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Being Written: Thinking the Normative in the EdD

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Abstract

In this paper I give various reasons why the EdD programme helpfully heightens our normative senses. The writing of a thesis in time and hence the realisation that the same time – that window of opportunity – to do other things and enjoy other experiences is traded off, comports the students in a manner which heightens his or her sense of one's temporality and invites reflexive consideration of what is it that truly matters. Thus embarking on an graduate programme and writing an EdD is an invitation to

theorize no doubt – we are invited to read, think, to reason, discuss and to write down our thoughts. But at the end of the day, it is the EdD that writes us. In the midst of our scholarly striving, it shapes us and graces us with the keen sense of what it is that ultimately matters. Such grasp of what truly matters ought then to inform our own reform of our scholarly and professional discourses in our field.

KEYWORDS

Doctorate, temporality, ethics, Heidegger, Finnis

Thinning the Normative: Performativity and the Business of Education

The business of education quite often is normative. Yet there are at least two different senses of the normative, of what “ought to be (done)”. There is, firstly, the normative in the sense of what one should to do in order to achieve a certain goal. For instance, when one says that, in order to start the engine of the car, one ought to insert the key and give it a good twist. When thinking and acting thus, one is indeed thinking about what one ought to do, and when executing the prescription, doing what one ought to do. Yet the “normativity” in such thinking and doing is in fact very *thin*: it is really at the end of the day, a technical-rationality at work. Or again: a mathematician who works out that the shortest distance between two locations is the straight path that connects them, and advises you to walk on that path if you wish to get from one place to the other efficiently: “you ought to walk that straight path!” In both these examples, the kind of “normative” thinking or prescription is at the end of the day really a kind of or result of theoretical or speculative thinking.

This kind of thin normative thinking is distinguishable from the much more robustly normative *qua* the ethical. At least, it is not the kind of thinking that

considers the good and the bad, the just and the unjust. Someone who errs in this kind of thin normative thinking – say the car technician who gives the wrong advice about how one ought to start the engine, or the mathematician who gives the wrong advice about how one ought to walk most efficiently – would not be criticized for being immoral or unjust, or evil. He may be accused of stupidity (if we must be so unkind to accuse him of that!) – still his stupidity is in no sense an ethical or moral fault.

Educational work, as was said earlier, is typically normative. At the same time, research has suggested that, in some contexts, the lived-experience of a teacher – the life-world of a teacher at work-- could well be pruned of the opportunity to think the robustly normative. Meaning, the normative thinking that operates in these situations would be predominantly the thinly normative, or what is really merely a kind of technical, speculative thinking. Stephen J Ball's (2003) well known piece on the terrors of performativity in UK schools and its effects on the teacher's agency comes to mind. There, one is caught up, in the *sheer business of the everyday running of the school*, in the speculative-technical thinking about how to achieve one's (given) goals; to think the "why" is either a luxury or self-consciously repressed. In worst case scenarios, one can imagine such technical-rationality becoming dominant to the point of fully displacing the

robustly normative when the pressure to placate the terrors of performativity is strong – here one's mind is as it were given over to the ventriloquism which parrots official discourses and too eagerly adopts prescribed ends without critical assimilation, and one's energy is spent performing to these ends (see Chua 2009; also Ball 2003; compare Labaree 2003).

Writing, Temporality and Thinking the Normative

Fortunately such a life, which in its everydayness risks forgetting to think the robustly normative, can be fractured as one enters graduate school. At least, I hope in this piece to argue for the way in which one's immersion in a doctoral programme, such as an EdD, can afford the thinking of the robustly normative.

My case is premised on the way in which, I would argue, thesis writing helpfully locates the candidate in that relevantly normative comportment or stance; my sense is that it foregrounds what I would like to call our “temporality” or finitude, which I think is helpful for encouraging one to think the robustly normative. By “temporality” I mean the notion or belief that our own lives lack a kind of eternity and permanence, that it can come to an end in one way or another, as might for instance, in death. Because it all would inevitably come to an end, what is available to us in life is not unlimited resource, but truly a

“window of opportunity”. Our grasp of our own temporality is hence this acute understanding that each of us exists within this limited or finite window of opportunity. My reader might discern a Heideggerian ring about this discussion. However because there is such a variety of interpretations (see Dreyfus, 2017) of what Heidegger means by and thinks is important about “temporality” (the result perhaps of his very opaque style; see a ranting lamentation in Edwards, 1989), I hesitate to say that my thoughts are derived directly from Heidegger. Still, some of Heidegger's writings seem to resonate with what I have in mind here.

Perhaps by beginning with a real-life example I could more easily bring across what I mean to unpack. Recently my colleague, Dr. Benjamin Wong, passed on very suddenly. There seems the suggestion, in Heidegger's *Being and Time*, that death is something we often fail to think about and confront, and that whilst we hear of other people's death, we still treat death as something distant (see Heidegger 1962:296-304): “One *knows* about the certainty of death, and yet ‘is’ not authentically certain of one’s own” (ibid: 302) Heidegger appears to think this unfortunate and he wants us to take death more seriously, to think and realise that it is something that we have ourselves to confront (ibid.) But Heidegger was not being morbid I think. I read him as resonating with my point that our own confrontation with our own death casts light, ironically, on our present lives. The

consciousness of our finitude (or “temporality”) positively reminds us to take our present existence seriously, and to treasure it more, and to value much more that finite time that we have. There is the similar Daoist and Zen-Buddhist notion, captured in the Japanese Bushido interest in cherry blossoms, that one ought to really focus on and cherish the present, when one can arrive at the appreciation of death, of the idea that what is present soon passes away; some suggest these Asian sources had inspired some of Heidegger’s ideas (in particular see Graham Park’s (1996) discussions on the interaction between Heidegger and Tanabe).

More recently, Richard Capobianco (2014: 38-49) has highlighted what in Heidegger is his fascination with nature-*physis*, which is the coming and *passing away* of phenomena. Attentiveness to nature-*physis*, Heidegger seems to suggest, leads to the originary Greek experience, that wonder or awe in relation to the presencing of nature (Ibid:44.). And it is this “coming-and-passing-away”, this finitude of nature-*physis* that is associated with what he calls the *enargeia* (ibid.: 15), the *gleaming* of nature, that Heidegger thinks the poet Hölderlin captured.

The point here is: our unevasive attentiveness to temporality, to finitude, sharpens our grasp of the value of the present, as well as the value (or not!) of things in the present.

I am less pessimistic than Heidegger about the way other people's death fail to inspire reflections of our own finitude. In any event, the death of a close colleague certainly facilitated serious thinking about the life that we still have. It is also certainly not just my experience; discussions with others about his passing focused not merely on his life, but also of our own, *of how precious life is whilst we have ours*. Hence one grasps the way in which life is transient, and therefore merely a window of opportunity, which is indeed depressing, but also insightful. One could say the reflexive re-valuation of our own lives was an intuitive and very natural response. I think in general it invites serious evaluation of our present existence. But an evaluation of what is presently available as life also entails a (re-) evaluation of what one puts into it, of what is essential, and what is truly important – of what truly matters: “...is this or that truly worth doing?”; “...what really ought I fill my life with?” Here we are in the realm of the robustly normative, the ethical.

Of course, such an anecdotal account of one person's experience is no basis for hasty generalization. Yet thinking through this and similar scenarios, as a thought experiment, strongly suggest it is unlikely that anyone who encounters death in one form or another fails to evaluate what it is that truly matters; thus imagine if you were in my shoes – what are some of the things that come to

mind? Are there really no questions that arise regarding what life ought to be about? It would be very unlikely, I suspect. Consider a related and relevant thought experiment developed by Robert Nozick and adapted by John Finnis, in which we are invited to consider plugging in for life into an experience machine which delivers all kind of pleasures in the mind but leaves us floating for good in a tank of water (Finnis 1980:95-97). Whilst not “death” in the typical physical sense, the invitation to and the approaching decision to surrender and hence *terminate* our lives as we typically know it (i.e., *not* merely floating in a tank of water) stimulates intuitions and invites questions about what is it that truly matters, and whether it is merely pleasure we ought to seek. It also forces us to ask whether if we do plug in we are plugging in into a life of futility, whether we are truly trading off the things that matter, and whether we ought not plug into the machine. And I would underscore that what is interesting in this whole exercise – this foregrounding of our temporality and finitude – is not merely that it steers us in the direction of *asking about* the truly normative. More importantly, as with the experience machine thought experiment, are the answers it gives: values or goods are grasped in that the exercise. The deliverances of that exercise of our consciousness of our temporality include some very concrete ideas about certain goods or states of affairs being choice-worthy and constitutive of our

flourishing and fulfillment: the goods of knowledge, of friendship, of life, of aesthetic experience, and so forth (see Finnis 1980). Meaning, with the attentiveness to our temporality, the choice-worthy goods gleam (*enargeia*) yet more brightly, “awe” (*thaumazo*) us, and draw us to peer at them with that wonder that energizes (*energizea*) us to seek them, to borrow a pun from Aristotle (Allen, 2010:60).

There are several ways, I think, that being in an EdD programme and the writing of a thesis foregrounds our temporality and affords such thinking about the robustly normative, and clears the way for the important things to gleam more vividly. Firstly there is the fact that one is *writing* an EdD thesis. For sure, one writes EdD's for a variety of reasons, and different persons have different motivations for writing an EdD. Still there is something inescapably true about all *writing of* EdD's. (I should add that these below reflections seem to me true not only of EdD's but PhD's as well). Already the very act of putting something into a text is the making permanent of some set of ideas – ideas that want to be put down and made permanent because of their (counter-factual) impermanence where they not written down. So writing seeks in principle to get around our temporality – we write these down, put these down on record, in part because we

are not going to be around forever to communicate these; the recorded text will do that in our stead.

Secondly, the writing of an EdD is a choice one makes with some substantial sacrifice. There is of course the cost of the EdD which one bears, and for that amount of money one puts into the programme, one trades off other purchases and hence opportunities in life that one can consume. But more than money, one also trades off time. One spends one's time *on the EdD* and so gives up what else could have been done with that time. This keen sense that one trades things and other experiences off becomes very obvious when students who fail to complete the EdD lament how not how much money they have spent, but the time they had spent on the programme – time which they could have spent doing something else. The very sense that there are *trade-offs* – that something else is *given up* for this – is intelligible only against the backdrop of an understanding of our own temporality. We know that we do not live forever, and so cannot indulge in the accumulation of *all* experiences, and therefore, whilst this window of opportunity is open, we need to make choices about what to put into it, before it shuts. We do not get the chance to postpone things, to do it later, to re-arrange the order of these life-experiences; rather these are things that have to be given up altogether. Each time one on-goingly commits to the writing of the thesis, one has to give up

other experiences and things as well as the time for these things, and one *knows* these things are traded off, and one also grasps that one is making these choices in the context of one's temporality, of one's finitude, within the available window of opportunity. With that grasp of one's temporality, then the valuable goods, the things that truly matter, are grasped, as I argued above.

I would add the qualification that the grasping of the important and valuable does not necessarily imply that the EdD is always a positive experience on the whole for everyone; it has to be acknowledged that the experience of the EdD could be different for different persons. However, the grasp of one's temporality and the attendant grasp of what truly matters, and the thinking about the robustly normative, I argue, is true for all persons – whether or not on the whole the experience of the EdD turns out positive.

It is also useful to note that this foregrounding of one's temporality from which follows the showing of the robustly normative is not the effect of some type of cost-benefit analysis. In cost-benefit analysis one has some sense of a commensurate value in terms of which two options are weighed one against the other: one chooses x-good because x-good instantiates more of z-value in comparison with y-good. In and of itself cost-benefit analysis does not make

visible the robustly normative – the robustly normative needs already to be assumed and visible in the form of the commensurate value which is then used to compare options. Of course, when one contemplates trading off something for another, there could well be some cost-benefit analysis. Still, such cost-benefit analysis itself does not yield any new insight into what truly matters – it simply judges, given what one already thinks matters, which of these options instantiate that which one thinks matters. Yet at the same time, there is also the recognition of our finitude. And it is *this grasp of our finitude*, our temporality, that I would argue shows the robustly normative, as said earlier.

Being Written: Theoria, the Gaze of the Gods and Repentance

In this paper I have suggested why the EdD is a good location for the heightening of our normative senses. The writing of a thesis in time and hence the realization that the same time – that window of opportunity – to do other things and enjoy other experiences is traded off, comports the students in a manner which heightens his or her sense of one's temporality and invites reflexive consideration and a grasp of what is it that truly matters.

Heidegger was happy to call to our attention the very etymology of “theory”. He pointed out how *theoria* in fact derives from two greek words, *théa*, which means the “goddess”, and *harao*, which is her “gazing back”. For him *theoria* was never the achievement of merely the human striving to know; unless the gods return their gaze, one remains unenlightened (Rojcewicz, 2006:7-8). In his sense our approach to the truth is less of our initiative, and more the action of the gods. It is the gods, and only the gods, that save us. I suspect this consideration of *theoria* can be borrowed and applied in our case. Embarking on a graduate programme and writing an EdD is an invitation to theorize no doubt – we are invited to read, think, to reason, discuss and to write down our thoughts. Yet at the end of the day, it is the EdD that writes us – it returns its gaze on us, amidst our human scholarly striving. It shapes us and graces us with the keen sense of what it is that ultimately matters.

Such a display of the robustly normative can of course be greeted with initial enthusiasm but without sustained connection to our own scholarly pursuits. Yet as John Finnis, arguing in a different field (law), has maintained, it should not be the case (see Finnis 1980). Quite the contrary, the robustly normative ought to be the viewpoint based on which we rework the important senses of concepts in our field. In Finnis’ discussion, the concept of interest would be the concept of

“law”. But as I have argued elsewhere, it would be just as true if we were to be thinking about what “teaching” is, or “schooling”, or “professionalism”, or related ideas in our own field, which is “education” (see Chua, 2013). It is this very viewpoint, informed by what truly matters, that helps us grasp what are the senses or meanings of these terms that truly matter, and which we need to surface in debates and scholarly discussions (ibid.), and distinguish from other peripheral or corrupted senses (mis)shaped by undesirable cultures, economic climates or theoretical paradigms. In a sense, and to put it more poetically, having been gazed by the gods, we need to revisit our own professional discourse to reform it, and where necessary, to repent from it.

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