

Education and the Longing for Immortality

David J. Blacker, *Dying to Teach: The Educator's Search for Immortality* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997).

EDUCATION OF THE UNDEAD?

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Last spring, I had one of my best educational experiences ever: I co-taught with Maxine Greene — and so, co-learned with the students — a course on existentialism and education. We spent several weeks on Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, a book I had not read since my teens. I was astonished and captivated anew by Sartre's journey to the heart of *la condition humaine*, and found myself wondering about existentialism's absurd end. How did I, following the intellectual culture I grew up with, lose interest in making sense of my mortality? Isn't it strange that, outside of a few stalwarts like Maxine, the spirit of existentialism so completely vanished, like yesterday's *nouvelle vague*? Imagine, then, my great pleasure, and relief, when I discovered what a Manhattan provincial I am, that anguished freedom was alive and writing in Normal, Illinois.

Dying to Teach: The Educator's Search for Immortality challenges educators to respond to two questions. Shouldn't we affirm education as a humanistic calling, by understanding it as a response to our human, mortal condition? And if so, then what difference would that affirmation make to the practice of teaching? In this brief commentary, I shall support Prof. David Blacker's claim that we ought to root education in an acknowledgment of the mortality that both individualizes and gathers us together. Proceeding from that central point of agreement, I shall also try to explain, however, some of my reservations regarding his advice to teachers. I worry that the only students who could be fully engaged by David's education in immortality, and who could be truly at home there, would be the eternal undead. For those who expect to stay in their coffins, on the other hand, this kind of teaching could represent what Sartre calls distraction. I would like to respectfully suggest that David's project to humanize teaching might be aided by a more focused attack on such distracting forces in our lives, and on the fear that makes us vulnerable to them.

Modern Western culture has increasingly distanced itself from death. Building on the historical work of Philippe Aries, David notes that, "Death becomes something essentially alien to ourselves, our *true* selves, our eternal souls. We shove death away in so many ways (p. 21)." But of course, this distancing is problematic, because our mortality is inescapably closer to us than any putative truths beyond. David agrees with Heidegger that our lives are essentially marked by constant anxiety about our precarious and transient being.

When Heidegger states that we are ontically distinctive in that we are ontological, he means that one of the observable characteristics of human beings — and our most unique feature — is that our very existence is always at issue for us. Not that we are always conscious that it is; this awareness of our own contingency, our own mortality, is not typically explicit. But it is nonetheless there, somewhere, at some level (p. 28).

If Heidegger and David are right, then the distancing above teaches us a topsy-turvy view of our nature. It is not the soul, but the body, that is the true self; death is human, all-too human, and less alien to us than eternity. Rather than pushing death away, therefore, we should let our anxiety about it bring our individual fate more clearly into view, so that we may live more honestly by its lights.

We want to shut off anxiety because it announces the unbearable truth of our own finitude, that our days are numbered. Anxiety wants us to face the truth. Understandably, we tend to turn away. For Heidegger, though, we ought to see anxiety as...a gateway toward authenticity: Tarrying with anxiety in a certain way precipitates in us a change toward "authentic selfhood," a state of being that is possible for us because we are already disposed toward it and...pointing that way — even as we flee from it also (p. 75).

David aims to ground education in an acknowledgment of who we authentically are: living beings concerned that we are returning to nothingness. Although our principal way of coping with this concern is to repress it as something unthinkable, David declares: "My purpose in this book is to reinscribe into the way we think about education that 'unthinkable'" (p. 27). Is this a project worth supporting? I most emphatically believe that it is. When I reflect on the demise of existentialism, I am struck by how it was displaced by, among other things, a mistrust of "essentializing" universals, and a scrupulous appreciation of diverse, practical, and political perspectives. This pluralism, and the struggle against homogenizing forms of oppression, is an idea whose time has come, and I would not for the world want to repudiate it. But it should not come at the expense of blindness to our shared nature. Whatever our differences, they are contained by this nature; seeing this keeps alive the hope that someday our conflicts can be settled in that common ground. We each die alone, like everyone else: who can deny the appeal of such a universal community of individuals?

This most basic question is open to everyone by virtue of their being human: "What is a human being?" The most solid and indubitable response is that a human being is finite; we are mortal. If you are human, you are finite. You are mortal. And you are concerned with your mortality whether you acknowledge it or not (p. 29).

At stake in David's project is the possibility of humanizing teaching, of encouraging teachers to address their actions to their students' humanity. That humanity is found in our concern about sheer existence, prior to any claims about what counts as essential. But if this reading is right, then I am puzzled when David goes on to state that, "the grand thesis of this book is that when one educates or is educated, one does so outside of time; in teaching and learning one is immortal" (p. 83). To be sure, by "immortal" he does not mean a state of simple permanence. But he does mean a sacred state of being that stands outside of our everyday, profane, mortal personal histories. Taking his cue from Mircea Eliade, he suggests that we can live timelessly through the power of ritual.

[Archaic human beings]...attempt to *participate* in that sacred time and become godlike, extratemporal....Key here is the archaic idea that ritual has the power to free one from historical time, to take one into another realm, one somehow *more real* than what one inhabits every day....These rituals occur at certain special times, times at which the individual of an archaic culture would consider himself *truly himself*, notably when accomplishing certain important acts (pp. 89-90).

Teaching and learning are two such acts. David illuminates below their ritualistic power to return us eternally to myth.

Think...of Telemachos' guide Mentor, mouthpiece of the goddess of wisdom, Athene. If I am mentoring someone, why could I not understand myself as repeating, reenacting, or, in some strong sense, re-creating that archetypal relation between Mentor and Telemachos — or whatever mythic prototype has richness and resonance for me given who and where I am? What prevents me from *becoming* Mentor? Why not live, in the words of one popular contemporary writer, "a mythic life" (p. 90)?¹

Now this last rhetorical question, I'm afraid, stumps me. The reason why not, I thought David had already established, is because Mentor is a god, and I am mortal. Whatever happened to idea that our most real, human realm is that ruled by birth and death? Whatever happened to the admission that I am truly myself only when I stop fleeing from our common condition? Sartre points out that human beings typically distract themselves from their anxiety by acting as if they were God. Accordingly, wouldn't this be an education in bad faith, one that carries us away, like a mythic, Bela Lugosi movie, from a more authentic way of life?

Still, David's idea that *some* kind of ritualistic education could help us cope with our mortality does seem promising. Perhaps it could be revised to avoid the above objection if it addressed more clearly the forces of bad faith. Although he describes familiar ways we distract ourselves from death, such as by medicalizing it, the only cause of this distraction that he identifies appears to be in the following observation: "Our Judeo-Christian heritage may indeed have opened the gates of heaven for us, but this has come at the cost of a gradual distancing of the living from death" (p. 21). This explanation may not be false, but it is too vague. One way of sharpening it might be to graft it on to Weber's account of the spirit of capitalism. Weber argues, you'll recall, that Calvinism burdened its adherents with such a pitiless view of their predicament, that the only way they could bear that view was to stigmatize anxiety about personal salvation as a temptation, and to occupy themselves with hard, profiteering work in order to wall temptation out. Today, we reinforce these walls of professionalism with euphoric consumerism. Now one could accordingly make a case that death, in this ethic, is bound to fall under the shadow of this anxiety; that our bad faith is largely motivated by a conception of personal salvation that is intolerably arbitrary, and so best not dwelled on. If such an explanation holds water, then it would suggest that one educational response might be to teach ourselves to cease clinging to personal salvation, and to finally give up the self to mortality — but then to see the expanse beyond the self, from which we came and to which we will return, as beyond loss. Thankfully, there is no time left for me to stick my theological neck out further than this. But let me at least point to the kind of ritualistic education I am thinking of here: namely, the zen meditation on *mu* or emptiness.

Dying to Teach invites us to understand teaching as an authentic expression of our humanity. Despite my questions about his idea of immortality, I welcome and support David Blacker's insightful revival of neglected existentialist scruples. His project vitally reminds us that the best professional ethics for teachers is one that binds reflective teaching to the examined life. I am grateful to him for the learning that his book inspired in me.

1. Blacker quotes the phrase "a mythic life" from J. Houston, *A Mythic Life: Learning to Live Our Greater Story* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996).

TEACHING TO DEATH
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In these comments, I will take up certain issues in David Blacker's *Dying to Teach* from a generally Mahayana Buddhist standpoint. My aim is to extend and deepen Blacker's provocative discussion of the relationship between death and education. I suggest that linking the sacred to a nontranscendental view of immortality need not imply an act of balancing the skyward gaze with one that is more earthbound. Perhaps Blacker finds himself in this position because his discourse rests within the Judeo-Christian tradition in a fairly unexamined way. Specifically, I will examine the limits Blacker places on language with regard to the appropriateness of its use in contexts of death. Following Buddhist thought (painted with the broadest brush), I will show that paying exquisite attention to the ordinary leads to the realization of the sacred. By way of this resolute turn towards the ordinary, I will take up a defense and extension of Noddings's ethic of care.¹ Finally, I will offer a different way of thinking about the relationship between death and education — one based on embracing mortality. The educational focus of this relationship is the process of death itself.

Blacker rests his discussion of immortality, the endless existence of a person after his or her death, through a specific focus on educational practice. Thus, he resists Cartesian dualism in some rather interesting ways without rejecting dualism entirely. The body disappears. As a result of educational interaction, however, the "teacher" is dispersed through a community of subjectivities spread over time and space. Despite this move the focus of much of Blacker's discussion rests on a fairly stable theory of the self — rather than on context-specific practices. The realm of human affairs demands Blacker's main attention. Nevertheless, he does not relinquish himself to a view of the importance of dailiness to the point that his discussion becomes nonreligious. On Blacker's view, a teacher achieves her quest for immortality with an eye to the transcendental as she is engaged in the everydayness of educational practice. In other words, Blacker steers between modern and postmodern thought as he follows the educator's quest for immortality. But the desire for immortality, for transcendence, still remains.

It is this commitment to the eternal ideal, to immortality, even as the eternal is constructed with care on a day-to-day and person-to-person basis which leads Blacker to limit language with regards to appropriateness in contexts of death. Death it seems must be spoken of in terms that reflect this commitment to transcendence. In his discussion of the Epicurean response, "no projects, no worries," to what is tragic in death, he would have us fix a minimal threshold for what is appropriate or inappropriate expression upon death. These limits are to be set through an avoidance of temporal extremes. What if, Blacker tells us, he had died in a car wreck this morning. It would be "decidedly odd," he says, "to mourn my passing *even partly* because the sandwich I made before leaving will go uneaten." Imagine the eulogy, he says, "and his lunch-making that morning went to naught." But, why should expressions of the ordinary, the mundane, be rendered necessarily inappropriate in

relation to death and immortality? It is the placement of this expression within the speech-act of a eulogy, a Western cultural phenomenon, that renders it inappropriate rather than some triviality inherent to the expression itself. Furthermore, his example can only work within the context of a formal, public, expression of grief and regret. One can well imagine meditating on the uneaten sandwich made by a loved one, abruptly snatched out of our lives, which would be a deep and far more poignant expression of grief — a profound mourning.

While such an attention to context and use might convince Blacker to withdraw the ascription of obvious triviality to expressions of mundane activity, he could still question the appropriateness of such an expression with regards to immortality and death — the sacred. After all, the question that motivates Blacker's discussion of education and immortality is not what is religious education? Rather, his question is this: Where does the religious lie in education? What then, we might ask, is religious about this linguistic example Blacker offers us? While it might have been possible to discern Wittgenstein behind much of the discussion offered so far, it seems to me that to answer this question I would have to invoke an explicitly non-Western, Buddhist, standpoint. Within this tradition, it would be perfectly acceptable not only to express personal grief through an attentive contemplation of the sandwich but to deepen that contemplation in ways that would make us sensitive to our mortality. An awareness of our mortality, in turn, would insist we bring a discipline of exquisite attention to what we do; from making sandwiches to tying our shoe laces, to combing our children's hair, to teaching and learning. In other words, our turn towards our environment would be awash in the aesthetic of an ethics of care driven by the inevitability of death. The expression, "He could not eat the sandwich he made this morning," links the sacred and the mundane in two ways. First, it draws our attention to the sacredness of everyday life and second, it gestures towards an awesome power by pointing out the extreme fragility of human existence.

Now let me take up Blacker's impatience with Noddings's ethic of care and deepen it to exasperation. On the view that I am sketching here, I shall not make a distinction between caring for a machine, plants, animals, and human beings. This is not because I am unable to tell the difference between sentient and non-sentient entities. Rather, it is because I wish to place my emphasis not on the nodes of interaction but on the context and practices which draw entities, sentient or non-sentient, into interaction. The regulative ideal of exquisite attention is settled into habit through educational discipline and practice. Furthermore, it is shaped through a pervasive awareness of death. The idea is that every activity, including linguistic activity, be undertaken with a profound and abiding awareness of mortality and therefore with care — both in its sense of carefulness and concern.

"What has changed for me now that I know I have to care for everything?" Blacker asks of Noddings. "Everything, indeed!" I respond. Everything has changed. Care, as precision and concern, is not only the regulative ideal but also the practice derived from a principled awareness of mortality. Apart from the role of aesthetics in such a view to action, ethics as moral appropriateness can be used with tremendous precision. We are fearless in our moral response to a situation because our awareness of mortality makes us so; we are fearful because our mortality,

following the more austere strands of Buddhism, requires that we be reticent in certain situations. In other words, Buddhism would have us develop our moral skills so we can respond appropriately to the call that draws us into specific situations. Contrary to popular belief, Buddhism is not a tradition of uncomplaining acceptance — a well-trained Buddhist is a moral warrior. He or she responds to situations not through adherence to moral principles but rather with a highly developed sense of moral appropriateness.

Such excellence in moral appropriateness, however, is not an end in itself. The Buddhist tradition reflects an awareness of the fear of death which underlies what makes us human. This tradition acknowledges that the process of death is not easy. Furthermore, the processes of death, divided into six stages called Bardos, are similar to the processes of death only much more condensed; and when intensified they are very like those of life. This tradition teaches us that Buddhist practices not only enable us to live well, but these same disciplines make the process of death easier. This tradition requires us to live well in order to die well. Death provides the focus for all life's activities. Such a focus draws fear and tragedy out of the idea of death. That is, death is made ordinary through the extraordinary role it is called on to play in daily life. This is not to say that on this view there is no discussion of immortality. Certainly the theory of reincarnation would invite such a discussion. However, not all strands of Buddhist thought subscribe to this theory. Furthermore, immortality is tied to an endlessly endured mortality. Therefore, it is hardly the goal to be prized. Rather, it is the dissolution of the state of immortality as it is tied to mortality, that is the focus of moral endeavors through several lifetimes. Furthermore, as that which is immortal about sentient beings passes from one earned mortal state to the next, it benefits from education rooted in daily practice, which enables it to endure the death process successfully and with dignity. In other words, within the Mahayana Buddhist tradition we are to live well in order to die well.

Now let us consider some additional problems Blacker raises for the ethics of care. Consider Sophocles's *Antigone*. Let us take up Blacker's charge that care theory is hard-pressed to resolve the dilemma of conflicting rights presented by Sophocles, for it is unable to even begin to make the distinctions necessary for choosing between this group and that. Therefore, he argues that care theory leaves us either morally catatonic or forces us to act on impulse without any recourse to justification. But, this follows only on a certain reading of *Antigone*. What if we have a view of ethics that is not about coming to some course of action following a rule-driven calculus, but rather follows an injunction instead to pursue that course of action which reflects being in a relationship of care, such as precision and concern, with our environment. On this view, we are not called on to choose between two rights — those of the state versus those of the family — as exemplified in the figures of Creon and Antigone. Both those positions are derived from principles. The actions derived from these principles bring death, destruction, and suffering not only to Antigone but to Creon as well through the death of his wife and son. The care theorist could well point out that while Antigone and Creon's actions were principle-based the moral status of their actions is debatable given the extent of suffering brought about by an untempered commitment to principles. It is in the figure of

Ismene, willing to die but for love of the living, and Haemon's call to reasonableness that we hear the voices of care. Neither is afraid to die. But their reasons follow a concern for the living rather than a commitment to abstract principles.

Reading Sophocles' *Antigone* in such a manner that the possibilities of action are ascribed only to the figures of Antigone or Creon may have more to do with ways in which contemporary Western-liberal culture drives interpretation than presenting a clear case against care-theory and much less of an argument against moral warriorship. One could well read Antigone and Creon's actions as vainglorious attempts at immortality. Through the words of the chorus, Sophocles laments:

Supreme in man's felicity
Is Wisdom; and the wise in awe
Bow them beneath God's ancient law.
Vainglorious lips and vanity
In heavy stripes their payment earn,
And men grow old before they learn (1348-1353).²

Finally, I take up Blacker's acceptance of the received opposition between care-theory and justice, but now from a Buddhist discussion of care. The discussion of justice would depend, I suggest, on one's view of justice both in its ideal construction and in the concrete practices through which it is realized. Lyotard's discussion in *Le Differend* does not quarrel with the idea of justice but only with the difficulties that everydayness, and the concern and care for others, present for its realization. But, what of justice itself? How to give a description of it which reflects not only care for others, but also a deep and abiding awareness of mortality, aesthetics, and the sacredness of the ordinary? I cannot do better here than quote from Stephanie Strickland's poetic commentary on Simone Weil:

As justice is to disregard your strength in an unequal
relationship and to treat the other
in every detail, even intonation, posture, exactly
as an equal;
so God
all powerful, does not exert power; God waits like a beggar for us,
made equal, Might drawn back
that the world be —
As justice; so God, secretly
present, an opening in us that can move, consent, bond us
forever,
but not
appearing — appearing absent; except
for how a thing can be beautiful, constrained
to its nature, how that
snares us.³

A not insignificant final point is that teaching to death is not exclusive to the East. Furthermore, given intertextuality, the East is not the other of the West.

1. Nel Noddings, *Caring: a Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

2. Sophocles, *The Antigone*, trans. Gilbert Murray (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1941).

3. Stephanie Strickland, *The Red Virgin: A Poem of Simone Weil* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 39.

TEACHING AND ETERNAL LIFE: THE LOVE OF LEARNING AND DESIRE FOR GOD

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The purpose of David Blacker's important new book, as he most memorably states is "to re-inscribe into education the way we think about that unthinkable," death (p. 27). According to Blacker, we have now become, in all our lives and practices, much like the main character in Tolstoy's famous story "The Death of Ivan Illich"; we tend to objectify, depersonalize, and distance ourselves from the primary fact of our existence, our own mortality. In the modern age, death becomes "a thing," something that happens to everyone but us, it seems — a mere formulaic notion. *Dying to Teach* is Blacker's attempt to force authenticity upon us, to revivify our practices as teachers and learners, by "stinging" our "Ivan Illich selves" into a clearer and more constructive recognition of our finitude. In my response to his book I want to concentrate on what he describes as our tradition's two most venerable "immortality projects," two ways in which we have tended to deal with our contingency. As I begin, I can only applaud his project of attempting to bring these ways of facing death to our conscious awareness as teachers and human beings, and examining their usefulness in our current situation. But in the end I will criticize what I perceive as a slight narrowness in that attempt, and will suggest a possible correction.

According to Blacker's Heideggerian analysis, an analysis so well captured in René Arcilla's opening remarks, to be human is always, either explicitly or implicitly, consciously or unconsciously, to be concerned with our contingency, our mortality. For a human being one's very existence is always an issue. But this issue can, Blacker insists, be dealt with honestly or dishonestly, in good or bad faith, authentically or disingenuously. As Ernest Becker put it in his book *The Denial of Death*,¹ a longing for immortality (or what Arcilla and I have recently been prone to call "metaphysical desire"²) is always a motivating factor in everything we do. But according to Heidegger's account, the early Greeks split "Being" off from "beings," and thus began the Western tradition of metaphysics; since then we have become more and more like the condemned man in Pascal's parable, a man who spends the last days before his execution in forgetfulness of his terrible fate, playing cards with his executioner. This process of forgetfulness culminates, for Blacker as well as Heidegger, in what we have now, a period of late capitalism in which we excel in finding better and more efficient ways to (adopting a phrase from Neil Postman) "amuse ourselves to death,"³ for example addiction to alcohol, illicit and prescribed drugs, (the prozac nation"!), TV, super bowls, obsession with celebrity divorces and murders, as well as that all time favorite, shopping. (In this vein, one might profitably look at David Foster Wallace's recent masterpiece, *Infinite Jest*, a marvelously surrealistic parody of our addictive society and increasingly frantic search for entertainment.⁴)

Still, according to Blacker, we, as teachers and human beings, must either construct or at least attach ourselves to some immortality project or another. That is, we strive to give real meaning to our lives in one way or other. His concern is with

two of our most common projects of this sort, one that seems inherent in the philosophy of Plato and another that can be found in the alternative to Platonism supplied by the Greek Sophists. Platonism, Blacker says, seeks immortality through "Truth." The Sophist turns instead to "the Other." I think it is fair to understand these projects or strategies in terms of Richard Rorty's "Objectivity" and "Solidarity," that is "two principle ways in which reflective human beings try to give sense to their lives by placing them in a larger context."⁵ Non-reflective humans, that is most of us living now, just travel along the paths originally developed by more reflective folk, typically following one or another of these two "ways," in a stuporous and unconscious attempt to ease the existential anxiety Heidegger would find at the core of any authentic human existence. Part of Blacker's noble task is to force us towards explicit consciousness of this fact and demand reflection from us. In this way we might begin to cure ourselves, as well as our students, of a peculiar form of "sleepwalking" highlighted in the work of Heidegger, Pascal, and Tolstoy.

Platonism, or Rorty's "Objectivity," seeks to solve our finitude, make sense of our lives, be describing its partisans "as standing in immediate relation to a non-human reality. This relation is immediate in the sense that it does not derive from a relation between such a reality and one's tribe, or...nation, or...imagined band of comrades."⁶ Examples of Platonism given by Blacker include both current research science and mathematics, but the project ultimately stems from Plato's supposed attempt to understand philosophy as a means by which we become immortal by knowing, bonding with, something deathless and immutable, something like his "Forms." Blacker's critique of Platonism follows Martha Nussbaum's complaint that it is immoral both as an immortality strategy and an ideal of teaching insofar as it *uses* other human beings to achieve its end. So in a brilliant chapter in her book *The Fragility of Goodness on The Symposium*, Nussbaum sides with the supposedly pathetic and buffoonish Alcibiades in his complaints versus Socrates.⁷ According to Alcibiades, Socrates' view of love as well as philosophy leads him to merely pretend to care about his dialogue partners, those "beautiful boys" he seems to need in order to discuss "Beauty" and "Goodness." In reality, Nussbaum says, they are, for Socrates, simply means to an end, that is a means by which the Platonist aims to bond with a reality supposedly divorced from all merely human contamination, that is "Truth." But for teaching to be valid it must, according to Blacker, exhibit a more valid and caring, a truer, relationship with students. Forms (or scientific discoveries or mathematical proofs) aside, a teacher must not use her students, influence them, so as to simply get them to carry on her own pet projects or concerns. She must truly care about their well being and enhance it.

But the real problem with Platonism as I see it is what I would call its "Essentialism," its abstractness. In a number of places, but especially in his first great novel *The Moviegoer*, the Christian-Existentialist Walker Percy speaks of two types of "searches," one vertical and one horizontal.⁸ The vertical search, practiced today so often by scientists and philosophers (and unfortunately more and more often even by our supposed humanists) in our universities, is the sort of inquiry into "universal knowledge" which Dewey called "the quest for certainty," a sort of inquiry that (in the approving words of Thomas Nagel) seeks "a view from

nowhere.” This sort of inquiry, according to Percy, turns the flesh and blood, unique “existing individual” into a cipher. Thus, it becomes just one more diversion from a Heideggerian (or as the Christian Percy would have it, a Kierkegaardian) authenticity in the face of our contingency. So Percy’s main character in *The Moviegoer*, Binx Bolling, says that detached, scientific research uncovers everything but the investigator’s very own unique and imperfect self. It leaves the self (to refer to the title of another of Percy’s wonderful books) “lost in the cosmos.” (Why, Percy asks, are scientists such as Carl Sagan so interested in finding extra terrestrial life? Is it because the lives they construct through the vertical search are so empty?⁹) I believe it is this same vertical search that men such as William James and Ludwig Wittgenstein had in mind when they criticized philosophers such as F.H. Bradley and Hegel for their falsifying systematization and misleading abstraction. (So Wittgenstein once referred to the work of another vertical searcher, the philosopher C.D. Broad, as “physics of the abstract.” In this regard one might also usefully examine Wittgenstein’s notes on Sir James Frazer’s modern masterpiece of social science, *The Golden Bough*.) When James and Wittgenstein took issue with their universities, Harvard and Cambridge respectively, I believe they were pointing at the way in which our modern academic ideal forgets “the existing individual” (Kierkegaard’s phrase) in the manner of the vertical search. I believe their complaints ultimately find their foundation stone in St. Bernard of Clairvaux’s (and more generally Cistercian) criticisms of scholastic theology at the University of Paris centuries earlier.¹⁰

Blacker’s second immortality project, which he refers back to the Sophists, proceeds as one seeks to escape death (to again use one of Rorty’s characterizations, “Solidarity”) “by telling the story of their contribution to a community,”¹¹ a human community either real or imagined. Blacker approves of this strategy insofar as it adds the care for “the Other” that Platonism seems to leave out. As the most viable example of this kind of project in educational theory today he provides a careful (!) analysis of “the caring theory” espoused by Nel Noddings. A teacher properly influenced by Noddings would, Blacker claims, find her immortality in the effect she has on her students as she cares for them as Buberian “Thous,” as the sort of unique individuals the vertical search cannot account for. But according to Blacker, “caring theory,” by itself, cannot sustain a viable notion of teaching. Care must be complemented by a concern for subject matter, for truth (if not “Truth”) as well as principle. Otherwise, for example, we may find ourselves caught with no way to condemn, as Blacker believes we should, those who would teach Afro-American students a false history in order to improve their self-esteem. We may have no way to distinguish what deserves our care most of all from what is less deserving of it.

In conclusion, Blacker argues that only a careful synthesis of both Platonism and “caring theory” will provide the educator with the kind of immortality project that does justice both to the morality of teaching as well as to Heideggerian human nature. I agree, however, with Arcilla that there is at least a tension in the synthesis Blacker provides, a tension between Heideggerian Existentialism’s stress on contingency and temporality, Gadamer’s hermeneutics and Eliade’s ritualistic timelessness. In response to that tension Arcilla refers to Zen, a non-Western “immortality

project,” (is it wrong to speak this way of Zen?) as a possible solution. And I can imagine other approaches “from the East,” for example approaches developed out of Hinduism, Islam, and Taoism. Pradeep Dhillon examines in some detail one of these non-Judeo-Christian approaches in her contribution to this discussion. But I want, instead, to turn very briefly and in conclusion, to the tradition closest to us, one that Blacker seems quite consciously and explicitly to dismiss out of hand, a tradition that honors the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as well as Jesus of Nazareth.

What troubles me about Blacker’s book as a whole is his overly quick dismissal and misreading of this Judeo-Christian tradition. I agree with Blacker (and Wittgenstein — see Tractatus 6.4311 and 6.4312) that “infinite temporal duration” is an unhelpful way for the educator to think of immortality. But I want to ask whether this is what St. Paul’s “Eternal Life” really means. Moreover must we read Paul, as well as the prophets, Philo Judaeus, Augustine, Bernard, Theresa, Pascal, Kierkegaard, (all venerable members of this tradition) as proponents of a God who exists as “a thing” in some Platonic heaven? Surely Nietzsche was right that we have killed *that* “thing-God,” and that He deserved to be killed. But this is not the Judeo-Christian God, just as infinite temporal duration is not “Eternal Life.”

Blacker insists, rightly I think, that in order to do justice both to our teaching as well as our metaphysical desire we must find a proper reconciliation between truth and caring. I also think he is right to distrust “Truth” with a capital T, Rorty’s “Objectivity.” (Parenthetically, I wonder why we should not also distrust, contra Blacker, “the Other” in favor of concrete, unique “others”!). However, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, not only in its ancient adherents but also in those adherents closer to us (for example Percy as well as Thomas Merton and Flannery O’Connor, Simone Weil and T. S. Eliot, Abraham Heschel and Martin Buber) one finds sustained and quite suggestive attempts to make sense of a truth, an incarnational truth perhaps, born of Percy’s *horizontal* (rather than vertical) search, a truth that meshes with a viable notion of God and immortality as found in Scripture, myth, and ritual as well as what is valid in modernity. The subtitle of this essay, “the love of learning and the desire for God,” in fact, refers to the title of one of the most worthwhile attempts I know of to begin to unlock a rich vision of teaching and learning in this vein, Jean LeClercq’s classic book on monastic culture.¹² Might not the incarnate truth LeClercq’s monks had in mind, a truth born of a search for “Thous” rather than for things or universals, neatly coupled with something like Noddings’ caring, provide the kind of synthesis that at least some of us could take to heart? Might not some of us, at least, find here an educational ideal that provides a truly satisfying and authentic way to “teach for immortality,” for “Eternal Life”?¹³

1. Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973).

2. Arcilla uses this phrase in his fine book *For the Love of Perfection: Richard Rorty and Liberal Education* (New York: Routledge, 1994). I make use of it in “Pragmatism, Thomism, and the Metaphysics of Desire: Two Rival Versions of Liberal Education,” *Educational Theory* 47, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 91-117.

3. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Viking Press, 1985).

4. David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (New York: Little Brown, 1996) which, according to its back cover “explores essential questions about what entertainment is and why it has come to so dominate our lives; about how our desire for entertainment affects our need to connect with other people, and about what the pleasures we choose say about who we are.”
5. Richard Rorty, “Solidarity or Objectivity?” in his *Objectivity, Relativity, and Truth: Philosophical Papers Volume 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 21-34, 21.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).
8. Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer* (New York: Fawcett Columbine Books, 1996).
9. Percy’s hilarious but ultimately quite serious discussion of Sagan et. al., and modern scientific Platonism in general, can be found in his *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1983). We find early intimations of Percy’s ideal of a non-Platonic “Science” of the person in his *The message in the bottle: how queer man is, how queer language is and what one has to do with the other* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1975).
10. For an interesting, if not entirely satisfactory rendering of James’s disputes with “Bradleyism” see T.L.S. Sprigge, *James and Bradley: American Truth and British Reality* (Chicago: Open Court, 1993). For Wittgenstein’s “take” on Frazer see his *Remarks on Frazer’s Golden Bough*, ed. Rush Rhees (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1974). For a discussion of Cistercian criticisms of the University of Paris in general see Stephen Ferrulo’s fine work, *The Origins of the University* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1985). Ferrulo’s careful discussion of Bernard’s complaints against the scholastic theology of Peter Abelard and his followers indicates how little things have changed in our “research universities.” Carol Walker Bynum’s now classic *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982) constructively suggests ways in which Bernard’s “male” Cistercians still remained at least somewhat stuck in a Platonic mode and how the spirituality of a number of medieval Cistercian women suggests useful correctives in this regard.
11. Rorty, “Solidarity or Objectivity,” 21.
12. Jean LeClercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, trans. Catherine Misrah (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982). In this vein, I should also like to mention the work of another author perhaps little known to members of The Philosophy of Education Society, historian-philosopher Pierre Hadot. Hadot has over the last three decades been creatively and courageously analyzing a tradition of “philosophy as spiritual exercise,” as opposed Blacker’s Platonism or “philosophy as theory”; all of the figures I have mentioned who would blend incarnate truth with caring into a rich notion of philosophical education are philosophers of the first sort. See Hadot’s *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, trans. Arnold Davidson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). Hadot, by the way, would categorize the Epicurean philosophers, as well as other Hellenistic ethicists, in a way radically different from that of Blacker, who in his second chapter describes them as what I have been referring to so far as Platonists. Yet what if the scientific vision or “cosmic consciousness” these Hellenistic figures are concerned with is meant to be born of the horizontal rather than the vertical search? Perhaps on this analysis even Plato himself, as well as supposed “Platonists” such as Plotinus, fail Blacker’s Rortyan criteria for “Objectivism.” Perhaps they, properly understood, belong to the same philosophical tradition as LeClercq’s monks. See Hadot, *Plotinus: The Simplicity of Vision*, trans. Arnold Davidson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995).
13. For a new, beautiful, exploration of how this “incarnational, existential Truth cum caring,” codified as a philosophical spiritual exercise in the monastic tradition of the Benedictines, might help reanimate our educational practices, see the recent book of the American poet Kathleen Norris, *Cloisterwalk* (New York: Riverside Books, 1996). Finally, thanks to Susan Laird as well as the staff at *Educational Theory* for facilitating the symposium of which this paper is a part and for valuable editorial advice and encouragement.