

Estelle Jorgensen's Vision of "Transformation"

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In a most intriguing essay, Estelle Jorgensen takes up the topic of "transformation" and ponders its meaning in the context of education. I find the essay well-written and a pleasure to reflect upon. To me, the topic is provocative, and indeed, I have taken it up myself.¹ So I wish to begin by thanking the author for her careful efforts to clarify the meaning of an interesting and complex term that is important in the field of education.

Yet, in reading, I found myself bothered by the fact that nowhere in the essay does Jorgensen seem to offer us an example of educational transformation. While she mentions a number that do not fulfill certain criteria, I saw no case of one that cuts the mustard.² Without an example, it is difficult to assess the value of her "dialectical" vision of transformation. Hence, I set about the task of trying to account for the dearth of examples. In what follows, then, I will argue the following claims: (1) Examples of educational transformation are lacking because Jorgensen's vision of transformation is based upon a model of explanation that excludes all candidates; (2) the model's failing arises from an ambiguity therein; and (3) Hans-Georg Gadamer's idea of "transformation" may be useful for helping us to identify examples of educational transformation. At least I want to offer it for discussion.

JORGENSEN'S VISION OF TRANSFORMATION

Jorgensen tells us that she has a "dialectical" conception of transformation. She writes:

Various elements and perspectives are in tension with each other, one or another coming to the fore at a particular time and place as actors might move about on the stage. Among these dialectics, transformation occurs from the outside in and from the inside out provoked by internal willingness to change and external pressure to change.

When the author says, "Various elements and perspectives are in tension with each other, one or another coming to the fore at a particular time and place as actors might move about on the stage," she seems to envision transformation like a drama in which "perspectives" or viewpoints are shoved center stage (or back stage) at different times. Hence, the values and purposes that guide the action at some moments are replaced by others at other times. The perspective changes, that is, a transformation occurs, because there are "external pressures" — pressures from without the drama that declare the present perspective inadequate. In addition, there is an "internal willingness to change," meaning perhaps, a recognition from within that change is needed. Let us see if we can become clearer about the nature of those "external pressures" and the "internal willingness to change."

First, the "external pressures." Jorgensen writes:

While there are limits to the degree to which an analogy with the physical world may be pressed, a social system's evolution may...reflect the impact of physical and human catastrophes, and the particular political, economic, religious, artistic, and other policies that shape social and cultural environments in which it exists.

When the author mentions "physical and human catastrophes, [and] particular political, economic, religious, artistic, and other policies," she may be referring to some of the "external pressures" that she has in mind. Perhaps she means, for example, that a governmental policy which grants vouchers to all parents and thereby permits them a choice of schools for their children may exert pressure on schools to change in ways that make them more appealing. Perhaps the policy will move schools to focus exclusively on some aspects of the curriculum, such as math and science, and redesign the entire program for students as a consequence. The policy, then, may be an example of an "external pressure" that helps to bring about "transformation" of schools.

Now let us consider what Jorgensen might mean by the "internal willingness to change." She continues the above quotation, saying:

This evolutionary quality suggests that transformation is profoundly internal not only to the social system taken as a whole but to the particular individuals who comprise it...the transformation of a social system... involves...a deep and abiding commitment to different shared purposes and a real change of heart and mind on their part.

When the author says that the individuals in a system undergoing transformation have "a deep and abiding commitment to different shared purposes," she may mean that the actors in the drama choose to adopt another perspective and hence, change their goals and purposes. Further, their choice is not transitory but rather one that is held over a long period of time.

POINT OF AMBIGUITY IN THE "DIALECTICAL" VISION

Now, here we come to the point of ambiguity that clouds the vision of "transformation" presented thus far. On the one hand, Jorgensen speaks of its "evolutionary" nature. At the same time, she tells us that transformation of a social system "involves a commitment to different shared purposes," which sounds as if the commitment must be intentional — something that the actors are aware of and work to achieve. Now, evolutionary change, at least as depicted by Darwin, is not the consequence of intention or will. Indeed, as the historian of science, Robert J. Richards argues, Darwin's account of evolution "flowed from his desire to distinguish his new conception from...the presumptive Lamarckian device of conscious will effort."³ Darwin's mechanism of evolution is natural selection, and natural selection is not based upon will or intention. To see that this is the case, let us consider an example of natural selection that Darwin offers in *The Origin of Species* (originally published in 1872):

We shall best understand the probable course of natural selection by taking the case of a country undergoing some slight physical change, for instance, of climate. The proportional numbers of its inhabitants will almost immediately undergo a change, and some species will probably become extinct...We may conclude...that any change in the numerical proportion of the inhabitants, independently of the change of climate, would seriously affect the others. [Hence], slight modifications, which in any way favored the individuals of any species by better adapting them to their altered conditions, would tend to be preserved.⁴

When Darwin says that, "any change in the numerical proportion of the inhabitants, independently of the change of climate, would seriously affect the others," he may mean that change in the number of members with certain features will modify the number of those who lack these features, because they will be displaced by those who

have adapted. Change in even a minor characteristic of one species, which better suits it to survive in the altered environment, then, will affect all the species therein, that is, the change will cause some to be selected for, as those who have made it will reproduce.

Now, in Darwin's conception of natural selection, the role of will seems to play no part. That is, the species that survive are not those who intend to do so, nor do they intend to acquire certain features. On the contrary, those populations that become dominant — those whose numbers increase over generations until they displace all the other populations — are those whose features best equip them to survive in the altered environment. The presence or absence of the adaptive features is sufficient to determine survival, regardless of the inhabitants' wills or their interest in surviving.

If the evolutionary model cannot explain a change that results from the will to change, is it the right model to explain educational transformation? Or, is the concept of will dispensable, so that the evolutionary model will suffice? I am not sure how Jorgensen would answer the question. But it seems that answer it she must, because the mechanism of will appears to be incompatible with that of natural selection, which is, after all, the mechanism of evolution. Which will she have?⁵

Perhaps, then, Jorgensen offers us no examples of educational transformation because in juxtaposing the mechanisms of natural selection and will as a basis for her "dialectical" view, she rules out all the examples. For if the candidates are to be explained by an evolutionary perspective in which change is guided by will, as she proposes, and that perspective is a conceptual conundrum, then it will describe no instances.

GADAMER'S VISION OF TRANSFORMATION

Just for fun, I am going to go out on a limb and consider an alternative vision of transformation, one that I take from Gadamer. In *Truth and Method*, he speaks of the "transformation" of reality into art.⁶ Here, he gives a more limited but perhaps useful definition of the term "transformation." He writes,

Transformation is not change, even a change that is especially far-reaching. A change always means that what is changed also remains the same and is held on to. However totally it may change, something changes in it. In terms of categories, all change (alloiosis) belongs to the sphere of quality, that is, an accident of substance. But transformation means that something is suddenly and as a whole something else, that this other transformed thing that it has become is its true being, in comparison with which its earlier being is nothing.... There cannot be any transition of gradual change leading from one to the other, as the one is the denial of the other.⁷

Now, Gadamer's definition of the term "transformation" seems to have the following features. First, when he says that transformation "is not change," he seems to mean that nothing which existed in the pre-transformed state is altered after the transformation has occurred. Hence, a painting of water lilies, which might be said to "transform" the lilies as they are seen floating on a pond, does not change the lilies.⁸ The painting is, "suddenly and as a whole something else," something other than the lilies. Second, when Gadamer continues saying, "this other transformed thing is its true being, in comparison with which its earlier being is nothing," he may

mean that the transformation puts the “true being” or essence of the object into view. Hence, Renoir’s paintings of water lilies transform them by depicting their essence as an instance of beauty. When we look at Renoir’s paintings, we see the beauty of the flowers; when we observe the flowers in the pond, we see flowers, one of whose characteristics may be that they are beautiful. Finally, when Gadamer says, “There cannot be any transition of gradual change leading from one [state] to the other, as the one is the denial of the other,” he seems to mean that transformation cannot come about as the result of evolution. For the mechanism of evolution is natural selection, and natural selection occurs gradually, over many generations: those best adapted to the environment survive and reproduce, so that over time, the environment becomes populated with a new, better adapted group of individuals. In the case of transition from reality to art, the work of art replaces reality all at once, in that it depicts its essence, while the reality that it transforms depicts nothing.

Now, under Gadamer’s definition, transformed states are works of art. The mechanism of transformation cannot be evolution. Could it be will? It does not sound like it, for Gadamer writes the following:

If, now, in a particular case, a meaningful whole completes and fulfills itself in reality, such that no lines of meaning scatter in the void, then this reality is itself like a drama. Equally, someone who is able to see the whole of reality as a closed circle of meaning, in which everything is fulfilled, will speak of the comedy and tragedy of life. In these cases, in which reality is understood as a play, there emerges what reality of play is, which we call the play of art.... The world of the work of art, in which play expresses itself fully in the unity of its course, is in fact a wholly transformed world. By means of it, everyone recognizes that that is how things are.⁹

Like Jorgensen, Gadamer speaks of a drama. The drama comes into being not through evolution or the will of the actors but by virtue of the “meaningful whole” that the drama itself reveals. Perhaps, then, it is what Gadamer calls “the reality of the play” that creates the transformation (the drama, the work of art). Similarly, it is beauty that creates Renoir’s painting of water lilies; it is the tragic in life that creates Shakespeare’s *King Lear*; it is the power of the sea that creates Ravel’s *La Mer*; it is fear that creates Hitchcock’s *The Birds*. Here, the artist or creator is moved not by his or her own will and desires but the truth that he or she finds in situations — a truth which transforms the creations into works of art, thereby revealing itself.

CONCLUSION

Using Gadamer’s vision, one might argue that Plato’s *Republic* offers an example of educational transformation, as does Rousseau’s *Emile*, and Dewey’s *Democracy and Education*. In each case, the text is a work of art in Gadamer’s sense, that is, it raises up truth about an aspect of reality — in this case, the nature of education rather than an object in nature, like water lilies. To see the truths, the reader must gaze upon the texts, just as the viewer must gaze upon Renoir’s paintings. As with all objects of art, the “gazing” involves asking the texts about their meanings, that is, questioning them. As the questioning proceeds, and the texts begin to speak, offering ideas about the answers to the questions, they begin to reveal their truths.

For example, with respect to Plato’s *Republic*, if we ask whether Socrates and Thrasymachus agree that what is just in a particular case depends upon the situation,

we may look at the text and wonder why Socrates says that children must hear only “fine” stories — ones that reveal truths.¹⁰ Does Socrates make the claim because such tales reveal truths that exist, regardless of particular situations? Because, in his view, children cannot learn the difference between just and unjust acts until they grasp what justice is and can use that knowledge to interpret particular instances that they encounter?

Here, then, may be an example of a truth about education that Plato’s *Republic* reveals to the questioning reader. One might say that the *Republic*, as a work of art, transforms education into a vision. Furthermore, a reader of the text may become transformed in Gadamer’s sense — may become someone new, and someone who knows reality more truly, by gazing upon, that is, questioning the text and listening to it speak. For such a reader may indeed begin to view the purposes of education, the nature of learning, the role of the teacher and the relation between schooling and society in new and truer ways. Indeed, he or she may embark differently upon the course of becoming educated or helping others to do so, having read Plato’s *Republic*.

For purposes of discussion, then, I offer Gadamer’s view of transformation for consideration. It has the advantage of allowing us to pick out examples to educational transformation, and perhaps, although I have not yet done so, to exclude some candidates.¹¹ It may succeed because it does not depend upon a model of explanation that admits no examples.

1. See Sophie Haroutunian-Gordon, *Turning the Soul: Teaching Through Conversation in the High School* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

2. She mentions modifications in schools proposed by Mortimer Adler, Roland Barth, Elliot Eisner, John Goodlad, and Ted Sizer (see Jorgensen’s fn. 2).

3. Robert J. Richards, *Darwin and the Emergence of Evolutionary Theories of Mind and Behavior* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 94.

4. Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species* (New York: The Everyman Library), 64-65.

5. Jorgensen argues that “Imagination constitutes a central mechanism by which transformation works,” under her dialectical vision. The claim suggests that will, rather than natural selection, may be fundamental to her model of explanation. But is she willing to suspend the evolutionary model?

6. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2d ed., trans. Sheed and Ward, Ltd. (New York: The Crossword Publishing Company, 1985).

7. *Ibid.*, 100.

8. Note: One’s vision of the lilies in the pond may change after one looks at Renoir’s paintings of them. However, paintings are not created out of the lilies themselves, as a garment is created out of cloth. Gadamer might say that a piece of cloth is changed when it is made into a coat, as many aspects of the material (its color, texture, weight) remain the same after it becomes a coat. The lilies on the water however, are transformed by Renoir’s paintings of them, for nothing of the lilies is present in the work of art.

9. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 101-2.

10. Plato, *The Republic* (New York: Vintage Classics, 1991), 377b.

11. I have not reviewed examples of the latter. Perhaps the topic will arise in discussion. I suggest that textbooks on how to teach — how to manage the classroom, how to develop curriculum, how to evaluate students, might be suitable to consider.