

A Case for Study: Agamben's Critique of Scheffler's Theory of Potentiality

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MYTHS OF POTENTIALITY

As a teacher of educational philosophy, I often have my students write their personal philosophical reflections on teaching and learning. This assignment helps frame the course in terms of personal beliefs, goals, and key concepts. When I read over the first draft of these statements, I am often shocked by how they are peppered with clichés and educational slogans picked up here or there and then internalized as some sort of educational wisdom. One predominant cliché often goes something like this: “I want my students to fulfill their true potentials as learners and ultimately as productive members of society.” On first blush, who could doubt the sincerity and the commonsense validity of such a claim?

Here it is important to return to the work of Israel Scheffler, whose book *Of Human Potential: An Essay in the Philosophy of Education* helps clarify the issue of potentiality in relation to education. Right off, Scheffler is critical of several common myths of potentiality — myths often articulated in my undergraduate philosophy of education courses. Scheffler writes, “In no case is potential a metaphysical essence governing the predetermined direction of the subject's development, nor is it a durable feature intrinsic to the subject.”¹ In other words, potential is not a special nature that is fixed and predetermined. Potentiality can develop into alternative potentials, change directions, or simply multiply depending on environment, context, and experiences. Another important myth that Scheffler rebukes is that *all* of one's potentials should be fulfilled. Lacking here is the need to distinguish different kinds of potentials which, at best, may lack the coherent harmony of a unified set of potentialities or, at worst, might lead to outright contradictions. Finally, Scheffler is leery of the myth of “uniformly valuable potentials” (*HP*, 15), which denies the simple observation that, according to specific contexts, all humans have the potentiality for both “good” and “evil.”

Once the ground has been cleared, Scheffler proceeds to present three interrelated yet relatively autonomous forms of potentiality: capacity, propensity, and capability. Scheffler's reconstructive analysis provides a rich insight into the relation between potentiality and education. Nevertheless, Scheffler's argument is lacking in one important respect. A key assumption of the book is an underlying ontology of action that is teleological. Subjects organize their activities according to intentional content in order to achieve specific goals. In other words, representations of success conditions enable the subjects to accomplish their purposes. In short, Scheffler argues that “human nature” involves “desire, intention, purpose” (*HP*, 34). Potentiality within this threefold structure is potentiality to become or to do.

In the rest of this essay, I want to complicate this picture somewhat by turning attention to Giorgio Agamben's theory of potentiality. For Agamben, potentiality is

not simply a positive capacity, propensity, or capability to achieve specific goals through specific courses of action. Rather, potentiality is always already accompanied by an equally primordial impotentiality. More often than not, philosophers have glossed over impotential with dire consequences. Below I will flesh out my cursory introduction to Scheffler's work, pinpointing where exactly Agamben would agree and disagree. Focusing on Scheffler's theory of capability, I will then argue that for Agamben, potentiality as a capability to become is also a capability not to become, which safeguards the particular freedom of human beings. Finally, I will draw some conclusions from this argument for education, highlighting what happens when the teleological notion of human nature organized in terms of desires, intentions, and purposes obscures the more fragile, contingent, and precious capacity that is also an incapacity: our impotentiality. In particular I will suggest that Scheffler's theory does not allow us to fully understand the peculiar freedom found in the act of study, and, in marginalizing the question of impotentiality, dips dangerously close to supporting the fundamental ontological assumptions of neoliberal school reform.

SCHEFFLER AND THREE DIMENSIONS OF POTENTIALITY

As mentioned above, Scheffler divides potential into three mutually supportive dimensions. First, Scheffler distinguishes potentiality as *capacity* to acquire x, y, or z. The study of potentiality as capacity in turn takes on a very specific significance. Instead of a search for a fixed capacity, the analysis of potentiality turns toward those factors which block progressive acquisition. Stated differently, one has a capacity when one does not face certain impediments obstructing learning. As Scheffler summarizes, the study of potentiality concerns "conditions that block learning, prevent development, necessitate failure to attain some designated outcome" (HP, 49). The educator's role in turn is the negation of the negation — that is, the strategic removal of obstacles. For Scheffler, educators play this decisive role during "critical periods" of development in a child's life where blockages to certain stimuli prevent the development of language acquisition or motor skills, for example. Although capacity is an important dimension of potentiality, not all of human potential can be reduced to or confused with it.

Next, Scheffler argues for potentiality as *propensity*. Attributing to someone a capacity simply means that the acquisition of x, y, or z cannot be ruled out. Given the right circumstances we all have an equal capacity to learn to speak, to think, and to act. Yet sometimes the attribution of potentiality is stronger than mere capacity. To have a propensity means that a subject *will* acquire some trait, skill, or disposition given the right circumstances. Scheffler refers to propensity as a kind of "conditional prediction: *if* he has the chance *and* his choice is not constrained, he is likely to swim" (HP, 52). Stated differently, a propensity is not a certainty but rather a *likelihood*, assuming, of course, that there are no external contingencies that interrupt the choice of the individual.

Finally, Scheffler turns his attention to potentiality as *capability*. A capability is even stronger than a propensity for x, y, or z. When someone has a capability, he or she "can be generally *relied on* to perform properly under these conditions, *if* he chooses to" (HP, 58). The subject can be relied on because the proper skills and

knowledge have been acquired to perform a specific task. Furthermore, the subject's skill acquisition is accompanied by "the internalization of standards of a certain sort of performance," (HP, 84) which enables the subject to become self-regulating and directing. Capability is conceptualized as the "capability to become" (HP, 85). As such, the agent embodies freedom through the choice to become x, y, or z, subject according to a specific desire, intention, or purpose. The role of the educator here is to "empower him [the student] to perform" (HP, 85). If the student has a capability, then empowerment includes enabling the student to choose to perform the capability by promoting permissive conditions. The skillful artist, chess player, or surgeon, for example, all have a capability that enables them to be who they are and to freely make the choice to exhibit their skillful being in the world without reserve. And we can count on their general success because they have internalized a normative representation constituting success conditions. Thus, the second part of the proposed definition emphasizes choice. Here the educator should encourage the student to value his or her capability and thus create the optimal conditions necessary for the student to *want* to realize his or her potential in the form of an action. This step is crucial for Scheffler because choice bridges capacity with the "freedom of action" (HP, 59). The picture that emerges is one of a relatively autonomous agent who has the confidence in the "growing sense of what *he* can do and the proper conditions presupposed by such doing" (HP, 84).

In sum, Scheffler argues that these three dimensions of potentiality are not only compatible but also mutually supportive. Synthesizing the three into one coherent model, potentiality as a whole becomes the interrelation between "the *enabling* of learning [capacity], the *development* of learning [propensity], and *self-development*, or the *empowering* of learning [capability]" (HP, 65). Working together both diachronically and synchronically, the three dimensions of potentiality ideally lead to increased freedom, which for Scheffler, as for Dewey, is the self-aware and self-reflective control over the direction of one's future experiences.

It is at this point in the analysis that I want to turn to Agamben, and in particular, his theory of the co-originary relationship between potentiality and impotentiality. While Scheffler provides an excellent overview of the question of potentiality, he neglects the constituting role of impotentiality in his model. This distinction between Agamben and Scheffler becomes increasingly clear in relation to capability, which, in order to save space, I will now focus on exclusively.

AGAMBEN AND THE ROLE OF IMPOTENTIALITY

Agamben begins his reflections on potentiality with a simple question: what does "I can, I cannot" mean?² Beginning with Aristotle's *De anima*, Agamben argues that the experience of "I can, I cannot" is itself the experience of the *paradox* of potentiality which is simultaneously a capability and an incapability. In fact, the "originary figure of potentiality" is the "*potential not to be*" (PT, 182) or impotentiality. Stated differently, "I can" is a possibility only as long as one remains in relation to "I cannot." To demonstrate this point, Agamben focuses on those who have already acquired a certain skill set and thus are, to use Scheffler's terminology, capable. Capable individuals who have knowledge are *in potential*, meaning that they equally

have the capability to bring knowledge into actuality and *not* bring knowledge into actuality. Agamben gives the example of an architect who “is in potential insofar as he has the potential to not-build, the poet the potential to not-write poems” (PT, 179). By conserving itself in the moment before actualization, potential remains impotential. Thus, all theories of potentiality (I can) must also and equally be theories of the impotential (I cannot); otherwise potentiality will be indistinguishable from actualization. To be “in potential” means “to be one’s own lack, *to be in relation to one’s own incapacity*” (PT, 182). Potentiality is the experience of a certain lack — a positive having of that which is absent.

Indeed, freedom is the experience of conserving a potentiality in and for itself. Agamben writes, “Here it is possible to see how the root of freedom is to be found in the abyss of potentiality.... To be free is, in the sense we have seen, *to be capable of one’s own impotentiality ...*” (PT, 183). What makes us human, according to Agamben, is precisely the potentiality to not-be, to remain impotential. It is impotentiality that opens history to contingency, to the potential to act otherwise or to be otherwise. In order to avoid evil, we must bear witness to this constitutive relationship to impotentiality. “Evil,” writes Agamben, “is only our inadequate reaction when faced with this demonic element [our impotentiality], our fearful retreat from it in order to exercise — founding ourselves in this flight some power of being.”³ In other words, evil is a certain hubris that we can fully actualize our potentiality and thus escape the aporia of the impotential.

At this point, a key distinction can be drawn between Agamben and Scheffler. For Scheffler, potentiality as capability is both self-development and the power to act. It is explicitly a “growing sense of what he can do” (HP, 84) and the desire to enact this growing sense. In this model, freedom is realized through action that enables the progressive ability to master one’s capabilities according to internalized, regulative principles. As such, Scheffler connects capability less with the question of “I can, I cannot” and more with the affirmative experience of “I will.” Yet for Agamben, freedom is not so much in acting on or realizing one’s capabilities as in the experience of the moment *before* choice: the experience of potentiality as “I can, I cannot.” Freedom arrives in the precarious moment when one gives one’s self the gift of impotentiality and holds it in relation to potentiality. In short, Scheffler’s model seems to separate the three dimensions of potentiality from any relation to the impotential. In fact, capability is the power to overcome the indeterminacy of impotentiality (“I can, I cannot”) through the affirmation of “I will.” “I will” indicates that the individual has a capability, which is both an ability and desire to accomplish a given task. When he argues that the role of the educator is to negate the negation and thus overcome internal and external limit conditions for the optimal learning conditions, Scheffler is, in a sense, overcoming the fragility and insecurity of the impotential, which is at best educationally unimportant and at worst educationally limiting.

This would all be nothing more than a minor academic point, but, as I will now examine, there are very real consequences when we ignore impotentiality. I will thus address two such consequences. First, I would like to argue that Scheffler leaves no

room in his model for the act of study. Studying is, for Agamben, an “interminable” act, or an act without a determinate end. As a means without an end, studying is an open-ended quest with an indeterminate success condition. Agamben writes:

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, or who have experienced the labyrinthine allusiveness of that ‘law of good neighbors’ whereby Warburg arranged his library, know that not only can study have no rightful end, but does not even desire one.⁴

With each new book discovered, the trail of clues becomes more elusive and the end more and more distanced from the student. Thus “studying and stupefying are in this sense akin: those who study are in the situation of people who have received a shock and are stupefied by what has struck them, unable to grasp it and at the same time powerless to leave hold.”⁵ Studying makes us stupid, and preserves the state of stupidity without end. Justin Clemens provides a wonderful summary of this condition: “The scholar, smacked across the forehead by an unexpected enigma, who is no longer convinced that he or she knows what he or she is supposed to know, compulsively pursues his or her stupefaction [sic] through the texts that he or she may once have thought that they [sic] had known.”⁶ This infernal quality of studying produces a pain not unfamiliar to anyone who has undergone intense and concentrated research—without clear direction, without a clear methodology, without an end in sight, we stumble along on a quest for new clues without knowing in advance what these clues might be. Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons have drawn upon Agamben to describe study as an educational “statusless status” without destination: the dwelling in a scholarly impotentiality that is not concerned with any particular representation of educational standards of measurement or definitions of success conditions.⁷ To study is to undergo a certain inoperativity where we are, to appropriate a phrase from Thomas Carl Wall’s insightful study of Agamben, “exposed to *all its* [thought’s] possibilities (all its predicates)” and yet are “undestined to any one or any set of them.”⁸

This experience of study is always accompanied with a particular phenomenological mood. As Agamben argues, there is a sadness that haunts those who pursue a course of study through this interminable statusless state. The seemingly infinite postponement of the deed explains, according to Agamben, “the sadness of the scholar” for “nothing is bitterer than a long dwelling in potential.”⁹ The seemingly endless pain of studying is therefore a type of melancholia that haunts the scholar who is betwixt and between both an “infinite undergoing” and an “unstoppable drive to undertake.”¹⁰ In fact, the painful experience of study is clearly related to Agamben’s analysis of potentiality, which he describes as “the hardest and bitterest experience possible” (*PT*, 178). By returning to Aristotle’s analysis of vision, Agamben argues that color is the actualization of light and that darkness is light *in potential*. Darkness is thus “the color of potentiality” (*PT*, 180). To think pure potential, freed from its subservience to actualization, is to wander through the darkness and shadow of thought. In this sense, Agamben’s theory of study is more aptly a phenomenological description of “brown study.” An old English term originally associated with deep melancholic brooding, brown study later became

associated with absorbed thoughtfulness and contemplation. Brown study is to study in the dark, in the shadow, to become lost through perpetual wandering or withdrawing from determinate ends.

As already outlined, Scheffler conceptualizes the human being as one defined in relation to desire, intention, purpose, and action. The capable subject is a subject “*trying* to accomplish” an action according to a certain representation of what counts. In other words, we are purposeful subjects. Conscious intentionality guides our capabilities toward the freedom found in acting upon our capabilities (“I will...”). In this sense Scheffler leaves no space or time for study. When one studies, one does not have a firm mental representation of a success condition. In fact, success conditions are *held in suspension* indefinitely. Rather than guiding our actions in relation to representational criteria of what counts, we are *drawn into* the darkness (or brownness, as the case might be) of object(s) of study without a clear indication of where we are headed or why we have chosen such and such a direction of study. In fact, there is no subject of study. Study is a de-subjectification, a certain type of existential death where all possibilities are laid out before us without necessarily privileging or eliminating any one particular possibility. “I” do not study. Rather “one” studies, where “one” indicates an impersonal yet singular self beyond the definition of a particular “me” with particular identifiable capabilities defined by a norm of excellence and oriented toward a goal. The certainty of our capability is rendered inoperative in the moment of stupid study. Thus study is not an experience of our potentiality to be but rather of the co-originary and paradoxical relation between potentiality (can) and impotentiality (cannot). The drive to act and the sense of infinite undergoing are perpetually interwoven and mutually entangled.

Oddly enough, it is through studying that one is rendered stupid (capacities are held in suspension), melancholic (in the face of an eternal return), and yet at the same time free. Thus for Agamben, freedom as the “rhythm of study” is experienced as a “shuttling between bewilderment and lucidity, discovery and loss, between agent and patient.”¹¹ This oscillation between “I can” (lucidity, discovery, agency) and “I cannot” (bewilderment, loss, patience) is lost in Scheffler’s theory of potentiality where freedom is the progressive confidence and desire to act upon one’s cultivated capabilities in order to achieve continuous improvement. Study in this sense becomes nothing more than preparation for freedom (a mere means to an end outside of itself) rather than the experience of the freedom of “I can, I cannot” as a pure means.

The second danger in ignoring or repressing the co-originary belonging of potentiality and impotentiality is political in nature and thus must be positioned in relation to Agamben’s larger social and economic analysis. The problem with liberal democracy is that

today’s man believes himself capable of everything, and so he represents his jovial “no problem,” and his irresponsible “I can do it,” precisely when he should instead realize that he has been consigned in unheard of measures to forces and processes over which he has lost all control. He has become blind not to his capacities but to his incapacities, not to what he can do but to what he cannot, or can not, do.¹²

Neoliberal confidence in its own capability to bring universal peace has led to the suspension of human rights at home as well as questionable (if not colonialist) wars abroad. Such hubristic thought also informs neoliberal educational reform policy where children should maximize their outputs on standardized tests, even if such expectations place undue ethical and educational burdens on schools.¹³ These theories of educational Prometheism are not empowering so much as disempowering in that they split potentiality from impotentiality, and in the process separate students from an experience of freedom.

Rather than recognize the limitations of neoliberal democratic government as internal manifestations of a constitutive impotence, impotentiality (the capacity to not-be) is projected outward onto the “other.” In poor, inner-city schools in the United States, the dominant logic is not one of investment into the potentialities of students (as in Scheffler’s model), but rather a systematic abandonment that attempts to drain life of its educational supplement.¹⁴ Pedro Noguera argues that social, economic, and political forces have resulted in diminishing educational returns for poor African American boys in particular. According to Noguera,¹⁵ African American boys are now more likely than other groups to (a) be suspended or expelled from school, (b) classified as “mentally retarded” and placed in special education classes, and (c) absent from honors courses. It would be a mistake to assume that Black males simply lack a certain kind of cultural capital that is necessary for success or that they are unmotivated learners who cannot “pull themselves up by their bootstraps.” Rather, neoliberal society projects its own impotentiality outward onto the racial other. High-stakes testing, zero tolerance policies, and teachers and administrators who lack commitments to the multicultural, low income communities they serve constantly demand that African American boys *actualize their impotence* through policies and procedures that create a self-fulfilling prophesy. In other words, “the trouble with Black boys,” as Noguera argues, is that they are burdened with the responsibility to compensate for the anxieties of liberal society by self-actualizing the system’s own internal impotence. Rather than correcting their potentialities by maximizing outputs, schools impose an impossible mandate: to maximize one’s own failure. The result is an *ontological*, educational division between those who are burdened with the task of carrying the social system’s disavowed impotence and those who are burdened with the task of realizing the very same system’s over-inflated hubris. For those included and excluded, freedom is no longer an educational possibility. For only in the moment of “I can, I cannot” does the student recognize the contingency of a life to be *rather than* what it is or will become. This fundamental ontological splitting through a bifurcated educational system is therefore nothing less than evil.

Although there are certainly key distinctions to be made, it is important to point out that both liberal hubris and Scheffler’s model share similar features. For instance, both logics are founded upon a basic assumption: the teacher should promote the increasing confidence in one’s capabilities for empowered actions and continuous, cumulative growth. If we take as our starting point a model of human nature based on intentional action guided by certain representational contents (goals

and norms, for example) then the hubris of neoliberalism — educationally, politically, and economically — seems to be a major problem that Scheffler’s theory does not adequately address. Yet, if we start from a different set of ontological assumptions, our theory of education need not lead to such Prometheanism. From Agamben’s perspective, the critical issue here is the recognition of the paradox of potentiality as always already impotentiality. As such, all capabilities are always already incapable, and it is this incapacity which, in turn, is the positive having of an absence. From this starting point, the role of teaching is not the promotion of (a) confidence in one’s increasing level of knowledge, skill, and mastery, and (b) the attending desire to realize one’s capabilities in action. Rather, the role of the teacher is to give us time and space to study — time and space to wander in the paradoxical zone where we can no longer find our bearings, where what we thought “counts” is held in suspension, and where our fragility is exposed or made vulnerable at the same time that it grants us our freedom. Here potentiality is not simply reduced to actuality’s “not-yet,” nor is it separated from its own constitutive impotentiality (capability not to do x, y, or z). Rather we experience potentiality as a means without end.

CONCLUSION: A STUPEFYING EDUCATION

What we need is an impotent education, a stupid education. Scheffler is to be commended for his detailed and insightful study of potentiality. But, in a paradoxical fashion, it is in his comprehensive overview of potentiality and its three dimensions that the very potentiality of the concept of potentiality is exhausted. It is only by being stupefied that we can give potential over to itself and thus resist fulfilling potential — actualizing its latent power — in the act of thinking its constitutive enigma. Agamben allows us to re-examine the potentiality in the concept of potentiality by focusing on its co-originary relation to impotentiality. This insight, in turn, enables us to rehabilitate study against neoliberal learning discourses and practices.

As such perhaps it will be necessary to return to my students’ papers, and next time I see the sentence “I hope to help my students fulfill their potentials” I should simply put a question mark, opening up the idea to its own impotence. For what is a question mark if not an invitation for further stupefaction? Indeed, the presence of a question introduces a contingency and fragility into the text. In this sense, a question mark does not end with the privation of potentiality as a pure lack, but with an opportunity to experience the generative possibilities of our incapability to mean what we say and do. The question mark is the mark of both the impotence of a particular formulation of an idea and the potentiality of the idea to become other than what it is. The question mark is a positive having of that which is absent. And in opening up the idea to its own impotentiality, the question mark gives a little gift: the gift of freedom.

1. Israel Scheffler, *Of Human Potential: An Essay in the Philosophy of Education* (New York: Routledge, 1985), 63. This work will be cited as *HP* in the text for all subsequent references.

2. Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1977), 177. This work will be cited as *PT* in the text for all subsequent references.

3. Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 31–32.
4. Giorgio Agamben, *The Idea of Prose* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1995), 64.
5. Ibid.
6. Justin Clemens, “The Abandonment of Sex: Giorgio Agamben, Psychoanalysis, and Melancholia,” *Theory and Event* 13, no. 1 (2010).
7. Jan Masschelein and Marteen Simons, “Schools as Architecture for New Comers and Strangers: The Perfect School as Public School?,” *Teachers College Record* 112, no. 2 (2010): 535–555.
8. Thomas Carl Wall, *Radical Passivity: Levinas, Blanchot, and Agamben* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1999), 152.
9. Giorgio Agamben, *The Idea of Prose* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1995), 65.
10. Ibid., 64.
11. Ibid.
12. Giorgio Agamben, *Nudities* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 44.
13. See Tyson Lewis, “Rethinking the Learning Society: Giorgio Agamben on Studying, Stupidity, and Impotence,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 30, no. 6 (2011): 585–599.
14. See Tyson Lewis, “The School as an Exceptional Space: Rethinking Education from the Perspective of the Biopedagogical,” *Educational Theory* 56, no. 2 (2006): 159–176.
15. Pedro Noguera, *The Trouble with Black Boys ... and Other Reflections on Race, Equity, and the Future of Public Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007).