

The Potentiality of *Studios* Adventure

Tyson E. Lewis

University of North Texas

In my co-authored book *Rethinking Philosophy for Children: Agamben and Education as Pure Means*, Igor Jasinski and I argue that the theory of adventure advocated by Agamben is essential for thinking about an educational practice beyond learning.¹ In particular, our book is an attempt to reconceptualize the practice of community of inquiry found in philosophy for children using Agamben's insights into concepts such as the demand, rules, love, happiness, anarchy, and adventure. Whereas learning concerns orienting students toward predetermined outcomes set in advance by the teacher, true adventure is open and experimental. Stated differently, learning conceptualizes education as a means to an end, whereas adventurous education is a means released from an end. When on an adventure, one does not know where one is going or how to get there. It is unclear how to assess progress or regress. This state of adventure is a state of study rather than of learning, for study is an educational form of life that is indifferent to ends. Also of educational importance is Agamben's insight that one cannot separate the speaking or telling of the adventure from the advent of the adventure. Drawing on definitions offered by Jacob Grimm, Agamben points out how "it is not always easy to distinguish between the event and its transposition into words."² The adventure, in this sense, does not precede the telling of it, and for this reason, "life and language merge."³ For Jasinski and I, education becomes adventurous when speaking and thinking coincide through community of inquiry practice. Speech is not simply a report of what has been thought (learned previously). Rather, speech announces the act of thinking, and thinking announces the act of speaking. This is an adventurous moment, often marked by phrases such as, "I am not sure this makes sense, but I am going to think out loud..." In such cases, children feel the adventure of speaking their thinking and thinking their capacity for speaking without guarantees. In such moments, they risk themselves in the adventure.

Vlieghe and Zamojski further this line of inquiry, providing a clear and detailed educational interpretation of Agamben's short but potent book *The*

Adventure.⁴ They begin by providing a critique of the modern understanding of adventure, which has exchanged the original meaning of the term for cheap escapism through a culture industry fueled by “adventure”-themed holidays, films, and media. Missing here is a sense of the medieval origin of adventure as an experience of the unexpected that transforms the protagonist. Vlieghe and Zamojski find in this original notion of adventure a form of education that stands in stark contrast to current understandings of education as learning and management of experience through planning and assessment. When undergoing an adventure, the protagonist experiences an existential mood of “being-carried” or giving one’s self over to a process that exceeds one’s intentions and aims, interrupts the continuity of one’s life, and comes to give one’s life a certain sense of purposiveness and unity. The educational risk of adventure is precisely that one might lose one’s self in being carried away by the event of the adventure. There is no necessary meaning to what happens during this event; instead, there is the existential injunction to make meaning out of what occurs and tell the tale. Thus, the adventure is just as much the event as it is the telling, as the adventure is meaningless in and of itself without a narrative framework. Through an adventure, the certainty and instrumental value of education as a learning enterprise are overturned for a more contingent and uncertain practice of self-loss through the encounter with unexpected events that demand a narrativization.

This line of argument resonates strongly with similar proposals made by Jasinski and me. Indeed, I agree with Vlieghe and Zamojski’s central claim: that the adventurous time of study is essential for rethinking what counts as education today. Having said that, I will conclude with a question for the authors that might help differentiate adventure in general from *studious* adventure. In my work with Jasinski, we argue that the real adventure of study happens when students suddenly *feel* the gesture of thinking in their speaking and speaking in their thinking. In such moments, something strange emerges that is between what is thought (content) and what is said (form): this is the power of speakability or the *potentiality* to speak. For children, this often emerges in moments when their attention turns away from the particular question at hand toward the surprising

advent of speaking. When students turn toward the question of speakability, the studious adventure begins. Importantly, the speakability of the adventure is, for Agamben, “neither merely linguistic nor merely factual; according to an ancient source, it is in between thought and the thing, speech and the world.”⁵⁵ For Vlieghe and Zamojski, the adventure of education turns us toward the world. Their example of educational adventure focuses on mathematics and how the studier can fall in love with the “complex world of, say, geometry.” They emphasize how studying is a call to be carried away by “something” and how there is a demand to commit one’s self to that something (and not to something else). In sum, studying is an adventure that is “in sync with a love for things in the world” that are contingently encountered. Yet I would argue that there is a distinction between falling in love with the thing of geometry (and the world of mathematics) and with the potentiality that reveals itself in the moment of studying a thing.

This might seem like an academic point, but there are educational implications here. Whereas Vlieghe and Zamojski argue that adventure produces love of something in the world, Agamben would argue that studious adventure produces love for the potentiality for there to be anything at all in the world (including the miracle of speech itself). This is neither a world-centered nor a thing-centered education, as Vlieghe and Zamojski might argue, so much as a potentiality-centered education. If we remain world-centered or thing-centered, there is a danger that language will once again become a mere instrument to convey knowledge about the world or love toward a thing in the world and that potentiality will once again exhaust itself in the things of the world.

Think of Agamben himself as a studier. I would argue that the expansive and sprawling list of themes and topics he writes about demonstrates that the adventure of his thinking is not found in his love of this particular world or of these specific things. Instead, he is caught up in the sudden and unexpected appearance of the potentiality that emerges in each and every study. Unlike Vlieghe and Zamojski, who argue that studying is a demand to commit one’s self to *something* and not to something else, Agamben’s own body of work seems to embody an educational ethic of “I would prefer not” to commit to

this over that. He is not the ardent geometry professor who professes his love for the subject by staying faithful to it. Instead, he wanders this way and that way, drifting through various topics, crossing disciplinary distinctions, sometimes recursively returning to certain concepts (while abruptly abandoning others) but, more often than not, engaging in a vast adventure beyond any given thing. But “preferring not to” does not mean that Agamben is simply irresolute. Instead, the demand to which he responds emerges from potentiality as such, which is not specific to this or that thing. We can also think of the Neoplatonic philosopher Damascius who, for Agamben, studied philosophical first principles to the point where he discovered nothing more than the potentiality to think. Or, finally, we can turn to Bartleby the Scrivener who, at least in Agamben’s reading, can be considered “the most exemplary embodiment of study,” who is not reborn by the act of studying (as Vlieghe and Zamojski suggest) but rather prefers to remain *unborn* in the risky moment of potentiality (which is equal parts potentiality to become a subject and impotentiality to *not* become a subject).⁶ In short, my concern is that a thing-centered or world-centered approach might end up sacrificing the very adventure that the authors hope to promote precisely because they have turned toward an emphasis on commitment to the world (and its things) and away from a *studious* adventure with the potentiality that resides between thought and world.

REFERENCES

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5 Agamben, *The Adventure*, 70.

6 Giorgio Agamben, *Idea of Prose*, trans. Michael Sullivan and Sam Whitsitt (New York: SUNY Press, 1995), 65.