

First Cry and Dying Breath: The Door to Transcendence in Education

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Abstract

This paper aims to present a single view on the best way to understand the problem of transcendence in education by adopting a standpoint that regards “the human practice of care for life” as the essence of education. Taking education as “the practice of care for life,” there exist two poles in life from which the imputation of its basis and significance must, in principle, depart and to which it must return. Namely, these are the moments at which each of us, as human beings, are born and then die, respectively, because they are events that transcend our intentions and plans. This paper focuses on the first cry of a newly born baby and the final breath that accompanies our dying moment, unraveling issues that are involved with the problem of transcendence in education. To be precise, the discussion is advanced with reference to the possibilities of life when the lessons of knowledge and the guidance of technology have yet to be established and or when assistance and support are no longer possible, either physically or psychologically. Education as “the practice of care for life” is, at its root, not an intentional or planned desire that aims at the realization of a good life as an alternative to the here and now. Education, in principle, rather than such a “desire” is something that manifests as a “response” to the summons of a life that is born and passes away in the here and now, before our very eyes. Education is our “prayer” of limitless devotion at the prospect of a life of hardships that has transcended our intentions and plans. Transcendence in education is exclusive to the here and now; it is lived in and through the here and now.

Keywords

transcendence, baby’s first cry, the moment of death, the practice of care for life, education as prayer

On a moonlit night, a button / was left on the strand line. /
 I picked it up: that it might be useful / hardly occurred to me. /
 Somehow I couldn't bear to throw it away; / I tucked it into my sleeve. /
 On a moonlit night, a button / was dropped on the strand line. /
 I picked it up: that it might be useful / hardly occurred to me. /
 I couldn't throw it at the moon; / I couldn't throw it at the waves. /
 I tucked it into my sleeve. /
 On a moonlit night, the button I picked up / shook me to the fingerends, shook me to
 the heart. /
 On a moonlit night, the button I picked up: / how could I throw it away?

Chūya Nakahara, "Beach on a Moonlit Night"
 (trans. Mackintosh and Sugiyama)¹

1. The "here and now"

To begin, I would like to briefly clarify my own understanding of "an orientation toward alternatives that are not possibilities in the here and now," which is positioned as a starting point for the discussion in this symposium. Later, I will proceed to the problem of "transcendence," which has been marked out to advance the discussion.

When I say "alternatives that are not possibilities in the here and now," the "here and now" to which I refer is not some given present moment or particular location. Rather, it could be a viewpoint reflexively and selectively adopted in view of the ongoing educational event. By relying on this viewpoint, we consider an instance of education in order to imbue it with meaning. While the way in which we perceive education in the here and now varies depending on these acts of reflection and selection, at the same time, envisioned and perceived in each of these acts is an instance of education located in some "beyond" that is *not* the here and now, which could also be called a "beyond" in relation to educational possibilities in the here and now.

¹ This poem was famously composed immediately after the death of Chūya's elder son, Fumiya, at the age of two. At that time, the poet was still reeling from the mental anguish brought on by his lingering grief. A button washed on a beach by a wave catches the narrator's eye by chance in "Beach on a Moonlit Night." This button becomes an object of obsession that the narrator simply cannot toss away. Viewing the poem in terms of the thesis put forward in this essay, a perfectly ordinary button encountered on a beach (representing a "here and now"), simply by virtue of its overwhelmingly commonplace and nondescript element, opens the door to the transcendence of involvement with the lost Fumiya. It is simply by the virtue of Chūya's way of being in the "here and now," of not being able to toss away the button, that the door to what lies "beyond" the "here and now" is opened and the image of Fumiya, lost forever to the "here and now," can nevertheless be touched in the "here and now."

It is my belief that this “beyond” is not some “next stage” indicated on the basis of some fundamental prospective outlook related to an overall process of change and transition, such as is found in human development theory or progressive views of history related to social and humanistic values. This “beyond” is not a “here and now” of a decisively different character in response to the continuous and gradual changes and transitions similar to progress or development; it is always something other than what lies next to the “here and now” in either time or space. The academic study of education, while devoting its inquisitive gaze to the pursuits of teaching/cultivating and learning/growing in the “here and now,” has attempted to pursue the very wellsprings of the forces that fundamentally drive such changes and transitions in the possibilities for human life. Through this effort, it has likely honed its sensibility to a “beyond” after the “here and now” that is reached by breaking through the gradual standards of what lies “next” in both time and space.

However, I am somewhat hesitant to connect the problem of the involvement between such education and the “beyond” directly with a discussion on a “desire” that yearns for a “different kind” of education. This is because I am concerned that the idea of a “different kind” could be perceived as “a new situation that has dismissed pursuits in the here and now.” This concern is linked with the faint but not easily dispelled feeling of discomfort over the fact that when I rely on this way of perceiving “difference,” the “beyond” in education also comes to be positioned as an object for research with visible and concrete form, the significance and challenges of which are then discussed critically as a matter of course. The feeling of discomfort, for me, seems to have a close relationship with the problem of determining the ideal way to think about “transcendence” in the context of particular educational events.

Keeping in mind this understanding with regard to “alternatives to the here and now,” I describe some of my own narrow insights on a view that finds the transcendent in education and the ways it is given significance.

2. Education as “the practice of care for life”

There are likely a variety of standpoints with regard to where we should look to find the core of an educational event. Our pursuits in contemporary society increasingly strengthen the tendency to functionally differentiate, with mutual interrelations as a standard of social utility and economic efficiency. Education, too, is understood, analyzed, and explained from such a perspective of utility and efficiency as a social function that is exercised in constant relation to various other social phenomena. Under such

circumstances, it is not easy to question what education is without any restrictions as to its primal character or wholeness, that is, without interrogating it from the standpoint of educational philosophy. As soon as you begin to answer what education is in the first place, the varied series of phenomena therein labelled as “education,” from whatever perspective or standard, are discerned at that moment in relation to various other social phenomena that exist in close proximity; this directly and certainly leads to the critique on whether these phenomena can also be defined as “education” in the contemporary academic study of education.

I certainly cannot deny the current validity or significance of such a critique for the study of educational philosophy. Nevertheless, in the present paper, given that I seek a thorough and rigorous critical redefinition of the concept of “education” and am aware of being possibly accused of bias in terms of the refinement of my themes and the roughness of the texture of my polemics, I would like to propose, somewhat audaciously, a consideration along the following lines. I wish to posit that education is, in its most straightforward and essential sense, “the human practice of care for life.” Here, “life”² refers to the complete whole of our lived existence as humans, founded through a perspective that fully comprises the dimension of our own lives and lifestyles³ as well as life in its biological, social, historical, and even cultural, moral, and religious modes. Similarly, by “care,” I refer to the whole body of human pursuits fully comprising the ways in which we express solicitude and outreach to the lives of others. In this sense, care can be expressed in a variety of activities: from protection, upbringing, tuition, and guidance to assistance and cooperation, encouragement and sympathy, or even nursing and palliative care.

Posited thusly as “the practice of care for life,” it is evident that education is a pursuit that may take place both inside or outside home or school and, in principle, over an entire

² As distinct senses for the term *inochi* (“life”), the *Nihon Kokugo Daijiten* cites terms such as *seimei* (“life”), *jumyō* (“lifespan”), *shōgai* (“lifetime”), *isshō* (“whole life”), *unmei* (“destiny”), *tenmei* (“fate”), *yuiitsu no tanomi* (“the last recourse”), *sonomono dokutoku no yosa* (“a unique good in itself”), and *shinzui* (“essential core”), and traces the etymology of the term from roots that include *i-no-uchi* (“the substance of breath”) and *iki-no-uchi* (“the substance of being alive”), and *inochi* (in the senses of “the substance of spirit,” “breath-route,” “breath-force,” and “life-spirit”). Although I have not been able to do so in the present essay, should the opportunity arise, I would also like to attempt a consideration that follows up the threads offered by these various senses and etymologies.

³ As a point of departure for the humanistic questions related to the various dimensions of meaning surrounding the word “life” (*inochi*), Shizuteru Ueda offers a distinctive discussion of the structure of the “self-awareness of ‘living’ implicit within the three closely related words *seimei*, *sei*, and *inochi*” (1991: 47) and “the associations among the three qualities of living, namely *seimei*, *sei*, and *inochi*” (1998: 19). While I cannot, in this paper, enter into a detailed explanation of the features of Ueda’s understanding of “life” (*inochi*), I acknowledge that my conceptualization of the idea in this essay has been inspired, in part, by Ueda’s discussion. Although Manabu MURASE’s “life studies” (Murase 1991, 1995) can also be cited as another inspired discussion, I will leave consideration of Murase’s views to another time.

lifetime. The basis of this notional supposition is constituted by a view of “life” that considers that even as we, as humans, are absolutely unique entities, the events of our lives over the course of our lifetimes form our mutual solicitude and outreach for each other. That is to say, life, while taking individually separate forms, through the entire process of its unfolding, can be understood as being lived out together in a relation of caring and being cared for by each other.

3. A view of education and the poles that confer meaning

When we understand the essence of education as “the practice of care for life,” what we may call life’s two poles become manifest. These poles are two points from which how we see the pursuits of education that are lived out in daily life and how we give them meaning repeatedly depart, both in principle and in a symbolic manner, and to which these perspectives always return. In other words, these two poles are the moments of our birth and death as individual human beings.

Witnessing the moment a baby vocalizes its first cry in the world or the moment someone draws their dying breath invokes powerful, irrepressible emotions in people—particularly immediate family members and other loved ones—and makes them deeply aware of the fact that life fundamentally comes into being and disappears in every event and that it is education that encourages our involvement with such matters.⁴

The moments of birth and death represent life events at their most extreme. They are the points by which the pursuit of education as “the practice of care for life” is first encouraged and to which it finally gets. Further, the significance of these extremes is that life events, in principle, transcend all of our intentions and plans.

Although we have the freedom to decide when to have a child, we do not choose to give birth to a specific child and no other; similarly, this limitation extends to the child as well, who is born to be a specific child and no other. In addition, although we can make plans to provide long-term nursing care for elderly parents by fully utilizing existing information and knowledge, we cannot choose when the final day will come. In the face of birth and death, we unconsciously enter into the most primordial and fundamental ways of practicing “care for life,” transcending the dimensions of intentional involvement

⁴ Accounts bearing witness to the events of birth and death are too numerous to mention. Here, it will suffice to quote the following passage by Itsurō Yamanouchi, who describes the moment of a baby’s first cry from the unique perspective of a pediatrician: “Then, with the final contraction, as though squeezed out, the entire body emerges. For an instant, it grabs at the empty air. It struggles, spreading its arms wide. Frowning, sobbing, it sucks in a big breath ... Here is the first breath. In the next instant, it is expelled with a strong wail. The child is born. Now it breathes. Now it lives!” (Yamanouchi 1986:1).

and deliberate engagement. To a newborn child, we teach neither letters nor numbers. We are determined simply to shower it with overflowing love, to cradle the child and whisper to it without care as to whether or not our words are heeded. Similarly, an elderly parent who has just passed away will neither respond nor nod when we speak to them. We may repeatedly attempt to speak to them, half-knowing that no answer will ever come—that our nods will not be returned. When these attempts finally and unavoidably disappear into the void, we cannot but stand still at the bedside, bowing our heads in the company of our overwhelming grief. Such are the possibilities for “the practice of care for life” at the moments of birth and death and the possibilities for “a life that cares and is cared for” that appear therein. In the context of this paper, these moments are the poles for how “education” is viewed and conferred with significance.

This position taken by the present paper, which regards “the human practice of care for life” to be the essence of education, thus presents a renewed perspective by focusing on life in terms of its extreme moments of birth and death. The paper is an attempt to discover the primordial and fundamental character of education, especially in the possibilities of care at these extremes of life. If we can, for the moment, understand the concept of “desire” in the context of the “pedagogical desire” (that has been raised as a topic for discussion) to be an emotional dynamic that attempts to engage with an object in an intentional or planned fashion so as to render the involvement with the object desirable to oneself and that attempts to realize or achieve some change in the object commensurate with the said intention or plan, it would be extremely difficult to call the pursuit of education as “the practice of care for life” a form of “desire.”

While it is, after all, impossible for us to deliberately select or intentionally contemplate with regard to births and deaths in this world, life is even still inevitably engendered through us: it motivates us and propels us toward this “care.” If we pay attention as we are shot through with irresistible torment, it is life that engages and involves us. In this way, when we understand the life we encounter in the context of “the practice of care for life,” education, more than “desire,” is likely rather a “response to life” in the form that implicitly follows on from the requests that emanate from the respective events of life themselves. Furthermore, it could be argued that this “response,” just as conceivably as for the aforementioned embrace of the newborn child or attempt to speak to a parent, who has just passed away, could keep being extended without any concern as to whether the life we seek can acknowledge or reply to our follow-on response. In this sense, education as “the practice of care for life” is also a “prayer to life.” I say “prayer” because the aim is not to acquire something from the object or to fulfill something in the object but to dedicate ourselves entirely to the object without the expectation of return.

4. The “here and now” and transcendence at the moments of birth and death

The pursuit of education as “the practice of care for life” holds the point in time when tuition and guidance (whether of knowledge or technique) have yet to be established and that when help and support (either physical or emotional) are no longer possible as the two polar extremes of life in which we are involved and engaged. By repositioning the ways in which we view and give meaning to education toward the beginning and end of such life manifestations, it will be possible for the door to what lies “beyond” the “here and now” to be opened in the pursuit of education.

Nevertheless, the births and deaths of our loved ones are certainly also life events in the “here and now” in that they take place in this world. In that sense, even when faced with such life extremes, we can still speak of education as “the practice of care for life” in the “here and now” in each case. At the same time, however, does this not stir our thoughts about the situation of life before birth and the abode of life after death?⁵ While we see birth as the beginning of life, the view that apprehends this as the beginning considers birth as a beginning that is, at the same time, the end of something. While we see death as the end of life, the view that apprehends this as an ending considers death as an ending that is, at the same time, the beginning of something new. As we embrace an infant as though to wrap it up in the instant after its first cry and as we stroke the withered hand of a loved one who has just breathed her final breath as though in thanks, it is through the life events of birth and death in the “here and now” that we think of endings and beginnings of “the practice of care for life” somewhere “beyond” the “here and now.”

The events of birth and death, even though they take place in the “here and now,” also invite and open us to a world that transcends the “here and now”—toward our involvement “beyond” the “here and now.” From this paper’s standpoint, when education is said to have turned its gaze upon and become devoted to “different” and better life possibilities not found in the “here and now,” these possibilities are not present as a reality in some separate space isolated from the “here and now.” Education as the “practice of care for life” found along the journey of life, with its two poles of birth and death, is a testament to the fact that our lives, simply by virtue of their pursuit in the “here and now,”

⁵ Discussions relevant to this thesis are those of Shūji Wada (1995, 2002), whose key concept of “the courage to educate” derives from a spirited engagement with the difficult challenge of making “a thorough reflection of postwar education,” which he undertakes with the intention of restoring trust and hope in modern education. Wada suggests that what inspires us with the “courage to educate” by directing us from the wellspring of its existence toward education that looks beyond nihilism is “solidarity with and responsibility to unborn children and the dead” (Wada 2002: 97).

are secretly yet certainly in contact with an everlasting moment that lies “beyond” the “here and now.”

Transcendence in education must truly be said to lie in the “here and now” and, moreover, to be lived through the “here and now.”⁶

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⁶ In connection with my provisional conclusion for this discussion, I would like to cite the research conducted by Kei Hachiya, who discusses “transcendence in education” from a unique perspective and conceptual framework (Hachiya 1983, 1985). Through his learnings with the educational philosopher Motomori Kimura, a member of the Kyoto School, Hachiya notes that to regard human beings as technologically proficient beings who strive to live better by applying themselves to their environment is also to regard the basis of education, in the broadest sense, as the transmission of technology. He argues that this world of technology is supported by a transcendent world within which it is structurally encompassed; he further holds that “for human beings to live in the world of technology is for them to also have a world of transcendence” (Hachiya 1983:34).