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SUBJECTIFICATION AND EXISTENTIALISM IN CONTEMPORARY EDUCATIONAL THEORY

Subjetivación y existencialismo en la Teoría de la Educación contemporánea

Stefano OLIVERIO
University of Naples Federico II. Italy.
stefano.oliverio@unina.it
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9440-5516

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ABSTRACT

In the present paper, I will investigate contemporary neo-existentialism in educational theory, by exploring the reasons which have recommended the rediscovery of an existentialist stance in our age, the significance of these endeavours for contemporary undertakings and also the manner in which the existentialist thrust has been spelled out. In particular, after situating present-day neo-existentialism against the backdrop of the mid-20th century educational existentialism and after specifying its topicality as a response to neoliberal stranglehold on education, I will focus on two models — «subjectification» and «existential learning» — and show that they ultimately represent two alternative pedagogical options. However, it will be argued, this difference does not exclude the possibility that both models can (and perhaps must) be deployed in contemporary scenarios to counter the human capital invasion of education, by

operating in different dimensions of education and in response to different educational tasks. Indeed, together they may allow us to re(dis)cover education as an adventure.

Key words: existentialism; learnification; liberal learning; subjectification; Biesta; Bollnow; Arcilla.

RESUMEN

En el presente artículo, profundizaré en el neoexistencialismo contemporáneo en la teoría educativa, explorando las razones que han recomendado el redescubrimiento de una postura existencialista en nuestra época, el significado de estos esfuerzos para las iniciativas contemporáneas, así como la forma en que se ha concretado el impulso existencialista. En particular, tras situar el neoexistencialismo actual en el contexto del existencialismo educativo de mediados del siglo XX y tras precisar su actualidad como respuesta al dominio neoliberal sobre la educación, me centraré en dos modelos: la «subjetivación» y el «aprendizaje existencial»; y mostraré que en última instancia representan dos opciones pedagógicas alternativas. Sin embargo, sostendré que esta diferencia no excluye la posibilidad de que ambos modelos puedan (y quizás deban) desplegarse en los escenarios contemporáneos para contrarrestar la invasión del capital humano en la educación, operando en diferentes dimensiones de la educación y en respuesta a diferentes tareas educativas. De hecho, juntos pueden permitirnos re(des)cubrir la educación como una aventura.

Palabras clave: existencialismo; aprendificación; aprendizaje liberal; subjetivación; Biesta; Bollnow; Arcilla.

1. Introduction

In this paper I plan to investigate some existentialist motifs and themes emerging in the contemporary educational debate in opposition to the dominant discourse of learning, the «age of measurement» (Biesta, 2010), with its emphasis on test-driven practices, and what has been nicely dubbed «the human capital invasion of education» (Saeverot, 2013, p. 1).

The purpose is not that of providing an encyclopedic overview of all (or even the most relevant) authors, who have been proposing an existential understanding of education; rather, I will aim at pinpointing the *reasons* which have prompted the rediscovery of an existentialist stance in educational theory in current scenarios, the *significance* of these endeavours for contemporary undertakings and also the *manner* in which the existentialist thrust is spelled out, insofar as — despite some arguably 'elective affinities' — we can indicate at least two main stances in existential education. In fact, detectable family resemblances — in the invocation of an existential education — should not lead us to cluster together in an indiscriminate way ideas which harp on partly different scores and this work of distinguishing is

not merely an exercise of scholarly accuracy but it may serve to marshal different conceptual devices in response to different educational tasks.

As should become apparent in the following argumentation, we have less to do with an existentialist revival in the sense of an academic or intellectual fashion or of a rediscovery of a philosophical school than with the need to hone conceptual tools and ways of questioning that may allow us to conceive of and practice education without yielding to the stranglehold of some prevailing forms of the pedagogical discourse which risk disfiguring education or, to put it more cautiously, dramatically narrowing down its scope. From this perspective we could speak — a bit humorously and with a bow to Derrida (and Kant) — of an 'existentialist tone recently adopted in educational theory' and investigate the endeavours, on the one hand, to disengage educational theorizing from the grip of learnification, viz., as Biesta (2010, p. 18) has famously put it, «the transformation of the vocabulary to talk about education into one of 'learning' and 'learners'»; and, on the other, to devise pedagogies which take leave of the drumbeating insistence on competences, learning outcomes, problem-solving and similar catchwords and, principally, of the view of human reality that they endorse.

The argumentation will unfold in three steps: first, in section 2, I will outline, in broad strokes, to what concerns the present-day appeal to existential themes respond and whether and to what extent it is connected with the mid-20th century pedagogical existentialism; moreover, in section 3 and 4, I will present two modes of the contemporary call for existential education — subjectification and existential learning — that, despite some relevant similarities, point to two ultimately distinct models; finally, in the concluding section, the differences between the two models are discussed and the respective tasks to which they respond are indicated.

2. A neo-existentialist turn in educational theory?

Reviewing Gert Biesta's highly influential theory about teaching and, more generally, commenting on the kind of theorizing that the Dutch educationalist has been developing over the last fifteen years, Erwin Terhart (2018, pp. 480-481) has spoken of a sort of «neo-existentialism» and indicated its lineage from the stance advocated, in the 1950s-1960s, by Otto Friderich Bollnow, despite this author not appearing in the rich panoply of sources marshaled by Biesta.

While Terhart does not elaborate on this suggestion, it can be used as a helpful entry point to the argument here proposed. Indeed, the work of Bollnow probably represents the most substantial engagement with existentialism in educational theory and outlining the specificities of the contemporary recovery of existentialist themes against the backdrop of his undertaking can provide a perspective from which to look at both the continuities and the novelties of present-day neo-existentialism.

Without being allowed to examine in detail Bollnow's complex conceptual device, I will confine myself to pinpointing some main features. It is, first, to note

that the appeal to existentialism in Bollnow was anything but an obvious move. On the one hand, a few years before establishing a bond between existentialism and educational theory, Bollnow (2011) had called for an «overcoming of existentialism» through the re-activation of a vocabulary of hope, trust, tenacious courage and gratitude in contrast with that of anxiety, nausea, and absurdity typical of the existentialist mood. Against the latter, Bollnow insisted on the need for a *neue Geborgenheit*, a renewed feeling of security and of at-home-ness within the world. On the other, Bollnow (2014a) was clear-sighted in spotting what had made difficult any intimate relation between existentialism and educational theory: these had ignored each other not only for the lack of interest in pedagogical matters on the part of the representatives of existentialism but more fundamentally because the latter had elaborated a view of the human being in which there was no room for some of the fundamental concepts of the classic educational discourse. Indeed, insofar as the idea of existence refers to a 'movement' which is 'enacted' only in the instant and the vital processes of development and existential stability belong, instead, ultimately to inauthentic forms of life, the existentialist discourse seems to attack the key notion of the educational tradition, that of «educability» (*Bildsamkeit*), which demands as its presupposition that continuity and steady advancement which existentialism rejects.

Whether building on the metaphor of organic growth or on that of craftsmanship, the classic educational discourse postulates a temporal development, which is at odds with the existentialist understanding of the human condition: indeed, existentialism emerges as a philosophy of crisis and the emphasis upon what breaks and casts into discussion the normally unfolding manifestations of human life remains a mark of its philosophical thrust. We can put Bollnow's point even more bluntly: for the existentialist mood any normal continuation of human life signals its having become ensnared in inauthentic encrustations that conceal the fundamental groundlessness of existence; this appeals to an ever renewed de-cision (something that chops off what is dead and inert) rather than to a steady movement of advancement. The «decisionist» temporality of existence is ultimately irreconcilable with the gradually unfolding temporality of education.

The ingenious move of Bollnow consists in recognizing this divarication between the classic educational discourse and existentialism, without making it, however, the reason for an expulsion of the latter from the former but rather by pivoting on that divergence as a way to complement the traditional educational theorizing. If this concentrated on the continuous forms of education, existentialism can open our eyes to the discontinuous forms, viz. those obtaining when the usual course of life is disrupted and one is called for a revisitation of one's own existence. The reference is to *critical* moments: the adjective refers both to periods of crisis, marked by a breakdown of the taken-for-granted frames within which we operate, and to the

fact that they appeal to a critical attitude that sieves the positions which have gone stale and, on the other, promote a rejuvenation of our being in the world (Bollnow, 2014b, esp. pp. 154 ff.).

In the interpretation here proposed, this logic of the complement packs a double punch: first, it expands the scope of educational reflection, by granting — via existentialism — theoretical dignity to forms of education not easily hospitable in the classic discourse; and, secondly, it prevents one from capitulating to the existentialist mood, according to which all continuous forms must be deemed as ultimately the manifestation of inauthentic existence. Indeed, Bollnow never ceases to vindicate the validity also of the 'old', continuous forms of education, as the new understandings offered by an existentialist pedagogy do not exhaust the human reality as a whole and the (continuist-evolutive) concept of educability maintains its value as well as do all those educational processes which are built in a continuous way (Bollnow, 2014a, p. 17).

Bollnow strikes an astute balance between traditional educational theory and existentialism: the former comes out enriched, insofar as it finds a way to address phenomena, whose educational tenor cannot be gainsaid but cannot be read in terms of the consolidated vocabulary of the educability; the latter proves to be significant also for the educational realm but it is circumscribed in its momentum: in fact, if it puts us in front of crucial experiences of our being in the world, it may not claim that the experiences it helps us to recognize are the only ones genuinely educative.

Bollnowian motifs may actually resonate in contemporary neo-existentialism, as Terhart has suggested: think of, to mention just a couple of themes, the focus on the discontinuous forms of education, which may be read into the appeal to a «pedagogy of interruption» (Biesta, 2006, 2010), or the emphasis on risk as «an essential moment in education» (Bollnow, 2014a, pp. 133 ff.; see also Biesta, 2014). Despite these affinities, one cannot resist the impression that present-day neo-existentialism emerges within a different constellation and is sustained by a different *Stimmung*. In this sense, it comes as no surprise that its accent lies less on the issue of the discontinuous forms than on the question of the *subjective truth*. Herner Saeverot (2013) has forcefully driven this point home, by contextually portraying the reasons why the appeal to existential education is so urgent:

[E]xistential education is not about obtaining objective truth, it is rather a matter of obtaining subjective truth. A premise of subjective truth is that one can never force upon another a meaning, persuasion or belief. The student must rather appropriate the existential communication from the teacher, make it into something subjective and personal, not only in order to think differently, but to start acting differently as well. Thus the notion of existential education stands in sharp contrast to the

human capital theory, which is spreading in the current political and educational landscape (p. 1).[1]

The context of the insurgence of the neo-existentialist tone is, accordingly, different from that which occurred in the 1950s-1960s, when the engagement with existentialism fundamentally aimed at enlarging the scope of the traditional educational discourse by giving hospitality to some educational experiences not falling within the domain of classic pedagogical practices. In the present situation, the appeal to an existential vocabulary is motivated by a fight against the appropriation and colonization of educational theorizing and practice on the part of neoliberalism:

> Thus, neoliberalism continues to threaten liberal democracies and remains interested in hyper-individualism, competition, and instrumentalist approaches to education. Yet, it is not merely interest, neoliberalism is obsessed with education: fixated with measurement and quantification with the ultimate end of education being the creation of the knowledge worker—ultimate control of democratic power is education. […] (Howard *et al.*, 2021, pp. 1-2).

The recovery of existential motifs is the vindication that

> education is a matter of existence, relationality, common moral and human concerns, concerns for that which is more than human, for life as human condition. Pedagogy is not merely instructional strategies, but an embodied practice of being oriented to the life of the child and young person in a thoughtful sensitivity for what is in their best interest (Ibíd., p. 2).

This mobilization of existential themes should not be taken as an evasion from the harshness of the real world into the realm of the inner life. This would, indeed, betray the vocabulary of existence, which is not that of an interior realm but rather of a relation with the world.

Advocating an existential stance means, moreover, making efforts to extricate some concepts from their neoliberal appropriation and giving them back a genuinely educational meaning. As Saeverot (2013, pp. 2 ff.) sagaciously highlights, the three catchwords of the neoliberal parlance — freedom, choice and responsibility —, which it perverts into ultimately economy-oriented ideas and makes the pivots of a promotion of the student as an entrepreneur, have totally different acceptations, if addressed through an existentialist lens. For reasons, which will be introduced in the next section, we can even venture to say that the existential key alone grants them those educational values which neoliberalism robs them of:

1. It is hardly necessary to specify that the whole point of Saeverot — and more generally of an existential understanding of education — would be misconstrued if the reference to the subjective truth is interpreted as a sign of individualism. As will be argued in section 3, individualism is typical of learnification and of its discourse of identity (= be yourself), whereas what is at stake in existential education is a discourse of being a self and, therefore, an invitation to subjectification.

> As a consequence of the human capital mind-set we have reached a mis-educative form of education, where students are slaves of society and its interests. […] Because of its very strong uniformity, economic and instrumental conditioning, which ultimately treats students as objects, the human capital mind-set contradicts humane existence. Therefore it is important to reconnect with existentialism in education, important as existentialism has always represented a form of criticism of such ways of objectifying people (Ibíd., pp. 3-4).

It could be legitimately argued that, thereby, we have not really moved too far from Bollnow and his endeavour to make philosophical existentialism relevant for educational theory. Indeed, a plausible interpretation of existentialism (the 20th century version in particular) sees it as a response to what in the German culture was called *die totale Verwaltung*, the world turned into something subjected to a total management. And, yet, we should appreciate the distinct note resounding in contemporary neo-existentialism, with its emphasis on the question of subject-ness. In the next two sections, I will investigate two modes in which this reclaiming of existential education and subjective truth has been undertaken. While sharing some common concerns in reference to the contemporary educational scene and societal challenges, these modes may represent two alternative ways of addressing the issue of subject-ness and, as aforementioned, they may be interpreted as responding to possibly different educational tasks, albeit within a concordance of inspiration.

3. Subjectification and existential education against the discourse of learning

When introducing his invitation to an existential view of education, Saeverot (2013) opposes it to the «biological pedagogy, which is a one-sided emphasis on the development of skills» and which results in «a lonely or non-relational form of existence» and in a view of the subject as being «completely determined by [her/his] abilities: [her/his] biological heritage» (p. 2).

We can further elaborate on this insight by showing the intimate bond between an ultimately 'biological' outlook and the contemporary stress upon learning. Against this backdrop, the significance of the notion of subjectification — here taken as one of the main manifestations of contemporary 'neo-existentialism' — will better stand out.

I will take my cue from a suggestion of Jan Masschelein (2001) according to which we should approach the bombastic emphasis on ours being a learning society through the lens of Hannah Arendt's (1958) tripartite phenomenology of active life and of her understanding of modern society as a society of labourers, namely «the form in which the fact of mutual dependence for the sake of life and nothing else assumes public significance and where the activities connected with sheer survival are permitted to appear in public» (p. 46). In this wake, we should recognize that

> the discourse of learning society is at the same time an effect and an instrument of the victory of *animal laborans*. The discourse objectifies and problematises educational reality in terms of 'learning' (and 'learning to learn') and not of teaching: and this learning (to learn) is at the same time considered as the organizing principle of society, meaning amongst other things that all members (and citizens) of such a society are primarily defined as permanent learners. […] (Masschelein, 2001, p. 2).

The conclusion of the Belgian educationalist is that

> this discourse on the one hand expresses what I want to call the 'logic of bare life' or the 'logic of survival', that is, a zoological imperative, while on the other hand it shapes that logic and brings it into being. […] We could say that the learning society is the public organization of the life process of the individual and of 'mankind' defined as a learning species (Ídem).

Against this backdrop, we can see the pith and core of the mantra about learning (to learn): what is at stake is providing students (significantly turned into learners) with those behavioural and cognitive skills that will enable them to cope with and to flexibly adapt to constantly changing environments. The reference to the notion of «environment» is anything but anodyne. In an epoch-making course, Heidegger (1992, pp. 344 ff.) strictly opposes world (*Welt*) and environment (*Umwelt*), the latter being proper to animals qua «poor in world»: through his typical work on language, and in particular on the German word for behaviour (*Benehmen*), Heidegger argues that living in an environment is a form of torpid captivation (*Benommenheit*), which is a way of expressing the fact that it implies a being trapped within the cycle of bare life and, therefore, unable to access that disclosure through which something like a world appears. From this perspective, insisting — as the contemporary discourse of learning does — on the need to adjust incessantly to the environment is a desertion from the genuinely human task of being-in-the-world and of world-forming and it means consigning oneself to a non-relational captivation that is poles apart from what education is all about. By mobilizing allegedly elating phrases, the contemporary discourse of learning can convey the impression that its emphasis on being learners who never cease to learn (to learn) points to the most up-to-date and empowering task in contemporary scenarios; however, what is actually performed is a dramatic impoverishment (indeed: a perversion) of our understanding of education and its inflection towards the logic of bare survival. That this logic is functional to the subjugation of the educational undertaking to the demands of the market, which imposes a constant 're-skilling' of people — doomed to a condition of flexibility —, hardly needs to be specified.

Gert Biesta has captured this cluster of themes and indicated the profound betrayal of any genuinely educational understanding of education within the contemporary discourse by speaking of a predominant paradigm of learning as intelligent adaptation. Its inadequacy in expressing the task of education — as something

which addresses issues of content, relation and purpose (Biesta, 2006, 2010, 2014) — is instantiated by the fact that intelligent adaptation can be performed also by a robot vacuum cleaner:

> At a behavioural level, learning is about the ways in which organisms or systems adjust to changing environing conditions and about the ways in which organisms or systems change as a result of this. […] A good […] example of such an intelligent adaptive system is the robot vacuum cleaner (Biesta, 2017b, p. 424).

There are two main shortcomings in this view:

> The first thing that is missing is that intelligent adaptive systems, be they organic or anorganic, are capable of adapting intelligently to changing environing conditions (and in the process acquire dispositions, skills and knowledge), but the question they cannot issue out of themselves is the question whether the environment they find themselves is worth adapting to […] The second thing that is missing is that intelligent adaptive systems are unable to receive. They can, in other words, not be spoken to, they cannot be addressed, which also means that they cannot be taught. The only thing they can do is (to try) to adjust to what they encounter (Ibíd., pp. 425-426).

Thus, two 'subject positions' can and, indeed, must be distinguished: the first is that emerging within the paradigm of intelligent adaptation and the dominant discourse of learning; we can call it the 'learning subject position'

> where the subject exists before the world, both temporally and spatially, and where the world, natural and social, appears as an object for the subject's acts of signification. Central questions here are 'How can I understand this?' and 'How can I make sense of it?' The subject position at stake in the logic of learning, in other words, is that of comprehension, of literally grasping the world in its totality (Ibíd., p. 427).

For its focus on individual acts of signification, Biesta defines it as «hermeneutical» and «egological»: what is at stake in it is the ability of the subject to make sense of the world, which is, therefore, only an object for the cognitive operations of the individual who constructs and reconstructs her/his own meaning perspectives and schemes, in an incessant work of rebuilding of her/his interpretive frames to constantly attune her/himself to new emerging challenges.

It is the typical outlook of the constructivist pedagogies — a sort of educational *koine* over the last decades (Corbi & Oliverio, 2013) — that, in their effort to dismantle traditional educational practices and to vindicate the epistemic agency of learners, have imposed the metaphor of the construction of knowledge as the inescapable horizon to understand what goes on and is valuable in education. Thus, they do not recognize the constitutive passibility (Roth, 2011) without which no learning of the radically new — that is, what exceeds the subject's frames — is possible. As Roth argues, in his systematic problematization of the constructivist metaphor,

«[v]ulnerability *precedes* knowing» (p. 18. Emphasis in the original) and this means abandoning the constructivist view of the subject:

> [T]he constructivist metaphor focuses us only on the transitive aspects of learning and knowing, that is, to the role of the person as the *subject of* activity. However, the English language also allows us to make thematic the converse side of the activity, passivity: the subject of (inherently collective) activity also *is subject to* and *is subjected to* collective activity. […] Passivity is the originary experience, which not only enables agency but also accompanies it […] (p. 19; emphasis in the original).

This emphasis on a being-exposed-to or being-addressed-by resonates with Biesta's (2017b, p. 427) second subject position, in which «[t]here is a different question, a different gesture, so we might say, […] which centres around the question 'What is this asking from me?' — a question that refers to what comes to the subject, so to speak.» This is an existential understanding of the subject position and the only one that allows us to recognize the constitutively relational character of education. In order to clarify this point it is appropriate to highlight the distinction between 'learning from' and 'being taught by', which corresponds to the two outlined subject positions. The former fundamentally denies any genuine relation, insofar as

> [w]hen students *learn from* their teacher, we could say that they use their teachers as a resource, just like a book or like the Internet. Moreover, when they learn from their teachers, they bring their teachers and what their teachers do or say within their own circle of understanding, within their own construction. This means that they are basically in control of what they learn from their teachers (Biesta, 2014, p. 53; emphasis in the original).

Instead, 'being taught by' is to be 'touched' by something that is other and cannot be reduced to one's own egological circuit but needs to be encountered, by giving hospitality to the offer one receives. Through this dynamics, which is not merely the constant re-weaving of one's own web of beliefs and meanings (as in the constructivist pedagogies) but consists in the exposure to what is exorbitant in comparison with one's own interpretive frames, the encapsulation in one's own individual orbit bursts open and the radically new can break in and, thereby, we come to exist as subjects, viz. to be «in a 'state of dialogue' with what and who is other» (Biesta, 2017a, p. 3).

In this horizon, existing as a subject is not a trait or possession of the individual: if we understood it in this way, we would reduce it to an 'object' and we would relapse into the third-person perspective of much contemporary educational theory, into that discourse of objective truth which an existential stance aims at abandoning and, almost imperceptibly, we would re-open the door to the vocabulary of skills, competences etc. Accordingly, by mobilizing, via Benner (2015, esp. pp. 82 ff.), a notion of the German pedagogical tradition, Biesta speaks rather of an *Aufforderung zur Sebsttätigkeit*:

> 'Aufforderung' is not the cultivation of an object […] but can better be understood as a summoning, as encouragement, one might say, that speaks to the child or young person *as* subject. 'Selbsttätigkeit,' which literally means self-action, is not the injunction to be active but to be(come) *self*-active. In more everyday language, this is not about becoming yourself, and particularly not about 'being yourself' in the simplistic sense of just doing what you want to do, but about being *a* self, being a subject of your own life (Biesta, 2020, p. 94; emphasis in the original).

In the light of these ideas, we have to understand the introduction of the notion of education as subjectification — as distinct from qualification and socialization (Biesta, 2006, 2010, 2020) — as exclusively referred to the second subject position, the existential one. Indeed, it is not far-fetched to say that the term 'subject' is adequate only for the existential understanding, whereas, as aforementioned, in the case of the first position we have rather to do with the individual, insulated in her/his own processes of learning and construction of knowledge, and not with a genuine subject-ness. Education as subjectification is not a matter of identity:

> [I]dentity concerns the question of *who* I am, both in terms of what I identify with and how I can be identified by others and by myself. The question of subject-ness, however, is not the question of who I am but the question of *how* I am, that is to say, the question of how I exist, how I try to lead my life, how I try respond to and engage with what I encounter in my life. It therefore includes the question regarding what I will 'do' with my identity — and with everything I have learned, my capacities and competences, but also my blind spots, my inabilities, and incompetence — in any given situation, particularly those situations in which I am called upon or, to put it differently, in which my 'I' is called upon (Biesta, 2020, p. 99; emphasis in the original).

Subjectification is thoroughly an existential matter, which has everything to do with our existing as subjects in and with the world and not merely constantly adapting to changing environments.

Reclaiming education in an existential key and appealing to the idea of subjectification in the just mentioned way does not represent, therefore, so much the revival of the themes of a philosophical school — existentialism — as the endeavour to fashion conceptual tools to contrast the drift of learnification and its 'subject' position (accomplice with an egological and individualistic view and thereby inimical to a genuinely educational outlook, which cannot but be relational). Moreover, it entails a profoundly different understanding of the issues of freedom, choice and responsibility, which need to be redeemed from the economical disfiguring operated by the contemporary discourse of learning. One of the strengths of the latter is its power to appropriate important notions of progressive education (such as the accent on freedom, choice and responsibility) and to bend them to a completely opposed political-educational agenda; conversely, 'neo-existentialism' (if we want to stick to this possibly misleading label) offers us a perspective that, in its intransigent and rigorous distinction from any vocabulary of identity, personality etc., promises to

resist this hegemonic colonization and to maintain a space to think of and practice education on its own principles.

At the same time, one may argue that this result is paid for in terms of an idea of subject-ness which excludes any existential view of our efforts of understanding and making sense of the world: are these ultimately doomed to fall prey to the drift of learnification? Cannot we conceive of ways of understanding that, far from distancing ourselves from existing as subjects, are manifestations of this existence? Is the very idea of existential learning a *contradictio in adjecto*? By opening a gulf between qualification and socialization, on the one hand, and subjectification, on the other, the former being the domain of the paradigm of the cultivation of identity, the latter referring to the paradigm of the I as subject, do we not risk consigning qualification and socialization to the unfolding of non-existential pedagogies? Important and crucial as the notion of a «pedagogy of interruption» (Biesta, 2006, 2010) is, does existential education obtain only in this suspension? Or can we think of manifestations of existential education which engage with cultural meanings?

To tackle these questions I will refer to another inflection of the contemporary recovery of existential motifs, on which I will focus in the next section.

4. An existential approach to liberal learning

Thus far, I have emphasized the significance of the existential thrust in educational theory in opposing the dominant learnification, the latter being construed as the substitution of the discourse of learning for that of education, with the consequent obfuscating of important facets of the educational prism. At the same time, I have specified that «learning» has ultimately be taken as a biological phenomenon, linked with the logic of bare life, and as a process pertaining to intelligent adaptation. What if we consider, instead, learning as

> a self-conscious engagement [that] is not an induced reaction to a fortuitous environmental pressure but a self-imposed task inspired by the intimations of what there is to learn (that is, by awareness of our own ignorance) and by a wish to understand (Oakeshott, 2002, p. 7)?

As an advocate of liberal education, Michael Oakeshott has insisted on the fact that «[a] human being […] is *in himself* what he is *for* himself» (p. 4; emphasis in the original) and that

> «[t]his inseparability of learning and being human is central to our understanding of ourselves. It means that what characterizes a man is what he has actually learned to perceive, to think and to do, and that the important differences between human beings are differences in respect of what they have actually learned. […] In short, this connection between learning and being human means that each man is his own self-enacted 'history'; and the expression 'human nature' stands only for our common and inescapable engagement: to become by learning» (p. 6).

In this perspective, learning is not construed as the process of intelligent adaptation to ever-changing environments but as an «engagement of critical self-understanding in which we relate ourselves […] to the continuous intellectual adventure in which human beings have sought to identify and to understand themselves» (Ibíd., p. 13). This kind of learning — liberal learning as Oakeshott calls it, sticking to a venerable tradition — «is learning to respond to the invitations of the great intellectual adventures in which human beings have come to display their various understandings of the world and of themselves» (p. 22). It is important not to misinterpret this view: Oakeshott cannot be simply aligned with the contemporary emphasis on the strategic role of cultural transmission and inheritance, forcefully vindicated especially in the French context (see Blais, Gauchet & Ottavi, 2014; Bellamy, 2015).[2] Also in Oakeshott there is obviously an accent on the pivotal role of culture but he explicitly warns about the risk of simply equating liberal learning with the acquisition of some cultural content and he phrases his outlook by using a quasi-existential vocabulary, speaking of «an invitation to encounter particular adventures in human self-understanding» (Oakeshott, 2002, p. 17): in the word «invitation» we can hear resonating the aforementioned idea of an *Aufforderung*, while the notion of «encounter» is pivotal in the pedagogical existentialism from Bollnow (2014a, esp. pp. 88 ff.) to the 'neo-existentialists'.

In the radical version of existential education framed by Biesta, as I read him, this would not represent a real change of scenario: we would have to do, in any case, with acts of signification and a hermeneutical attitude, which may ultimately end up feeding those unwelcome tendencies that conceal the genuine task of education, viz. that of «arousing the desire in another human being for wanting to exist in the world in a grown-up way» (Biesta, 2017a, p. 4). In other words, despite the quasi-existential vocabulary and the clear distinction from a simple accent on cultural transmission, the Oakeshottian perspective on liberal learning would remain at the level of socialization and would be linked with the paradigm of identity, without accessing the dimension of subject-ness and subjectification. It is, therefore, necessary to turn to another view of existential education, if we want to valorize these Oakeshottian insights through an existentialist lens.

It has been the merit of René Arcilla to embark on a re-proposition of the idea of liberal learning, by approaching it in the light of contemporary educational questions. It is impossible to rehearse here his complex conceptual device, which fuses together an ingenious reading of Oakeshott's tenets, the valorization of existentialism and the inventive elaboration of the pedagogical significance of

2. For a recognition of the importance of cultural transmission, advocated, however, along partially different lines, see Oliverio (2015).

the works of modernism in art.[3] Thus, I will confine myself to pinpointing some elements, culminating in the notion of existential learning and, more particularly, in the idea that «[o]ne thing that stimulates and nurtures existential learning […] is modernist pedagogy» (Arcilla, 2010, p. 10). In the rest of this section, by dramatically gerrymandering Arcilla's argumentation, I will provide the coordinates to highlight the meaning of the latter quotation and to explain what he means by «existential learning» and why he invokes a «modernist pedagogy.»

To begin with, Arcilla's endeavour starts with interpreting Oakeshottian liberal learning as a form of radical self-examination which is jeopardized by the all-pervading mass media: «[W]hat stimulates such learning is radical questioning of our deepest assumptions, and such questioning is apt to be obstructed by the very technology of the mass media, including the World Wide Web» (Arcilla, 2002, p. 457). The reason is that the mass media tend to recede into invisibility, to distract our attention from their own workings and to turn the world into images and a kind of spectacle, by thus putting the user in a position of a simple consumer and onlooker, who is enthralled by what appears through the medium. To adopt the vocabulary introduced in the previous section, we can rephrase Arcilla's point by saying that the mass media create a sort of environment in which one is torpidly captivated and the world is dissolved in a flow of images and sounds, which are «calculated to trigger automatic, unthinking reactions» (p. 462). The key interpretive move of Arcilla is that of reading the obstruction that the mass media risk causing to self-examination in terms of the debate on art modernism and, in particular, of the idea that modernism was a response to the mounting kitsch: also the latter pivots on the immediacy of the medium, whereas modernist art «stresses process, which takes time for thinking» (Ídem), by drawing attention to the medium and, thereby, calling for critical reflection. In this sense, the opposition «between an experience of vivid immediacy, and one of a medium's intimations» (Ídem), which Arcilla gathers from the most influential theoretician of art modernism, is read into that between the absentmindedness induced by the mass media and the kind of self-examination

3. Modernism is a term that embraces a series of art movements and tendencies in the first decades of the 20th century. It marked a reaction against some key principles of academic and conservative art (such as the realistic representation of subjects), insofar as they had been appropriated by mass culture, and it promoted, instead, experimentation with the formal aspects of the work (in the case of painting: shapes, colours, lines etc.). While assuming an avant-gardist attitude, modernism was not opposed to the great achievements of the history of art *per se* but only to their trivialization, brought about by bourgeois culture. In this sense, working on the formal aspects represented, instead, the endeavour to rediscover the very essence of what makes up art. As Arcilla (2010, p. 4) puts it, «[t]he idea of modernism that I am drawn to inherit is perhaps the most commonplace one: that based on the stress on medium. The medium of an art consists of a set of regular materials, instruments, techniques, and forms. The artist employs these to produce recognizable works of that art; in this sense, the medium constitutes the means of artistic production.» It is important to stress that modernism regards not only the visual arts but also literature and music. However, Arcilla's focus is predominantly on debates about painting.

to which liberal learning amounts. And, accordingly, modernist pedagogy — that is, a pedagogy pivoting on the study of and the exposure to modernist works — is considered as pivotal for keeping the project of liberal learning alive. Modernism is a kind of mediumism and, to put it in an Oakeshottian-Heideggerian vocabulary, modernist art works are recommended as a privileged adventure in human self-understanding, responding to whose invitation we may counter the absentmindedness and torpid captivation of mass media culture.

This argumentative trajectory is further developed by construing Oakeshottian liberal learning as existential learning,[4] the latter phrase being

> the name for how we take responsibility for the fact that to exist at all is to be in question and that the learning that responds to this condition is not something we undertake to achieve an end—an instrumental practice—but the way we are ourselves. It would indicate a natural necessity that demands to be better recognized by our educational institutions, one that modernist culture can address (Arcilla, 2010, p. 15).

Liberal learning as an adventure in self-understanding is fundamentally existential learning because it does not deal with problematic situations to be met with smart solutions (according to what Biesta would call «intelligent adaptation») but it addresses questionable existence or, more accurately, it is the experience of being addressed by existence as inescapably questionable: «Instead of immediately trying to solve the problem, one would pause to see in it a reflection of the questionable nature of everything that is» (Ibíd., p. 29).

Two comments are in order: first, although Arcilla does not explicitly thematize it, the emphasis on the opposition between what is merely problematic (and, accordingly, liable to an instrumental treatment and a solution) and what is questionable (= ultimately unearthing the groundlessness of existence and, thereby, putting us in question and calling for an existential engagement) goes counter to a central theme of contemporary education, modelled after the paradigm of lifelong learning, understood as a manifestation of the logic of bare life. As Thomas Popkewitz (2008) has forcefully argued,

> [p]roblem solving is a particular salvation story that considers life to be a series of rationally ordered paths for finding solutions that is never complete and always defers the present to the future. […] The reformed child of the lifelong learner [sic] lives in a continuous course of personal responsibility and self-management of his or her risks and choices; life is now thought of in segments of time where quick actions are required to meet the challenges of new conditions and where nothing seems solid or stable (pp. 118-119).

4. Due to the constraints of space, I cannot dwell upon the way in which Arcilla (2010, chapter 2) reads the Oakeshottian tenets — and, especially, his stress upon the priority of freedom in liberal learning — through a Sartrian lens.

It is to note that the pedagogies oriented to problem solving operate a transformation of typically existential themes (choice, responsibility and risk) into something manageable through a calculating rationality and, thereby, they defuse the 'questionability' of existence and turn subjects into adaptive intelligent systems. In contrast, Arcilla advocates a pedagogy which allows us to be exposed to what is questionable (thereby involving us in an adventure of radical self-understanding) and he argues that modernism as mediumism offers the best entry point to this task.

Secondly, modernism can perform this pedagogical role of promoting existential learning because in modernism the medium is a site of estrangement and, thus, it operates much like the consciousness in Sartre's (1996, pp. 37 ff.) understanding of it. It is worth quoting Arcilla (2010) at some length:

> The modernist medium, marked by negation, like our consciousness in general, generated by 'nihilation,' discloses the inescapably questionable scene of existential learning. […] A modernist medium resembles consciousness, then, in that in both of them objects appear that refer specifically to what they are not. The object of consciousness is not a lot of things, but it is specifically not the consciousness of it. Similarly, the object in the modernist medium is not, whatever else it may not be, what it conventionally signifies. In the latter case, the medium negates traditional signification; in the former, consciousness negates its object. Accordingly, the signifier that is not what is signified, in this medium, would be a signifier of the object that is not consciousness of it, and that draws attention to and reflects that consciousness: my consciousness, me. To call a work modernist […] is to recognize that this work captures my conscious existence in the world (pp. 29 and 42).

The power of estrangement experienced in the encounter with modernist works unveils the fundamental strangeness of existence, the fact that we exist ultimately as foreigners in the world, which addresses us as questionable and not merely as a set of problems to solve or of environmental stimuli triggering reactions. In contrast with the salvation narrative of the discourse of the learning society and with its emphasis on the possibility of the management of oneself and the world, we are thus consigned to the awareness «of how deeply uncertain as well as alien existence is» (Ibíd., p. 43). However, it is precisely through this experience of estrangement that we become subjects, we come into being as subjects and not merely adaptive intelligent systems, and we respond to an invitation of self-understanding and self-examination which does not boil down to a simple instrumental learning of how to cope with ever-changing situations.

Thus far, the stress has been laid on how

> [b]y drawing attention to the medium of a work of artistic representation and, by extension, to the medium of our awareness itself, to our consciousness, modernist works remind us of the alien and questionable, nameless dimension of ourselves. Beneath all we have assumed, including our own identities, there is our deeper strangerhood (Ibíd., p. 12).

Mediumism in its pedagogical inflection thus serves as a wake-up call for presentmindedness against the narcotic power of the entertainment industry, which distracts us from the awareness of our existential condition.

However, there is not only this 'negative' role of modernism but Arcilla endorses also an affirmative view of mediumism, insofar as, attracting us to the consideration of the artistic media and of their materiality, it invites us to an «acceptance of the matter in the largest sense [and thereby] of the miraculous offer of existence [that] would involve an affirmation of that offer, and some understanding of there is in it to love» (Ibíd., p. 59).[5] The matter is no longer simply a given in the epistemological acceptation of the world but it is a gift, a present, something that one receives, thus opening the dimension of a relation to the other and to the Present, understood as what exists here and now «as an event of offering» (p. 60). From this perspective, acknowledging our condition as existential strangers is a first step to accepting and celebrating the Present and to loving the miracle of existence: the fight against the absentmindedness inflicted by the mass media through a modernist/'mediumist' pedagogy consists, therefore, not only in a promotion of a critical attitude and a recognition of our foreign condition — and this prevents us from acquiescing to the chloroforming immediacy granted by the mass media — but also in a rediscovery of the present and the cultivation of a presentmindedness towards the world.

If interpreted against the backdrop of the Bollnow line, this model of contemporary neo-existentialism seems to diverge in at least two aspects: first, it does not focus on «discontinuous forms of education» but rather it endeavours — via a recontextualization of the Oakeshottian liberal learning — to outline a kind of (modernist/mediumist) pedagogy that may (and perhaps should) be performed in continuous educational practices (not only in formal but also in non-formal settings[6]). In the conceptual device of existential learning, as I suggest construing it, the critical element that belongs to pedagogical existentialism according to Bollnow resides less in an attention to the moments of existential breakdown than in an appeal to cultivate a self-examining attitude against the numbing, torpid effects of the predominant mass media culture and the consumerist stance it favours also at the intellectual level.

Secondly, while thus maintaining the critical-estranging character of an existentialist stance, existential learning does not insist only on our experience of unfamiliarity with the world (that is, of our being foreigners and aliens) but it culminates in a reconstruction of our dialogue with the world, construed as something that addresses us and affirmatively encounters us. In this sense, while Bollnow tends to

5. Arcilla comes to these conclusions through a refined commentary and educational appropriation of some key debates of art criticism on modernism. I cannot linger over a reconstruction of his detailed argumentation (see chapters 3 and 4 of his volume, respectively, for the themes of strangerhood and presentmindedness).

6. It is to note that Arcilla's interest lies especially in educational practices in society at large and not limited to the school setting.

keep separate the recognition of existentialist themes and the recovery of a new *Geborgenheit*, existential learning as the outcome of a mediumist pedagogy interlaces them with each other as two sides of one and the same endeavour, stemming from the shift from the stress on problem solving to the openness onto the questionability of existence.

5. Concluding remarks: the adventure of education

What I have pursued in this paper is an interpretive reconstruction of some existentialist motifs in contemporary educational theory, culminating in the 'modelling' of two alternative views: subjectification and existential learning. Mine has been less an exegetical than a theoretical move: in this sense, I cannot have done justice to the wealth of insights of the authors upon whom I have drawn, by confining myself to distilling two educational options and showing their topicality.

There are certainly areas of overlapping and commonality: the mediumist fight against the society of consumerism resonates with the spelling out of the educational task — understood as subjectification — in terms of a contrast to «the impulse society.»[7] Albeit through different argumentative strategies, both models air misgivings about the educational implications of the dominant discourse of identity. And, finally, both draw attention to the narrow-mindedness of an understanding of education in the light of the idea of the cultivation of skills in problem solving or intelligent adaptation.

Despite these shared points, we should not be blind to the relevant differences. If we focused on the philosophical sources which underpin the two alternative views, we could venture to say that the distinction ultimately resides in the contrast between Lévinas and Sartre,[8] between an intransigent thought of the transcendence of the Other and a philosophy of the I as freedom, between the priority of responsibility to the freedom of the I and the primacy of the nihilating power of consciousness on which also responsibility pivots and, ultimately, between two views of freedom: on the one hand, we have

> a 'difficult' notion of freedom, one where my freedom to act, that is, to bring my beginnings into the world, is always connected with the freedom of others to take initiative, to bring their beginnings into the world as well so that the impossibility to remain 'unique masters' of what we do […] is the very condition under which our beginnings can come into the world. This is why the notion of 'subjectification' is more appropriate than a

7. The phrase «impulse society» is by Roberts (2014) and Biesta (2017) explicitly refers to his work. See also Brunstad and Oliverio (2019) for a discussion of this thematic constellation.

8. At the purely philosophical level, this contrast became particularly manifest when Sartre, in the final phase of his speculative career, seemed to perform a palinode of his philosophical existentialist views and to embrace those of Lévinas up to the point that one may state that «[the] last Sartre is Levinasian. He is so in an evident, indisputable and profound manner» (Lévy, 2000, p. 747).

> notion like 'individuation', because it expresses that we are not only the subject of our own beginnings but are also subject to how others take up these beginnings. 'Subjectification' thus articulates that being and becoming a subject are thoroughly relational […] (Biesta, 2010, p. 129);

on the other, a view emphasizing freedom to understand (rather than to act), in which one's relation to the other is ultimately connected with a common membership in a community of conversation where one's own self-understandings are constantly put to the test. This Oakeshottian outlook of liberal learning is radicalized and morphed into «existential learning,» by stressing that the world is not merely the pole of our acts of understanding but something that, through its questionability, addresses us and calls for our understanding; and, yet, the mediumist conception preserves the primacy of the I and freedom as primarily a power of understanding.

The distinctions here outlined reverberate, as aforementioned, on the pedagogical level: on the one hand, the subjectification model results in a pedagogy of interruption (Biesta, 2006, 2010), which suspends the normal order of rational communities that our educational institutions and settings fundamentally are; it aims to maintain open the possibility of «a particular, 'wordly' quality of the spaces and places in which 'newcomers' can come into presence» (Biesta, 2010, p. 91) and can be 'singled out' in their uniqueness as (ethical) irreplaceability; on the other, the modernist pedagogy gives a specific spin to the contemporary appeal to a recovery of the significance of humanities[9] by identifying a certain canon of works that can allow us to renew our endeavours for liberal learning, while recontextualizing them to new, emerging challenges and orienting them to the promotion of a learning which is not merely the familiarization with some cultural contents but the — possibly disquieting — adventure into the questionability of our condition.

When insisting on their being alternative, I have wanted to avoid facile confusions. However, this does not exclude the possibility that both models can (and perhaps must) be deployed in contemporary scenarios to counter the human capital invasion of education: on the one hand, the sharp distinction of the task of subjectification from those of qualification and socialization articulates a vocabulary in educational theory which makes us as teachers and educators sensitive to the different dimensions of the educational undertaking and allows us to have it clear that a fundamental purpose of our educational engagement should be directed to creating the condition for subjects to come into presence in their uniqueness, while being aware that this will always remain an event for which we cannot claim any kind of control; on the other, the adventures in self-understanding do not need to remain just the domain of socialization and, more specifically, of cultural transmission, as if this *per se* represented a way out of the contemporary predicament;

9. Nussbaum (2010) is an influential instance of the present-day invocation of a role of the humanities.

nor must they be considered as merely indulging in an egological approach, in the derogatory acceptation of the word, but rather they may become — to adopt and adapt a forceful Kierkegaardian (1983) phrase — «the course the individual goes through in order to catch up with himself [sic]» (p. 46). Thus, we unearth the alien and questionable character of our existence and experience the world as addressing us, thereby contrasting the attempts to make us only problem-solvers and efficient producers/consumers. In this sense, mediumist pedagogies offer a promising way to avoid both the Scylla of an encrusted or backward-looking view of the canon (without denying the value of liberal education) and the Charybdis of the OECD literacies.

Erwin Terhart (2018) drives a good point home when he warns about «the structural incompatibility between an existentialist view of classrooms and teachers' work, on the one hand, and the character of the modern school system as an 'iron cage' on the other» (p. 488). And, yet, an existentialist thrust may be necessary if the educational undertaking must be something more than a component of the assembly line of societal production. In this sense, without gainsaying the differences on which I have repeatedly insisted, it is possible to re-comprehend, through a possibly idiosyncratic interpretation, both models within an over-arching aspiration, by emphasizing the idea of education as 'adventure': whether spelled out in the Oakeshottian terms of adventures of self-understanding or, through an exercise in etymology, as the openness to what/who is yet-to-come, an existential view of education as adventure invites us not to sidestep the possibility of an encounter with the unpredictable and to preserve spaces where this possibility might come true.

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