially, the fact of the hermeneutical pressure being educative does not rest in permanently resolving the contradiction. Instead, its educative value rests in stimulating a *way of being* that never stops in acting towards its resolution despite the fact that its completion is never truly certain in reality. It is to maintain the momentum of the dialectic because its movement *is* the hermeneutical agency towards a meaningful self, which both embraces the tradition and watchfully interrogates itself in the moments of embracement. The educative existential situation, ultimately, is brought forth when the teacher-student relationship neither denies nor resolves the contradiction. The teacher must, in some artful way, *be* the target of resistance while covertly inviting such dispositions as educatively ideal. The student, by implication, should interrogate herself and the traditions around her in ways that do not and cannot radically reinvent education and her role towards a final rested resolution.

CONCLUSION

Through my discussion, I have elaborated the educative existential situation of the teacher-student relationship. Essentially, it is the space to which the dialectical dance between traditions and the resistance against them is sustained as the very movement, and therefore, the *reality for the meaningful self*. In the educational reality between the teacher and student, it means to see

the contradictory situation of the student not as a problem that should be dismissed or a step towards its ultimate resolution. Rather, it is to understand resistance as intrinsic to the role of the student as well as to the facilitation of their meaningful learning and agency. Through Russonian insights, the educational answer to the struggle with the restrictions of one's freedom and power (should a student ever explicitly confront such a struggle) does not lie in the removal or dismissal of such restrictions as much as the artful use of its pressure to stimulate meaningful learning and self-formation.

1 Emily Robertson, "The Epistemic Aims of Education," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Education*, ed. Harvey Siegel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

2 John Russon, *Reading Hegel's Phenomenology* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004), 85. I use John Russon because his discussion of dialectical phenomenology has a significant emphasis on the notion of intersubjectivity. In particular, Russon roots the Hegelian *Geist* or *Spirit* within the framework of embodied intersubjective space that allows for the agency of self-consciousness. His emphasis on embodied intersubjectivity, then, can be a useful foundation from which the teacher-student relationship is examined, particularly in its potential educative condition in cultivating agency and meaningful learning in the student.

3 The notion of the meaningful self is not defined specifically at the outset because this section is itself an attempt to discuss its phenomenological situation. As such, the direct discussion of the nature of the meaningful self is situated in the last paragraph, which follows as a conclusion to my attempt at its phenomenological elaboration.

4 The intersubjective history here is the existential fact of our orientation to the world, where how we orient ourselves to the world is informed by the shared habits of the culture we are initiated into as part of growing up. As Russon states, "The habits we develop for figuring our contact are our habits of establishing that we are someone." John Russon, *Human Experience: Philosophy, Neurosis, and the Elements of Everyday Life* (Albany, NY: State University of

New York Press, 2003), 79.

5 For instance, Anthony Giddens states that performing the most basic tasks of life “demands the bracketing of a potentially infinite range of possibilities open to the individual.” See *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 37-38.

6 See Matthew Ratcliffe, “The Phenomenology of Mood and the Meaning of Life” in *Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Emotion*, ed. Peter Goldie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

7 Russon, *Human Experience*, 65.

8 Russon, *Human Experience*, 71.

9 Russon, *Reading Hegel's Phenomenology*, 88.

10 G.W. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 113-114.

11 Russon, *Reading Hegel's Phenomenology*, 72.

12 Russon, 93.

13 Russon, 94.

14 Russon, 95.

15 Russon, *Human Experience*, 70.

16 Schools as institutions, Russon argues, “educate each of us into who each of us is, which means they teach us what there is, how to behave...they articulate for us the parameters of our human world” and that “it is only by embracing these customs and their implicit narratives that we develop the ability to look for justification.” See Russon, *Reading Hegel's Phenomenology*, 175.

17 I mostly refer to students in K-12, where attendance and commitment to be a student is conventionally acknowledged to be more mandatory than going to post-secondary institutions.

18 John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916), 239. I do not mean that education and learning are only preparatory in their functions where the Deweyan ideal of “education is life itself” is not possible. Rather, I mean that the formal staying in the institution of school itself is not commonly regarded as the ultimate goal(s) for living *in itself*.

19 Although radical resistance and alteration to the educational traditions and

authority are possible, its possibilities do not necessarily represent common conditions for the institution as much as exceptional circumstances.

20 Russon, *Reading Hegel's Phenomenology*, 95.

21 Russon, 95.

22 Russon, 95.

23 Although this is certainly possible, its possibility does not equate to its conventional status insofar as it is *more* conventional for teachers to give directives to students rather than the other way around.