

“Nothing Carries the Root of its Own Being in itself”¹ Hegel and Lacan on the Subject of Desire

JAMES STILLWAGGON

Iona College

RODINO ANDERSON

Teachers College, Columbia University

IN ITS BROADEST SENSE, education is commonly understood as a practice of disciplining the energies of the young in harmony with the larger purposes of the community whose continued existence is at stake in their education.² While the aim of shaping and directing children’s energies has always been present in educational practice in one form or another, the question of what these energies are and how they come to manifest themselves is not always as clear. Maintained in theoretical discourses as both the potential engine of the individual child’s emergence into the world of adulthood as well as a significant threat to that world, the energy that drives childhood is most commonly described as an unbridled, natural force that pre-exists and opposes the shaping forces of education.

In this paper, our aim is to present an alternative to the view that the child’s energies pre-exist the discourses and relational contexts that give them shape. Through G.W.F. Hegel’s and Jacques Lacan’s respective theories of desiring self-consciousness and subjectivity, we present the child’s energies as the product of the educational relationship rather than a raw material shaped by its educational experiences. We argue that shifting the way we envision the child’s energies similarly alters what is possible in educational practice.

In the next section we present a brief overview of various philosophical approaches to childhood that demonstrate a common concern over the existence of potentially destructive childhood energies prior to the child’s subjection to the shaping forces of society. In the two sections that follow, we turn to two related theories of desire expounded by Hegel and Lacan, as possible directions for thinking about the energies of the child in relation to their educational contexts.

The Inhumanity of Childhood

In his introduction to *The Inhuman*, Jean-Francois Lyotard seeks to establish humanity as a balancing act between, on the one hand, the pre-humanity of animal life and on the other, the post-human rigidity of technology. Achieving this balance, according to Lyotard, begs the question of education, as that institution that realizes children's "capacity to acquire a 'second' nature" defined by the beliefs and interests demonstrated in the child's human environment (1991, p. 3). Lyotard's position, contained in his claim that humans are not "born human, as cats are born cats" leaves the child in a state of nature somehow prior to humanity and faced with a distinct task, "to free himself or herself from the obscure savageness of childhood" (p. 3-4).

Lyotard's sentiment regarding the inhumanity of children would seem deliberately counterintuitive if it were not supported by the better part of a tradition of thought concerning childhood in its relation to education. Stressing the importance of education as a normalizing agent in society, John Dewey refers to children as "seemingly alien beings" whose purposes must be transformed by education if they are to be trusted to take part in society and benefit from its resources (1944, p. 10). Dewey underscores the idea of children as inhuman, or not-yet-human, by connecting their outsider status to another broadly held view that the inhumanity of children poses a threat to social order. Beyond Lyotard's position, which ultimately describes freedom from "the obscure savageness of childhood" as an educational goal for the individual child, Dewey emphasizes the collective overcoming of childhood as an urgent necessity for the continued life of any community. He compares the failure of a society to educate its "seemingly alien" young to a plague that "carrie[s] off the members of a society all at once" resulting in a "relapse into barbarism and then into savagery" (p. 3-4).³

Similar to Dewey in her understanding of the urgency of education is Hannah Arendt, who qualifies her claim that "the child requires special protection and care so that nothing destructive may happen to him from the world" with the counter claim that "the world, too, needs protection to keep it from being overrun and destroyed by the onslaught of the new that bursts upon it with each new generation" (1980, p. 186). In order to take advantage of the crisis posed by the "onslaught of the new," society must not allow children's growth to be guided by their own youthful, tyrannical energies, but their ideals and actions must be trained in relation to the world that precedes them and to the existing, shared purposes of adult society.

More direct in his assessment of the threat that each coming generation poses to existing culture, and the need to discipline some pre-existing, fundamental force in the child is Martin Buber. Invited to speak on the subject of "[t]he development of the creative powers in the child," Buber refuses the suggested theme of his talk, claiming that "only the last three [words] raise no question for me" (1947, p. 83). By his emphasis on what is in the child, rather on what we might hope to develop within it, Buber indicates his belief, developed through the remainder of his talk, that creative and destructive powers are in the child already, prior to any human meddling. While some influence over the child is necessary in order to shape those powers, the child's motivations necessarily pre-exist any contact with others. Like Arendt and Dewey, Buber shares concerns over the presence of untaught energies, and views the coming of the new generation as a form of promise which carries with it the threat of destruction:

In spite of everything, in this as in every hour, what has not been invades the structure of what is, with ten thousand countenances, of which not one has been seen before... a creative event if ever there was one, newness rising up, primal potential might. (1947, p. 83)

For Buber, the primal force driving each new generation suggests “the existence of an autonomous instinct, which cannot be derived from others,” but whose realization in “the deeds of the generations now approaching can illumine the grey face of the human world or plunge it into darkness” (p. 84–85).

The range of positions presented above regarding the child’s pre-discursive and potentially destructive drive call for an urgent response among educational theorists and practitioners alike. Failure to respond to the “invasion,” to the “onslaught” of newness upon the world becomes a matter of absconding from one’s duties, not only to one’s society, but to one’s humanity. Yet perhaps the very idea of an autonomous drive at work in the child, prior to its educational experience, creates a situation in which the educator’s defense of humanity is at once urgent and impossible. If the creative-destructive force in children is truly independent, autonomous, and precedes any educational influence, it is difficult to imagine how any influence might shape or discipline it in an educational sense at all. A coercive force might train the subject to refrain from exercising its “originator instinct” (p. 85) but if such an instinct has no need of outside influence for its existence, it equally has no capacity to be changed. The upshot of an education conceived as an overlay of force or habituation upon an independently existing drive is that even the most refined subject will find herself torn between identification with the social laws within which her public identity has its home and the instinctual forces still at play within her original self.⁴

Our notion of the educated, trained self as a complex of social forces and limitations arranged upon an underlying original, autonomous drive provides a suitable account of those aspects of human habit that are enforced even without our conscious awareness of their presence as a force in our lives, such as tastes in food or clothing, the use of currency, or the habit of driving on the right-hand side of the road. These, we might say, are the restrictions we put up with as socialized beings in order to fulfill our seemingly underlying desires through our relations with others in the world. What this understanding of education as a shaping of existing urges cannot explain are those aspects of the self, even those underlying desires, that are clearly learned, but to which we nevertheless find our identities tied and in the absence of which we feel pain and longing, such as a first language or “mother tongue,” a home country, or the ineffable sensations of a place that provide a sense of belonging.

Once we recognize these latter learned aspects of identity as more than mere limitations upon a pre-existing drive, however, and moreover the productive role that learned relations have in providing the human subject with its motivations and wants, we have thrown into question the status of our more mundane habits and relations as well. The constitutive effect of ordinary habits in shaping the subject in its relation to the world reveals itself in those disorienting moments wherein expected patterns are broken, such as when we find ourselves expected to drive on the opposite side of the road. Even these unnoticed, insignificant habits are no mere restrictions or orderings of an underlying drive, but play an active role in creating the drives they seem to limit.

If we accept that habits and beliefs constitute the drives they limit, providing human subjects with both the ideals they strive to attain and the desire to achieve them, we are presented with a different set of possibilities for envisioning education as that process by which these habits and beliefs are reproduced. Rather than an educational model of coercion or enforcement, in which educators mold students’ pre-existing drives according to the interests of society, the idea of a human subject whose desires are contingent upon its objects prompts us to think of education in terms of the production of educational desires. In the following sections, drawing upon the work

of Hegel and Lacan, we outline this somewhat different understanding of the human subject, emphasizing the effect of external objects and relations as formative of its motivations.

Hegel on Dialectics and Educating Desire

An ordering principle for Hegel (1971) is “nothing is unconditioned; nothing carries the root of its own being in itself” (p. 304). “Subject and object, man and nature,” and man and man are all “*relatively* necessary” beings. That is, for Hegel, relation preconditions being. This relation that preconditions being means that the medium connecting say, teacher and student, is vital for the constitution of both. Neither comes to the space of the classroom ready formed, but will continually be shaped by the interactions with each other. As such, a curriculum reveals itself to be a dynamic medium for transformation not as a static locus of knowledge to be acquired, but a recreation of energies for teacher and student to share in. For Hegel, both his dialectics and his concept of desire [*Begierde*] exemplify this relational precondition. We will explicate these two concepts—dialectics and desire—in the dramatic speculative logic of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

Dialectics

Phenomenology of Spirit is a work of initiation, an education needed before entering and learning how to think in Hegel’s System on Science. Hegel shows this initiation through the drama of consciousness coming to know itself. In coming to know itself, consciousness develops methodically. For Hegel, this methodical development is dialectic. Hegel’s dialectic has three logical components as consciousness attempts to establish truth: (1) in itself, (2) for itself, and (3) in and for itself. The logical components comprise consciousness’ transformative movement from immaturity to wisdom, learning that wisdom comes from the ability to unify objective and subjective attitude towards knowledge. To flesh out the experience of this transformative experience undergone in this dialectic, Hegel shows first that consciousness gives objects a validity that is absolute through expressions that merely claim to have an immediate knowing to those objects—objects are simply *there*. That is, consciousness establishes objective truth and its language is conditioned in such a manner as to claim objects to have an importance over and above its very own knowing. However, these statements prove to be empty tautological determinations, especially when the world does not behave correspond to language.

Secondly, he demonstrates that to overcome this position, consciousness learns that it is the one that posits these objects and that they are not just simply there. Through its own powers consciousness learns that it is what bestows objects their special character, allowing these objects to be there in the first place. Thus, it comes to understand that the objects are for consciousness. Here, consciousness becomes conscious of its own powers and is now crowned “self-consciousness.” However, self-consciousness is fraught with similar dilemmas of when it was just mere consciousness, finding another “self-consciousness” that is over and above its own comprehension.

His third and final argument is that this self-consciousness comes to learn what frustrates it is this positing of something over and above itself, something always distant that needs to be mastered. Through a very long, complex and frustrating journey, self-consciousness learns that

the truth of its being is not an either-or, but an *and*, (the German *und*). This realization of the *und* transforms thinking because it is grounded in a dwelling space of relation. That is, the journey culminates in an absolute being (or knowing) that is immediately guided by the ordering principle of relation, and one that can only be made manifest through mediation.⁵

Though the dialectic culminates in the Absolute, we need to revisit the shift from consciousness to self-consciousness, the in-itself to the for-itself. Hegel will come to boldly claim that self-consciousness is desire in general, reminding us like Plato how central desire is to our educational disciplining. But unlike Plato's *Eros*, Hegel's desire dwells with the destructive aspects of this force and he sees that negation as constitutive of our subjectivity.

Desire

In describing desire [*Begierde*], Hegel makes his most dramatic case against something being in itself. The "Lordship and Bondsman" section of the *Phenomenology* normally commands scholarly attention due to its emphasis on mutuality and recognition, but here we will refrain from entering the scholarship on this spectacle given the logic of the dialectic we have set out before thinking through the center of Hegel's *Phenomenology*. Though consciousness (now self-consciousness in Hegel's educational enterprise) may seem appealing as it tries to remain "for itself," a pure ego, Hegel develops the concept dialectically to show how it overcomes being for itself. Hegel's statement that "self-consciousness is desire in general" takes up more forcefully the educative theme that we are shaped by those things we desire, rather than carrying pre-formed identities prior to relations to others, as would one who believed solely in the objectivity of the world.

Certain of only itself, self-consciousness would need to overcome, negate the "independent life [in] an objective manner" (Hegel, 1977, p. 174). Acting in an objective manner, negation would be destruction. This violent appearance is how self-consciousness appropriates "certainty of itself as true certainty." For Hegel, then, desire as self-consciousness is the process whose result is the true certainty of how object corresponds to concept. However, explicitly making its certainty truth, self-consciousness regenerates itself. Restated, desire breeds desire.

First, as a concept, desire is negation that preserves itself. Thought this way, we immediately see its inexhaustibility, its self-regeneration. There is no *ob-object* proper of desire. Desire satisfies desire. In the abstract, nothing satisfies desire because it is nothing. Desire is pure lack. Secondly, as experience, Desire acts violently towards an other because the other perturbs, gets in the way of, its pure lack. Since desire enjoys desiring itself, it tries to get rid of anything that draws attention away from itself. It likes being a pure Ego, the center and certainty of the world. In trying to get rid of this other, desire also experiences satisfaction. The satisfaction is even better than enjoying itself. Due to its inexhaustible character, desire necessarily turns to a greater satisfaction. However, this development reveals the following two things: (a) desire cannot turn back to a lesser satisfaction, and more importantly (b) desire is necessarily dependent on its other. Thirdly, as experienced relation, desire seeks to have the other exhibit itself as worthy of satisfying completely. If the other is not capable, Desire is put at risk, for the other threatens its preservation.

Thus, the dialectical chain of Desire manifests itself in the development of being. That is, desire is educative because it is the in-itself, that through mediation, returned-into-itself developed. This mediation is an *und*, not a for-itself, which at this stage self-consciousness does not

quite completely grasp. Once Hegel completes his curriculum in the Absolute, he reminds us that the task of our education is to “re-collect” the “beings as they are in themselves.” Hegel’s *Phenomenology* as a work of “re-collection” of beings brings philosophy closer to form of actual knowing, where it can purge itself from the title of desire *for* knowing, and lay claim *to be* actual knowing.

Desire as the Repetition of a Gap: Lacan on Human Development

For Lacan, as for Hegel, any understanding of childhood and education is based in a concept of human existence thoroughly conditioned in its nature by its relations to its others. In Lacan’s work, the ultimate human condition is “the fact that there is no genesis except on the basis of discourse”—that all human beginnings come late to a world that is already at play and in which existing rules of language have shaped the subject’s becoming before she has had the opportunity to shape herself (1999, p. 16). In considering the human child as subject, it might be more illuminating to claim that its genesis in discourse is twofold, with each birth or emergence into the world premised upon its discursive double.

On the one hand, the human body is born as an object of biological conditions in the form of physical needs that consequently place a demand upon its caretakers to satisfy those needs. Expressing its needs in the form of a demand for love, the child is born again into language, only to find those needs alienated by a failure of language to capture the subject’s intent. As the emerging user of a language grows to master its tools, seeking more precision of meaning in order to properly convey herself, the self that she creates and re-creates in language becomes further subject to the laws and the values conveyed therein. Through the translation of needs into descriptions of the self in ever more refined expressions of language, the subject produces herself as a linguistic double of its incomplete body, with desire standing as the linguistic counterpart of the body’s biological needs (Lacan, 1977, p. 287).

The child’s second birth as a subject of language in time finds its first birth retrospectively. With the advent of desire, the subject’s motivations are tied to the fulfillment of a complete selfhood that can be realized in language and thereby recognized as such by another. The promise of such completeness is suggested, according to Lacan, in the romantic relationship, wherein the demand for love that marks the child’s relationship to the caretaker is repeated as the demand each lover makes for the love of its other. In responding to the lover’s demand for love and effectively taking on the role of the caretaker, the subject stands in the enigmatic position of completeness that she had presumed of those who responded to her own demands.

Throughout the subject’s rebirths and refashioning of herself as subject to language, what remains constant is the movement of externality that drives the subject in a repeated detour from the self in order to overcome its elemental negativity through an overcoming of the other. Just as Hegel theorizes desire as a “negation of what is negative for self-consciousness,” the same outward negation as an affirmation of selfhood is present in Lacan’s language as an appropriation of the otherness of the world, a consuming of all that has not been claimed by the subject’s purposes through language.

From Hegel’s statement that “self-consciousness is Desire in general” the outwardly directed, consuming adventuring of the self in the world might seem a self-centered undertaking, insofar as it equates the subject’s understanding of himself with his own selfish desires at the expense of the other. Coupled, however, with Hegel’s idea that it is “something other than self-

consciousness that is the essence of Desire,” (Lacan, 1977, p. 175) the identity between desire and the subject becomes complicated, as a detour away from the subject, toward the object of desire, lies at the center of its assumed identity. The consuming action by the subject comes into focus as directed not only *toward* the desired other but *by* the desired other. In a more abbreviated form, Lacan expresses the same notion already found in Hegel: “man’s desire is the Other’s desire” (p. 4).

Lacan’s formulation can be read in at least two ways, depending on how the indeterminate referents he employs get fixed in our readings. On the one hand, each human subject wants to be desired by other subjects; on the other hand, the human subject’s desires tend to conform to those of other subjects around it. Far from being mutually exclusive, these two readings recount the emergence of the subject as subject to language and the laws of its given community. Through the relational principle of the first reading, the structural, communal component of the second reading is possible. An additional complication we can add to these readings, strengthening their ties, is that the Other that Lacan invokes here is no mere other but the *grand Autre* (the capitalized Other)—a presumed privileged position in relation to the subject and its desires (1981, p. 36). For the purposes of this essay, and for our understanding of the educated subject generally, what we can glean from this complex set of relations of desire is that the subject comes into its purposes, arrives at its motivations, through its ever-growing but never complete understanding of what a completed human subject would want. Education, therefore, never happens without authority, but the function of this authority is to provide the distance across which the student subject’s imagination of the authority’s completion might ignite and propel its desires.

The implication of otherness (in a general sense, both as capitalized authority and common erotic objects) as containing the essence of desire, and desire as the determining characteristic of subjectivity, is that we must understand subjectivity as taking shape outside itself, and the idea of self-creation through the consuming of otherness as a fiction maintained while each conquest or seduction of otherness attaches the subject to another form of otherness that further defines it. As the desire that initiates and mediates the consuming of the other allows for the other’s role in the shaping of the self, we are indeed what we eat.

Viewed from the perspective of desire, the question of “what we eat” becomes the central question of education. The venturing of self-consciousness in the world to find satisfaction in its assertion of self-certainty-as-truth is educative in all cases, as it establishes, in each case, a relationship to some aspect of the world that shapes subjectivity. The goal of such an education would not be to locate and characterize antecedent desires as creative or destructive and requiring support or interdiction, but instead to educe and produce in the subject desires that support the continuance of those norms favored by the social body the school serves, by presenting the subject with corresponding objects of desire. Taking advantage of the subject’s drive to consume the other, and of the way in which this consuming constructs subjectivity, education is reconceived as the site where “the subject manifests himself in his gap, namely, in that which causes his desire,” and takes on characteristics appropriate to the object he pursues (Lacan, 1999, p. 16).⁶

Conclusion

In this paper we have offered an alternative to a pre-discursive understanding of the child’s energies in two parallel theories of desire that illustrate the thoroughly constructed nature of the

developing subject's motivations. Developed in each case from a negativity that is central to the human condition, desire in both Hegel and Lacan provides both the occasion of self-consciousness or subjectivity in its relation to otherness, as well as the consequence of the subject's relation to the world, a self-definition that is only possible through otherness. Central to education, according to this understanding, is the drawing out of desire that results in self-consciousness taking on a particular shape in relation to the purposes of the larger community to which it belongs.

The upshot of such a relational re-visioning of the child's energies and drives suggests a parallel revision of our ways of seeing a host of educational problems, from discipline to motivation and interest. Interest—a term which already has a long history in educational thought as a connector of “personal” concerns and “academic” goals—comes to reflect instead the existing distance between our students' desires and the ideals and purposes we would have them take up in the name of social reproduction. Motivation—the term which shifts perhaps most dramatically in rethinking the student subject in terms of her desires—loses its Romantic association with notions of authenticity and purity of the will, but in being turned inside out suggests new possibilities of understanding the perversities and ambivalences that are often carried by desires in relation to their objects. From these shifts in our understanding of students' connection to academic subjects and social norms, it is clear that discipline, from the perspective of the educated subject as a desiring being, can never be understood as a shaping of a pre-existing life force or original drive by means of external pressures, but must be reconsidered in terms of the student's capacity to seek fulfillment through the disciplines in which she engages.

If we begin with the widely held idea that the child is moved by powers specific to the child that pre-exist the child's relation to the world, it is difficult to imagine that the power of education will ever be anything more than a list of *thou shalt not*s tacked on in a limiting fashion to an untutored self that continues to lurk behind its polished façade throughout its life. If, on the other hand, we are to hold that education might produce human striving as subject to the beliefs and norms of a given community, we might better explain affective outcomes of education such as pride, commitment or moral outrage in which the claim that learning makes on the learner gives the lie to any theory of pre-existing drives disciplined by force.

The crisis of the coming generation, the promise of renewal and a threat of destruction recognized by theorists such as Arendt, Buber and Dewey, receives both support and radical reframing in light of Hegel's understanding of self-consciousness and Lacan's theory of subjectivity based in desire. Rather than conceiving of the failure of education as the inability to defend society against the onslaught of youth as an unbridled natural force, educators' greater failure might be understood as an inability to inspire students' desires for the things they ought to love.⁷ Rather than focus our own energies on restricting or redirecting the existing desires of the young as we might with natural forces, we might do better to understand how to produce those desires that will best serve our communities.

NOTES

1. Hegel, 1971, p. 304

2. This general understanding holds true even in conceptions of education as directed toward social change or renewal or revolutionary possibility, as in Arendt (1980).

3. We might inquire whether there is a shadow here of Dewey's early interest in recapitulation theory, pointing to the idea that if children were to take over, the world would return to some earlier, darker period of human history.

4. The tensions produced by such a model of sublimation are explored in greater depth in psychoanalytic work on the relationship between the individual and society (see, for instance, Freud 1961, p. 51—52, 55—56, & passim).
5. For more on this notion of “und” see Verene, 1985.
6. Lacan’s understanding of his own educational practice in the psychoanalytic relation similarly lends itself to an interpretation of the scene of instruction as a scene of desire: “I intend to begin from the extremes of what I am supposing: to isolate oneself with another to teach him what? What he is lacking!” and further, “I am not there when all is said and done for his good, but in order that he should love.” Lacan 1961, p. 1.11
7. The question of *what* students ought to love is entirely beyond the scope of this essay, in which we merely attempt to describe the subject of education in terms of the desires excited within it by educational objects and images external to it.

REFERENCES

- Arendt, H. (1980). *Between past and future*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Buber, M. (1947). *Between man and man*. Translated by Ronald Gregor Smith. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.
- Dewey, J. (1944). *Democracy and education*. New York: The Free Press.
- Freud, S. (1961). *Civilization and its discontents*. Translated by James Strachey. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1971). *Early theological writings*. Translated by T.M. Knox. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1991). *Encyclopedia logic*. Translated by T.F. Geraets, W.A. Suchting, H.S. Harris. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1977). *Phenomenology of spirit*. Translated by A.V. Miller. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Lacan, J. (1961). *The seminar of Jacques Lacan: Transference VIII 1960-1961*. Translated by Cormac Gallagher, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Available at karnacbooks.com.
- Lacan, J. (1977). *Ecrits*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Lacan, J. (1981). *The four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Lacan, J. (1999). *On feminine sexuality, the limits of love and knowledge, 1972-1973*. Translated by Bruce Fink. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Liotard, J. F. (1991). *The inhuman*. Translated by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Verene, D. P. (1985) *Hegel’s recollection: A study of images in the phenomenology of spirit*. Albany: SUNY Press.

