

Toward an Ontological Account of the Student: An Educational Reading of Giorgio Agamben's *The Adventure*

Joris Vlieghe

KU Leuven

Piotr Zamojski

Polish Naval Academy

“Let’s have an adventure!” This seems to be a rather common commercial slogan today, in times of “adventure tourism” and adventure parks industry. Indeed, a quick dive into the Internet results in finding a whole bunch of slogans like “Adventures are waiting for you!,” “Let’s make today an adventure kind of day!,” or “Venture down a new path to find your new adventure.” Associating “adventure” with entertainment appears to be a popular way we use this concept. It is associated with excitement and unexpectedness. Simultaneously it refers to a “smooth” experience: it is designed by someone to keep us safely entertained. It involves a surprise, but a planned one. It is an excitement of the unknown, but this unknown is expected and safe. Next to this first meaning of “adventure,” there is a second and comparably common understanding of the concept. On this second conception, adventure is opposed to plan, and, hence, it is conceived of as a disruption, distortion, or interference that requires additional effort to be overcome or that ruins our intentions entirely. We wish things had gone smoothly as planned, but instead “we had an adventure.”

Strange as it may sound, these two meanings both can be traced back to the heritage of modernity with its stress on control over ourselves and the world. The idea that one can (and should) plan one’s life was unintelligible in the premodern world of direct socialization (in other words, when the social and political position of an individual was fully determined by birth). Today we ask preschool children about who they want to become in the future, seeing the task of planning and controlling their own lives as the most urgent and crucial. Indeed, we plan our lives in detail, including our holidays, during which we often take advantage of the adventure industry. We plan to be excited by a designed and safe surprise, but when things do not go as planned, we seem to be

disturbed. We reject the adventure and make an effort to avoid it in the future.

In his recent book *The Adventure* Giorgio Agamben suggests that we have lost the sense of adventure, because these modern conceptualizations of the idea “run the risk of obstructing our access to the original meaning of the term.”¹ These modern conceptions are responsible for “an obscuration and devaluation of adventure” (*Adv.*, 43), turning it into a trivial form of sentimental escapism: childish made-up stories completely unrelated to reality and the demands of life. In this sense, adventure fiction is everywhere today. But the overabundance of superheroes, dragons, mutants, and so on actually steers us away from adventuring, Agamben would argue. Hence, he makes the case for the original meaning of “adventure” as it appears in medieval chivalry literature, where it refers to the really unexpected: adventure appears suddenly, requires a response, and transforms the protagonist in a profound and unexpected way. Adventure, Agamben argues, is a matter of anthropogenesis (*Adv.*, 81). We argue that, as such, it is also an *educational* phenomenon, even if a long-forgotten one, the appearance of which is effectively erased or suppressed by the currently dominant educational imaginary.

Adventure is increasingly dismissed in educational contexts because of the predominant discourses of learnification and managerism.² It is impossible to reconcile adventuring in its original sense with the idea that education is a production process, or, in other words, a technical endeavor that could and should be designed and managed in a way that leads to achieving particular learning outcomes efficiently. There is nothing unexpected in the production of learning outcomes. There is no anthropogenetic transformation in equipping pupils with predefined functional qualities.

In this essay, we seek to follow Agamben’s reconstruction of the genuine sense of adventure in order to consider it as a fundamental concept for education. We claim that Agamben offers a vocabulary and an existential grammar that allows for the articulation of an ontological account of the figure of the studier and the practices of study. This makes possible an understanding of education completely different from the dominant managerial frame of reference.

TAKING UP AND BEING CARRIED

The background against which Agamben develops his own theory of adventure is a set of five short poems that Johann Wolfgang von Goethe wrote in 1817, inspired by the ancient cult of Orphism and the five *Urworte* (the most basic words): – ‘*Daimon* (guiding spirit), ‘*Tyche* (chance), ‘*Eros* (love), ‘*Ananke* (inevitability), and ‘*Elpis* (hope). According to this cult, these are the main forces that give shape to every human life. Departing from Goethe’s poetic rendering of these five figures as archetypes that characterize the five different stages of life, Agamben puts them at work to sketch an existential-ontological analysis of what leading a human life is all about. These five figures are the names of five forces that we all have to face. We constitute our existences in response to them. Every concrete life, then, can, be thought of as adventure, or, in other words, a unique life story that consists of dealing with these five existential dimensions. In view of this, the bulk of Agamben’s book, which consists of his discussion of the figure of the medieval knight as a historical, cultural, and literary figure, is first and foremost meant as an ontological account of what it means to be a human being: we become who we are thanks to our involvement in a particular kind of story. Briefly put, such a narrative ontological account of subjectivity reveals that our lives are always torn between contingency and necessity and that the challenge of a meaningful existence—and—and, we would add, an *educational* existence—is to be found in sustaining contingency, so as to live it as necessity: “Tyche is not only chance; no matter how contradictory this may seem to us, she is also destiny and necessity” (*Adv.*, 17).

Given this strong (but not articulated) Heideggerian undertone of his book, it is not surprising that Agamben relates his ideas to the work on adventure by one of Heidegger’s students, Oskar Becker. Becker gives an aesthetic account of adventure and swaps the knight for the artist. Issuing from an ontological analysis of being an artist, he argues, contrary to his tutor, that the most fundamental existential mood (*Stimmung*) should not be rendered as being-thrown in the world (*Geworfenheit*), but as being-carried (*Getragensein*). The artistic life has a certain lightness and sense of security to it: creating an oeuvre is not a matter of firstly conceiving what the artwork should look like

and secondly taking up the risky task to carry this plan out faultlessly. Instead, it is a matter of giving oneself over to a process that guides the artist to bring the task at hand to a good result: “the work gives itself to him [sic] and carries him until its completion” (*Adv.*, 57). However, Agamben only follows Becker to a certain extent. In the end, Becker’s account seems completely to miss the point of what the medieval idea of adventure involved, as it runs the risk of coming with a full “aestheticization” of adventure and hence of life itself (*Adv.*, 57). The *weightlessness* of the artistic life-experience as Beckers depicts it could not be further removed from the one of the adventurous life of the medieval knight, “in which what orients us is . . . the situation to which we are consigned or the task we need to assume” (*Adv.*, 56). Again, what characterizes adventure is a chance encounter with something that crosses our life’s path and that gains a compelling character—a *weighty task we cannot escape to fulfill*. Contingency and necessity are one.

Another source of inspiration for Agamben is Georg Simmel’s study of adventure, which expresses a similar paradoxical idea: “The most general form of adventure is its dropping out of the continuity of life” (quoted in *Adv.*, 47). At the same time, genuine adventure is always “felt as a whole, as an integrated unit [and it] connects with the character and destiny of the bearer of that life in the widest sense, transcending, by a mysterious necessity, life’s more narrowly rational aspects” (quoted in *Adv.*, 48-49). A life is adventurous because of an encounter with something unpredicted, and thus adventure is predicated upon the discontinuity of life. Simultaneously, however, adventure also bestows upon this life a consistency and a unity. Hence, what at first appears to have *only* an eventful—in other words, temporary and disruptive—character has in fact *also* the force to turn life into a greater and steady whole. As a result, adventure stands opposed to the modern and degenerated concept of adventure (an innocent trip or a childish pursuit) because within this view the venturesome things that happen to us remain radically exterior: they are mere *external* occurrences (outlandish happenings) that have nothing to do with life per se. The events encountered in a genuine adventure, on the contrary, are fully *internal* to it. What occurs is not lived as something “strange,” but as something

that despite its contingency feels like the inevitable orientation of our life story.

Not without reason, Simmel claims, love often plays a crucial role in the medieval knight literature. On the one hand, when we fall in love, this always happens in an entirely contingent manner, but, on the other hand, when we stay true to the moment of falling in love, this event begins to characterize our life journey in an almost obligatory manner. Love is thus ambiguous: we stand in both active and passive relationships to it. We have to conquer the heart of the beloved one, and at the same time we must open ourselves to the moment of pure grace, of givenness. This points to yet another ambiguity that typifies adventure.

THE STORY

Adventure means both what has happened and the very story that recounts this happening. Narration and the life of the knight are one: “the adventure does not precede the story as a chronological event but remains inseparable from it from the beginning” (*Adv.*, 30). In this sense, the adventure is “poetological”: it performs what and while it recounts. Put differently, there are no knights without the stories of their adventures, and there are no stories without the events that happen to the knights. These events become an adventure *only* through the story. Thus—although at first it seems difficult to fathom—adventure is both what happens to us as well as a story holding memory together, and as such forming an identity. One cannot separate the two: the event and the story do not exist on their own.

This becomes clear from the fact that adventure *itself* “appears in the middle of the story” (*Adv.*, 40). Agamben points here to the radical unpredictability of adventure as an interruption in the course of the story. One cannot expect adventure and be prepared for it. One cannot see it coming, precisely because *it is not* before the middle of the story. It does not stem from the preceding events; it cannot be deduced or expected. It intrudes the course of events. It does not fit in either with the beginning of the story or with the endings stories usually have: “it happens (*avviene*) instantaneously and we do not know where it comes from” (*Adv.*, 67). Ultimately, Agamben argues, it “remains a

‘time stolen’ from the process of events that constitute our existence” (*Adv.*, 53). Moreover, phenomenologically speaking, it demands that the adventurer “[tries] to tell his adventure” (*Adv.*, 69), to share the incredible that has happened: “You won’t believe it!”

However, telling a story is a creative act. Hence, “the event at stake in adventure is nothing more than anthropogenesis . . . the moment when . . . the living being separates his life from his language only to rearticulate them” (*Adv.*, 81-82). Adventure is about being born (again).

THE EVENT AND INSTAURATION

By now it has hopefully become clear that adventure is not simply “that what happens” (*Adv.*, 65). To develop this idea, Agamben also elucidates adventure with the help of the Heideggerian notion of *Ereignis* (event). ‘*Er-eigen-en*’ literally means that we have to make something that occurs into part of our self, of our own (*eigen*) life. In other words, what matters is that what happens in fact happens to us, or, even more accurately put,

[what happens] must be desired and loved by the one to whom it occurs, because he first and foremost sees in what occurs the adventure that involves him and that he must recognize, in order to live up to it. . . . Desiring the event simply means feeling it as one’s own, venturing into it, that is, fully meeting its challenge, but without the need for something like a decision. It is only in this way that the event which as such does not depend on us, becomes an adventure; it becomes ours, or, rather, we become its subjects. (*Adv.*, 71)

What happens to us becomes an adventure when we take the existential challenge to assume and continue with this event as rendering life coherent and meaningful. In this sense, adventure cannot be grasped with the categories of the modern understanding of the autonomous and self-possessed rational subject (for example, as in full charge over the meaning of existence). As Agamben suggests himself, this view is close to the definition that Gilles Deleuze gives of the ethical life: “not to be unworthy of what happens to us.”²³

This attitude is not the Stoic call for impassivity as we encounter it in the work of Marcus Aurelius, where that what happens remains utterly external to the subject. For Marcus Aurelius it is an ethical imperative to keep distance from what occurs.⁴ If not, we become unhappy. For similar reasons, adventure should also be carefully distinguished from the (again, only seemingly identical) Nietzschean call for “*amor fati*,” as in the end true life for Nietzsche is a pure affirmation of the will that wills itself (*ad infinitum*).⁵

What Agamben is describing, however, is a highly qualified form of affirmation: an attitude toward the world and ourselves that positively takes up the coming event and hence makes *Ananke* (necessity) and *Tyche* (chance) coincide in the story of our life: “Adventure is in fact fully identified with life, not only because it affects and transfigures the whole existence [of the adventurer] but also and above all because it transforms the subject himself, regenerating him as a new creature (who is conventionally called a ‘knight’, but has nothing to do with the homonymous social figure)” (*Adv.*, 53-54). Having an adventure means, therefore, opening our existences to the possibility of deep transformation and the promise of an altogether different future.

Thus, adventure is an unforeseeable rupture in the course of things, a rupture that one takes up actively, giving shape to a life that is marked by this event. Although Agamben does not make this reference himself, this view bears a close parallel with what Etienne Souriau, in his work on the ontology of art, calls “instauration.”⁶ Souriau wants to oppose a simplistic modern account of the artist being in total control of the artwork she creates, because, for Souriau, the artist is as much shaped by the artwork as the work is produced by the artist. The artist constitutes herself while constituting the oeuvre, up to the point that the distinctions get so fuzzy that the artist is (also) the “hostage” of the work to be carried out:

Should we say that Dante used the experiences of his exile in the *Divine Comedy*, or that it was the *Divine Comedy* that needed Dante’s exile? When Wagner becomes enamored of Mathilde, is it not *Tristan* that needs Wagner to be in love? . . . All the great works grasp the man [sic] in his entirety, and the man is

no longer anything but the servant of the work, that monster in need of nourishment. Scientifically speaking, we can speak of a veritable parasitism of the work with respect to the man.⁷

Agamben similarly writes, “the subject does not really preexist the adventure. . . .He instead derives from it, almost as if it were the adventure that subjectivized itself” (*Adv.*, 78). There is, therefore, always a risk involved—a double risk, to be more exact. Firstly, there is the obvious danger of a kind of self-loss (which feels especially threatening to the modern subject obsessed with self-control). It involves fear of the transformation of the self, of becoming anew.

But, secondly, adventure also confronts us with a final lack of ground that could justify why that what happens to us is meaningful. In this regard, Agamben also elucidates that the Grail (the mysterious cup that forms an archetypical motif in medieval chivalric literature) is actually an entirely empty signifier. The Grail does not mean something specific, and it was only later interpreted as the vessel containing the blood of Christ and a symbol of eternal youth. Furthermore, the Grail succeeds in setting the story in motion precisely because it represents nothing. Put differently, the adventure has no deeper or pre-existing ground, and yet it makes all the difference that we take it up. Something else completely could have happened to us. The work of instauration always comes with a leap into this deep contingency.

Thus, there is also the risk that we just turn our back on what happens to us. It is at this point that three of the *Urworte* we have not discussed so far play a pivotal role: *Daimon*, *Eros*, and *Elpis*. First, *Daimon* is often interpreted as an innate force that from birth guides us and determines who we are (like a horoscopic sign). This, however, should not be confounded with simple determinism. Agamben returns near the end of his book to the artist, and more exactly the poet, to claim that the demon is above all a call to remain faithful:

[R]emaining faithful to one’s demon does not in fact mean blindly abandoning oneself to him and being confident that he will in any case lead us to success. . . . Poetry and happiness are not his gifts; rather the demon himself is the ultimate gift

that happiness and poetry award us at the point where they regenerate us and gives us new birth. (*Adv.*, 86)

This comes close to Spinoza's idea that "blessedness is not the reward of virtue, but virtue itself."⁸ Joy is not the result of virtue, as per the traditional Aristotelian account of the good life. Instead, it is the joyful life that falls together with a good life. It is only by taking a joyful attitude to what happens to us that we can gain a meaningful life. What is demanded here is taking a particular care for oneself in an instaurative sense: meaning only happens to our life story if we already give a particular meaningful shape to our existences in relation to the adventurous event that marks us.

Finding one's *daimon*—this is what is at stake in adventuring. Giving ourselves over to and taking up the adventure requires a particular *Stimmung*, a mood of being-carried (*Getragensein*), which points eventually to the next *Urwort*—love (*eros*). *Eros* is "the name of the regenerating potency that, beyond us, gives life to the demon" (*Adv.*, 88). As noted above, love inevitably involves a form of self-abandonment. So, adventure always points to the last *Urwort*—hope (*elpis*). This is not hope in the sense of an awaited precise view of a (better) future, the expectancy of which justifies our present life choices. Adventure, as we said, is predicated upon the acceptance of indispensable contingency. Therefore, the hope at stake here is a presentist hope, a hope that demands that we give up hope as a future-oriented concept. In Agamben's words,

This is the ultimate meaning of the myth of Pandora. The fact that hope, as the final gift, remains in the box means that it does not expect its factual accomplishment in the world—not because it postpones its fulfillment to an invisible beyond but because it has always already been satisfied. (*Adv.*, 90)

STUDY AS ADVENTURE: A DAIMONIC PRACTICE OF INSTAURATION

We want to argue that the life of the student, ontologically speaking, can be clarified in a narrative way in terms of adventure as conceptualized by Agamben. The studier is not a learner, nor an entrepreneur, because for these

two figures what happens to them remains utterly external and does not transform an existing life. The thing that is being learned is merely an object with instrumental value. Mathematics, woodcraft, music, and so on are only processed in view of obtaining credit points or as an investment toward a productive and successful life. The life stories of learners and entrepreneurs do not allow for self-loss and assume the certainty that at the end of the journey something of great value will be gained. This value that the learner or entrepreneur has in mind then serves as a firm ground. Contingency disappears.

We claim that the true studier *is* an adventurer. More exactly, the grammar of studying and that of adventuring coincide. When we truly study, we must be prepared for things to happen to us that are fundamentally unexpected because the thing to which we devote a studious life takes us in directions we cannot predict: it puts demands on us that run their own course. For example, as students of mathematics, we simply cannot know beforehand where this adventure will take us. We deliver ourselves fully to the challenges that come upon our path. We concede to what mathematics demands from us. Moreover, similar to what happens when we fall in love, when we are gripped, for example, by a not-yet proven theorem, there is no real ground to it. We can easily imagine a life in which we would never have encountered the beautiful and complex world of, say, geometry (and where we would have developed a studious interest in something else). And yet, once we are called upon to study something, it matters to commit oneself fully to it, as it makes all the difference to our lives that we engage with it and care for it—and not something else. The begin-point of study is indeed *Tyche*, but it is of great importance that it becomes a matter of *Ananke* and that it becomes “our own” (*Er-eignis*) so that we are truly and fundamentally transformed.

All this, however, demands a never-ending work on ourselves: to affirm the event, despite its contingency. This work bears the characteristics of what Souriau calls “instauration.” We need to give up full self-control (the hallmark of modern, unadventurous subjectivity) so as to give ourselves over to a process in which we are as much formed by the thing of study as we are in command of what happens. This thing then gets a sort of “daimonic” insistence over

us; we must be open to the fact that it steers us. To follow the “Daimon,” we need to take an affirmative and joyful stance in life and be willing to be beguiled by the thing so that it might make our life into a meaningful one. Study is impossible to conceive of without the ambivalent (both active and passive) power of *Eros* as well as a particular mood of *Getragensein*. This, finally, is dependent on *Elpis*, hope in the present. Even though we have no idea what is ahead on our life journey (as opposed to the existence of the learner and the entrepreneur), we live our lives in an affirmative key and so initiate hope by simply adopting what happens to us as something that is good and welcome and that can make a genuine difference.⁹ Hope is not in the future but radically here and now. Hope coincides, so to speak, with displaying studious care and interest for math, wood, music, and so on. In sum, students are indeed those who, after a chance encounter with something, start leading a life in which they are “not . . . unworthy of what happens to [them]” (in Deleuze’s words quoted earlier). Being a student is, fundamentally, a life experience in which, from the inside-out, a life is self-constituted, not on the basis of a strong and willful decision about a desired future but in sync with a love for things in the world that we contingently encounter and that places a daimonic demand on us. This requires a radically immanent hopefulness. Ontologically speaking, studying is essentially adventuring.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

A question remains: Are we willing to accept an education that is disturbing and that involves the danger of being irreversibly changed? Naturally, a person can always reject adventure and not respond to what happens to her/him. It is difficult to abandon oneself and be carried by the adventure, to break the bonds given by the original birth and to be born again. Today, the dominant ways of understanding education are far removed from such an ontological stance. Equipping students with functionalities desired by the job market or the global knowledge economy as well as understanding education in terms of creating safe spaces for securing students’ needs are both assume radical certainty regarding who a student is and how she should organize and control her life. In the first case, this certainty is determined by the economy, in the second, by the given

(economic, political, ideological) status quo, which is assumed to determine the propensities of a subject as a matter of natural or innate necessity (as if these needs were not a construct themselves). There seems to be very little room in our current educational imaginary for open-endedness and the unpredictability of being carried by the adventure. Maybe it is high time to acknowledge that education is not about particular outcomes but about experiencing adventure and being born again.

REFERENCES

- 1 Giorgio Agamben, *The Adventure*, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2018), 43. This work will be cited as *Adv.* in the text for all subsequent references. Throughout this essay, we choose to follow Agamben and write consistently about “adventure” without an article so as to stress its ontological character.
- 2 On learnification, see Gert J.J. Biesta, *Good Education in an Age of Measurement: Ethics, Politics, Democracy* (London: Paradigm Publishers, 2010). On managerism, see Michael W. Apple, “Education, Markets, and an Audit Culture,” *Critical Quarterly* 47, no. 1-2 (2005): 11-29. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0011-1562.2005.00611.x>
- 3 Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 149.
- 4 Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. Gregory Hays (New York: The Modern Library, 2002), Book V, 19.
- 5 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
- 6 Etienne Souriau, *The Different Modes of Existence* (Minneapolis, MN: Univocal Publishing, 2015).
- 7 Souriau, *The Different Modes of Existence*, 235.
- 8 Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. Matthew J. Kisner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 249.

9 Of course, in their lives the entrepreneur and the learner are also confronted with unexpected occurrences, but the fact is that these are immediately given a clear and unambiguous sense, for example, as a “learning opportunity” or as a “temporary setback.” What happens here does not fundamentally alter the course of life.