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From Being Willful to Being More Willing: A Phenomenological Critique of Rousseau’s “On Education”

Abstract: In this article, author Tyson E. Lewis critiques Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s metaphysics of the will from a phenomenological perspective. He argues that Rousseau’s emphasis on the will, as the primary concern for early childhood education, inaugurates the last vestige of metaphysical logic in Western educational philosophy. This rise in the importance of the will in progressive education is coterminous with the increasing nihilism of a technological age, where meaning is reduced to the individual’s own willful self-production and self-reliance. As such, Rousseau’s emphasis on the will is less a solution and more of an internal problem of what Heidegger refers to as technological “enframing”. As an alternative to the discourse and practice of the willful pursuit of self-cultivation and self-reliance, I turn to Giorgio Agamben’s theory of study. In the act of studying, the studier does not engage in willful production but rather, is more open to receive the potentiality of what remains in a nihilistic age.

Keywords: Rousseau, Agamben, study, will, technology, potentiality, sacred

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Introduction

There is a persistent theme in modern Western educational philosophy: the centrality of the will. From Rousseau onward, the question of will defines a key problematic, which educational theory and practice must confront. In this essay, I attempt to provide a critique of the will, which destabilizes our taken-for-granted assumptions concerning its nature and priority. In order to historicize the will, and in particular the educational variants of willful thought and action, I will turn to Heidegger and his critical distinction between willfulness and willingness.

For Heidegger, “being-in-the-world” is radically historical, thus different epochs of being open up new understandings, meanings, roles, and practices that define culture and civilization. If we live, as Heidegger believes we do, in a technological epoch, the persistence of the metaphysics of the will (in a purportedly post-metaphysical age) presents a symptom of certain transformations in the nature of “being-in-the-world”. When educational philosophy insists on the priority of the will as a metaphysical ground, it fails to take into account its own historical suppositions and connections to contemporary nihilism. The most important aspect to note is that this metaphysical dimension is not restricted to any one field of educational philosophy, school of thought, or a particular political agenda. Rather, we find its residue in the most progressive forms of pragmatism and the most critical of radical pedagogies. From Rousseau on, the will becomes a kind of global logic that, even as it stands before us, remains unable to account for its own historical specificity, and remains ignorant of its complacency with the meaningless nihilism of the contemporary technological age.

After analyzing the origins of the educational will in Rousseau, I will turn to a possible alternative to education as “willful production” (of the self, of the world, of social relations, and so on). Here, I will gesture towards the theme of study, which is perhaps best articulated in the work of Giorgio Agamben. If we think of progressive education as a kind of willful pursuit of one’s interests and desires in the name of growth and personal transformation (Bildung), then studying, which does not desire ends and thus appears to be indifferent, seems rather odd, if not
anti-educational. In an age of what Heidegger refers to as technological leveling, meanings have been suspended, and the world does not call human beings to take up significant practices (Heidegger 1984). It is through studying that this pervasive darkness can be transformed into a kind of infancy or new beginning without recourse to the discourse and practice of willful production, or a return to a notion of the sacred. The idea at stake here is what Heidegger refers to as a distinction between willful pursuit and willing receptivity and sensitivity to the traces of meaning offered by the world. It is my wager that studying is a significant educational practice that can attune us to the significance of a loss of significance in our technological age, thus converting the leveling, which Heidegger describes, into an opportunity.

**Rousseau on the will**

The metaphysics of the will, as the ground of education, was perhaps first described in Rousseau’s “Émile, or On Education”. In fact, the pedagogical problematic of “Émile” is nothing less than that of will and willful action. Rousseau argues that we are all born “devoid of knowledge and of will.” (Rousseau 1979, p. 61) However, the relation between the two forms the fulcrum of early childhood education. Thus, the first lessons the child learns concern willful action and freedom. Rousseau writes of the infant, “prepare from afar the reign of his freedom and the use of his forces by leaving natural habit to his body, by putting him in the conditions always to be master of himself and in all things to do his will, as soon as he has one.” (Ibid., p. 63) Exercise of the will is absolutely essential for maintaining nature’s true path: that humans be free and self-determinating. The key point in the above quotation is that the authority of the tutor is never exerted over the child in any immediate way. Rather, it must always prepare experiences for the child “from afar” so that the appearance of freedom remains absolute from the first-person, engaged perspective of the child. But as the will grows, the power of the will must be constantly circumscribed so as never to command anyone or anything except the voluntary actions of the child, as he or she learns to master the world. For instance, Rousseau warns that when the child cries for an object, the tutor must be careful not to carry the object to the child but rather, carry the child to the object. “It is important to accustom him early not to give orders either to men, for he is not their master, or to things, for they do not hear him. Thus when a child desires something that he sees and one wants to give it to him, it is better to carry the child to the object than to bring the object to the child.” (Ibid., p. 66) Two important points are raised in this example. First, carrying the child to the object empowers the sense of the child’s will to reach out and grasp the world, and bring it into focus/nearness through his or her embodied actions. Second, the will of the child must be cultivated, yet, at the same time, it cannot overreach its prescribed boundaries. If the will is overextended to ordering things and people, then the lesson of freedom will be lost on the child. Instead of an active, self-regulating, and self-realizing subject, the tyrannical child will simply order
others to do his bidding. The lesson learnt here contradicts the self-sufficiency of nature. If the free man, according to Rousseau, “wants only what he can do and does what he pleases,” (ibid., p. 84) the tyrannical man imposes his will on others in order to do what he cannot yet do for himself. This creates chains of inappropriate dependencies that break the laws of natural man. Stated differently, the free man knows how to extend the will without overextending desires. In the absence of this equilibrium between the power of will and desire, the child will perpetually be unhappy. Rousseau writes, “He is a despot. He is at once the vilest of slaves and the most miserable of creatures.” (Ibid., p. 87) Although superficially the master of his surroundings, the overly willful child actually is a slave to his abundant desires, and to the work of others who satiate these desires. The result of an overextension of desire and an accompanying misdirection of the will is thus slavery and sadness rather than freedom and happiness.

The authority of the tutor, as hinted above, can never be imposed on the child directly. If the problematic for the child is the relation between will, desire, and freedom, then the problematic for the tutor concerns will and authority. The will of the tutor must remain absolute without ever taking on the guise of authority over the child. Rousseau warns, “Command him nothing, whatever in the world it might be, absolutely nothing. Do not even allow him to imagine that you might pretend to have any authority over him. Let him know only that he is weak and you are strong, that by his condition and yours he is necessarily at your mercy.” (Ibid., p. 91) In this sense, lessons derive from the experience of necessity rather than from the command of the tutor. The battle of wills must remain exactly as it is; a battle of forces rather than of intellectual persuasions or machinations of political power/negotiations. By hiding authority, the tutor is able to perfect the appearance of freedom, which conceals a deeper set of temporary dependencies. In a rather Machiavellian move, Rousseau urges tutors to “let him always believe he is the master, and let it always be you who are. There is no subjection so perfect as that which keeps the appearance of freedom. Thus the will itself is made captive.” (Ibid., p. 120) Authority must remain absolutely invisible to the student in order to safeguard the appearance of freedom. If freedom conforms to what one ought to do rather than merely what one desires to do, the distinction must be safeguarded by the tutor who, “from afar,” dictates the nature and order of the student’s experiences according to the ultimate authority of nature itself. In conclusion, hiding authority ensures that “leaving him thus master of his will, you will not be fomenting his caprices.” (Ibid.) When force between tutor and student is the only operating factor, there is no strict hierarchy between the two, and no inequality based on the authority of one over the other. Indeed, Rousseau describes his relation to Émile as one of friendship (ibid., p. 159) – granted a friendship that does not erase the operations of the will but rather recognizes them as natural and necessary outcomes of one’s developmental stage. In this manner, Émile will be free from all inequalities, oppressions, and all forms of hierarchy. The key to social reconstruction is the correct relationship between wills in the educational relationship.

In essence, the centrality of the will is an educational embodiment of Rousseau’s larger metaphysical claims. As discussed in Book IV of “Émile,” in the dialogue
with the Savoy Vicar, Rousseau argues that “The more I observe the action and the reaction of the forces of nature acting on one another, the more I find that one must always go back from effects to effects to some will as first cause; for to suppose an infinite regress of causes is to suppose no cause at all. In a word, every motion not produced by another can come only from a spontaneous, voluntary action. Inanimate bodies act only by motion, and there is no true action without will. This is my first principle. I believe therefore that a will moves the universe and animates nature. This is my first dogma, or my first article of faith.” (Ibid., p. 273) Although Rousseau cannot explain how a free, voluntary, spontaneous will comes to produce a physical action, the experience of volition is enough to give his materialist metaphysics all the “proof” necessary to transform speculation into a dogma. In retrospect, this very dogma informed much of Rousseau’s theory of early childhood education. In both cases, freedom can only be secured through a benevolent will. If Rousseau argues, “the world is governed by a powerful and wise will,” (ibid., p. 276) it appears as though his educational philosophy follows the same fundamental principle. This principle states that the tutor must also be such a powerful and wise will – ultimately a will that binds the will of the student to nature’s path “from afar” in order for the student to come to see freedom as a first principle or irrefutable law of nature. Thus, for Rousseau, the relationship of humanity to God is identical to the relationship between the student and the tutor. In both cases, a benevolent will intervenes from the outside to guide the individual towards natural autonomy and freedom. The question of the relationship of wills between men and women, which concludes “Émile,” as well as the question of the general will in Rousseau’s political writings fall under a similar problematic. Indeed, Rousseau’s metaphysical commitments reach a certain plateau in his formulation of the “general will,” which transcends and stands above the “will of all.” In all cases, the will is the unquestioned metaphysics of educational, social, political, and theological relationships.

Educational philosophy has inherited Rousseau’s emphasis on the will and its strange metaphysics. We see a consistent emphasis on the relationship between the will and voluntary attention in the work of William James (1992), the necessity of willful effort and interest in John Dewey (2011), and the connections between genius and will in Jacques Rancière (1991). In all cases, the will is almost unanimously given priority as the initial and central human faculty – a key point that can never be proven or argued but must merely be asserted. In turn, this initial metaphysical claim then demands that education primarily concern itself with the training of this will. Without such training, disasters will happen (for Rousseau, this means tyranny or servitude). Finally, none of the theorists problematizes the will as a historical artifact. They all accept its enduring presence as a kind of taken-for-granted backdrop for solving a host of problems related to education – a kind of metaphysical necessity or ground upon which the educational project is founded. While some might argue that emphasis on the will is common sense, considering the will a part of human nature and thus, deserving attention, I will argue below that such common sense considerations remain mired in metaphysical commitments. These commitments can only be theorized when placed within
a broader context of the history of being-in-the-world. While the first half of this essay has been descriptive, the second half will be critical. Later on, I will end it with a largely reconstructive third move.

The will and technology: Heidegger’s intervention

The theorists of educational will fail to address the relationship between the metaphysics of the will and the logic of the technological age – the dawning of which Rousseau was perhaps, privileged to witness first hand. Technological “enframing,” according to Heidegger, reduces meaningful and significant entities into mere resources to be used at will, in order to achieve instrumental ends. According to Heidegger, “enframing” “is the way in which the real reveals itself as [a] standing-reserve” (Heidegger 1984, p. 23) of raw materials to be controlled by humans. One particularly important mode of such control is scientific research, wherein research “has disposal over anything that is when it can either calculate it in its future course in advance or verify a calculation about it as past.” (Ibid., p. 127) Only that which can be calculated, assessed, and thus controlled, counts as an entity.1 In this sense, scientific or technological research stands over and above things and considers them as mere objects to be manipulated through calculation. Instead of being receptive to and thankful for the world, as it has been provided, the researcher is in control of a world reduced to a standing-reserve.

There are explicit connections between the rise of technology and an understanding of the human as a willful subject. Heidegger writes, “willing determines the nature of modern man” who conceives the world as “given over to, commended to, and thus subjected to the command of self-assertive production” through “purposeful self-assertion.” (Heidegger 2001, p. 109) Stated differently, “As a way of objectifying beings in a calculative manner, modern science is a condition posited by the will to will itself, through which the will to will secures the dominance of its essence.” (Heidegger 1998, p. 231) According to Heidegger, the ultimate project of scientific calculation is the appropriation of resources by a will whose only interest is the manifestation of its own willfulness. “Self-assertive man,” warns Heidegger, “whether or not he knows and wills it as an individual, is the functionary of technology.” (Heidegger 2001, p. 113) In other words, instead of standing and waiting, listening, and sensing the arrival of affordances granted to us by the world, modern technologically defined humanity impatiently stands against the world as mere meaningless, raw material, which can only be animated through a kind of willful. As a result, the world becomes a kind of mute resource, which is given life by the willing and able subject. Freedom is the independence to express actively one’s capabilities in order to remake the world in one’s (free) self-image. Freedom is freedom that is willed. Theories of entrepreneurial optimism in the capacity to self-realize, self-generate, and self-manage our potentials are

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1 Perhaps “enframing” is best seen in education through the rise of “learning” discourses which transform education into entrepreneurial self-production for maximum economic outputs (see for instance Masschelein 2001).
not empowering so much as symptoms of an overall “enframing” of human potentiality within a means-end logic, which denies the freedom to prefer not to will.

Drawing heavily from Heidegger and other existentialist sources, Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly argue that the leveling caused by the technological age, and the attending belief in the powers of individual self-production have caused a crisis in Western culture. “The nihilism of our secular age,” they warn, “leaves us with an awful sense that nothing matters in the world at all. If nothing matters then there is no basis for doing any one thing over any other, and the contemporary burden of choice weighs heavily.” (Dreyfus and Kelly 2011, p. 71)

The sense of the sacred is not something over which we have power or control. Indeed, to experience the sacred – the possibility of meaning-rich lives defined by focal practices that orient our actions and decisions – is precisely to experience that which supersedes the will. A Nietzschean metaphysics of the will, which places the burden of excellence on the shoulders of the individual and his or her powers, presents us all with an impossible task, one that is destined to fail and plunge us into nihilism. The sacred cannot come from within but must come from without, or even better, it can only come from the indeterminate zone that lies below the subject/object split which the will rests upon.

For theorists of the will, educational freedom is akin to Bildung or edifying self-cultivation. This is clear in Rousseau, James, Dewey, and even Rancière, all of whom theorize education in connection with the willful production of freedom, equality, growth, mastery, and self-transformation. Yet for Heidegger, Bildung is nothing more than a kind of educational equivalent to the metaphysics of the will to power – a kind of intellectual manifestation of Promethian hubris capable of perpetual improvement according to mental models. It presupposes more than they can ever hope to take account of by their own rational principles (thus Rousseau’s reliance on intuitive feeling). Heidegger reminds us that bilden means to form or cultivate while Vor-bild means to set up a preestablished rule (Vor-schrift). Thus, self-cultivation regulates individual behavior according to an internalized prototype or idea of “the educated person.” The root for this concept of Bildung, as forming someone in accordance with a predefined paradigm, can be found in Plato’s allegory of the cave. In Heidegger’s opinion, the allegory of the cave is pivotal for understanding not only Plato’s thoughts but also a monumental shift in Western philosophy as a whole. With the cave, Heidegger pinpoints the arrival of three equally dominant themes in modern Western thought: Bildung, humanism, and truth as correctness. The interconnectedness between these themes cannot be underestimated. Turning away from shadows toward the light of the sun is, according to Heidegger, the moment when the experience of truth transforms itself from “unhiddenness” to correctness of intellectual representation and assertion according to an idea. Thinking defines being, and Dasein turns away from things that are experienced to ideas that are beyond phenomenological immediacy. As reason is the only faculty capable of communing with ideas, humans gain a new, privileged position within the order of being. From this fundamental, metaphysically established hierarchy of beings, humans emerge as rational animals capable of their own self-production and self-improvement through self-contemplation. The
result is a form of education whose sole purpose is the “shaping of their ‘moral’ behavior, as the salvation of their immortal souls, as the unfolding of their creative powers, as the development of their reason, as the nourishing of their personalities, as the awakening of their civic sense, as the cultivation of their bodies, or as an appropriate combination of some or all of these ‘humanisms.’” (Heidegger 1998, p. 181) Bildung becomes an educational manifestation of a metaphysically determined system revolving around the human being and his capability for continual self-improvement. The dangerous factor in this regard is that Bildung becomes the “invincible power of an immutable reason and its principles” (Heidegger 1984, p. 180) that denies the phenomenological possibility of sensitivity to that which is beyond our control, our rational self-interest, and willful determination by our creative powers. Certainly, some might claim that it is too quick a move to conflate self-cultivation with self-management (Bildung with the educational “enframing” of learning). Yet, as Heidegger points out, apparent differences on the ontic level might conceal deeper ontological similarities between the two operations, thus undermining the claim that Bildung is a radical alternative to the practices and discourses of technological “enframing.” If the will is an instrument of “enframing” the world, self-cultivation and social transformation are not so much outside this frame as they are symptoms of its internal logic. The real alternative lies elsewhere. Heidegger summarizes, “The essence of freedom is originally not connected with the will or even with the causality of human willing.” (Ibid., p. 25) Rather, freedom is a kind of poetically open receptiveness to the call of the world and what the world affords the subject.

Drawing heavily from Heidegger’s critique of the metaphysics of the will, Giorgio Agamben further argues that the current age has lost this aesthetic openness to what is given by the world. He reconstructs Heidegger’s general argument this time by focusing on an epochal shift from Greek poiesis to technological praxis. Throughout his early, literary works such as “The Idea of Prose”, “The Man Without Content”, and “The End of the Poem”, Agamben picks up on Heidegger’s critique of the metaphysics of the will. He stresses that poiesis is not the result of a commanding and self-asserting subject who gives meaning and significance to the world through creative production. This notion of praxis denotes that self-construction has come to dominate the modern world as the last metaphysical principle in a technological age of learning. On the other side, poiesis is an exposure of the self to the open affordances of the world – to the possibility of letting objects shine forth as meaning-rich (cf. Dreyfus and Kelly 2011). In other words, poiesis is beyond the individual, subjective, intentionally guided will. Heidegger writes that poets, who are more venturesome than the most adventurous of willful subjects, “will more strongly in that they are more willing.” (Heidegger 2001, p. 116) “More willing,” in this citation, must be read with caution. “More willing” does not mean more commanding. Rather than more willful, Heidegger passes beyond the metaphysics of will to a mode of being that is more willing to be responsive, sensitive, and thankful for what is offered by the world. In the illuminating essay “On the Essence of Truth,” Heidegger makes a similar claim, arguing that the essence of truth is found in freedom “to let be.” (Heidegger 1998, p. 144) Being
more willing, in my argument, is being open to letting beings be as the beings that they are. In other words, letting beings be is to remain open and receptive to what presents itself. According to Heidegger, technology gives the impression that “everything man encounters exists only insofar as it is his construct” and in turn, that “man everywhere and always encounters only himself.” Poetic willingness (as letting be) enables “presences [to] come forth into appearance” (Heidegger 1984, p. 27) beyond the intentional volition of the subject-as-producer. If the more willful subject transforms the world into an object to be imbued with meaning by willing productivity and spirited command, the more willing subject turns to the world in order to listen, receive grace, and allow things to shine.

Similarly to Heidegger, Agamben fears that humans have lost this poetic receptivity. This loss is due to the overwhelming dominance of praxis over poiesis in the technological age. Agamben observes, “According to current opinion, all of man’s doing – that of the artist and the craftsman as well as that of the workman and the politician – is praxis, that is, manifestation of a will that produces a concrete effect.” (Agamben 1999, p. 68)

We can see the prodigious emphasis on praxis in the aesthetic theory of Nietzsche, where the artist is a “Will to Power,” or even in Marx, where the essence of the human is productive labor. Summarizing a long trajectory in Western culture, which has eclipsed poiesis with a biological notion of willful action, Agamben writes, “The point of arrival of Western aesthetics is a metaphysics of the will, that is, of life understood as energy and creative impulse […] And yet what the Greeks meant with the distinction between poiesis and praxis was precisely that the essence of poiesis has nothing to do with the expression of a will (with respect to which art is in no way necessary). This essence is found, instead, in the production of truth and in the subsequent opening of a world for man’s existence and action.” (Ibid., p. 72) The outcome of willful action is nothing more than the will reaching its own limit and reflecting itself in that limit, whereas the outcome of willing openness is receptivity to the world in its truth. In terms of the art world, the artist as pure will becomes the “man [sic] without content” (Ibid., p. 55), who has lost his or her sense of dwelling in a shared world precisely because his/her creations can only reflect his/her aesthetic subjectivity as absolute essence. In terms of political praxis, Agamben argues that Marx reduces productive activity to nothing more than “vital force, drive and energetic tension, passion.” (Ibid., p. 85) In the end, “The essence of praxis, the genetic characteristic of man as a human and historical being, has thus retreated into a naturalistic connotation of man as natural being.” (Ibid.) The structure of the world within the paradigm of praxis is teleological and progressive: there is a certain forward march, or at least an everyday, common sense notion of a forward march towards increasing levels of mastery and control over the environment and its resources, not to mention the self and its potentialities. Lost here is a sense of the world as pre-dating willful production (the clearing that is necessary for willful production to take place), and the only meaning possible for the man of praxis becomes the meaning he produces – a kind of radical constructivism, which, in educational terms, means perpetual self-(re)generation through verification of the powers of the will.
If we live in an age of technological “enframing”, things no longer call to us as meaningful or significant. For Heidegger, this means that *Dasein* exists in a state of inauthentic conformity to *das Man*, for Dreyfus and Kelly, this means living in a nihilistic world that lacks a sense of the sacred, and for Agamben, this means that humanity no longer has a sense of its own potentiality. In such circumstances, there can be no intuitive sense of anything as anything. Rather, all that appears are mute objects waiting to be animated by a will (and thus reflect back to humankind its own self-image as “man the producer”). Again, Heidegger summarizes this condition when he states that calculative thinking “compels itself into a compulsion to master everything on the basis of the consequential correctness of its procedure” (Heidegger 1998, p. 235) and neglects to care for the being of beings. In this dire set of circumstances, it would appear that educational philosophy can do little to help. The emphasis on willful self-production found in progressive and radical educational theories does not seem to promote freedom so much as reproduce the metaphysical preconditions for technological “enframing” and ontological leveling.

However, is everything lost? Recalling an early clarion call by Heidegger, Dreyfus and Kelly argue that the task of the philosopher is to assist in the project of “rediscovering the practices that reveal the sacred enchantments of the world.” (Dreyfus and Kelly 2011, p. 89) In this sense, the authors would suggest we return to certain classic texts, to not only read them in the light of contemporary nihilism, but also as resources for combating such nihilism. In marginal comments, asides, or tangents, we can find certain moments wherein *Dasein* is released from the metaphysical constraints of the will in order to become open to the possibility of the sacred. Thus, for instance, we might be apt to read Rousseau’s materialistic interpretation of Divinity as found in nature as a call for *Dasein* to be open and receptive to what has been given to it, and receive it with gratitude. In this sense, to will, for Rousseau, is to be open to the will of nature, which, on an intuitive level, gives *Dasein* access to a divine principle, which it can neither rationally fathom nor control. For Dreyfus and Kelly, the task at hand is a difficult but straightforward one: sensitize ourselves to these traces left by the gods, left in the margins of the Western classics, in order to prepare for their return. In other words, read the works of figures like Rousseau, James, Dewey, and Rancière in order to discover moments when education can be disconnected from the metaphysics of the will in order to return to a notion of the sacred. This is the only idea that will combat nihilism, and in turn, give *Dasein* a sense of what matters to it.

But there is a problem with this philosophical strategy. For Rousseau, the dependency upon that which is outside the will remains trapped in the discourse of the will, creating an infinite regression from will to will to will, and so on (the will of the child must be kept in check by the will of the tutor, who, in turn, is guided by the will of nature, which embodies the will of God, and so on). Behind what is given remains *a will* which in turn must be given something that is, again, the product of another will. Nothing in other words is ever truly given, but always produced by a willful subject. Thus, even in our attempt to salvage the sacred in Rousseau’s work, we reach the obstacle of the will. As such, it is not
clear that the retrieval of willing openness which Dreyfus and Kelly search for is of any real help. In fact, this reading strategy merely reconstitutes the centrality of the will. The sacred escapes us even when we attempt to retrieve it through open receptivity to the divinity in nature. In the end, the problem of the rise of technological enframing goes all the way down. Given this, Dreyfus and Kelly’s hermeneutical practice seems overly optimistic.

However, there is perhaps another “solution” to the problem of ontological leveling; a solution that does not see such leveling as an immediate evil leading to nihilism, but as a window opening into the primordial experience of potentiality. Here, I would like to conclude with a gesture towards Agamben’s theory of study. It is my contention that study presents us with a different relationship to the classics than that proposed by Dreyfus and Kelly, and thus opens up to a new educational paradigm that has yet to be fully understood let alone appreciated.

Studying potentiality: Agamben’s alternative

Although the will “solves” the problem of inequality (for Rousseau), it nevertheless fails to recognize its own ungroundedness, and therefore its complacency with technological calculation. When placed within the history of being, the solution becomes a symptom. Dreyfus and Kelly thus propose to read authors such as Rousseau, against the grain of the will, in order to rekindle a sense of the sacred outside of the metaphysic of the will, which has been a consistent theme in educational philosophy. Yet, I would argue that this return to the theme of the sacred, in order to solve the problems of a secular age, is unsatisfactory precisely because is misrecognizes an opportunity unique to ontological leveling: the exposure of pure potentiality. Instead of defining our lives according to a rehabilitation of the sacred, Agamben and his theory of study open Dasein up to the possibility of a profane solution, one that is no longer within the logic of technological “enframing” and yet not outside of it either.

For Agamben, we cannot return to a poetic age (or even a rehabilitated notion of the sacred which it defined), yet nor can we remain within the current epoch of technological praxis (wherein all relations are reduced to calculations of resources). What is an alternative beyond either poiesis or praxis and beyond either the sacred or the nihilistic? It is at this point that we can finally turn to Agamben’s description of “interminable” study. Agamben argues, “Those who are acquainted with long hours spent roaming among books, when every fragment, every codex, every initial encounter seems to open a new path, immediately left aside at the next encounter, or who have experienced the labyrinthine allusiveness of that ‘law of good neighbors’ whereby Warburg arranged his library, know that not only can study have no rightful end, but does not even desire one.” (Agamben 1995, p. 64)

The studier stands before a world that is mute, allusive, and dark, yet limitless and alluring, without end. For the studier, who is lost in the interminable rhythms of study, there cannot be: (a) a desire to realize certain latent potentials, (b) a will to guide one’s studies toward educational-growth, or (c) a command to verify the
equality of intelligences. Similar to Heidegger’s description of the venturesome poet, the studier “is turned away from all purposeful self-assertion,” and therefore does not engage in “willing in the sense of desire.” (Heidegger 2001, p. 135) The will does not take up the fragments of the world left by “enframing”, or build a new world in its self-image, or express sacred gratitude towards the gods for having given the gift of meaning. Rather, the studier remains quiet, listening to this collapsed world, which no longer affords meaning, rule, or measure for what counts. To study is to undergo a certain inoperativity where we are, to appropriate a phrase from Thomas Carl Wall’s insightful study of Agamben, “exposed to all its [thought’s] possibilities (all its predicates)” and yet are “undestined to any one or any set of them.” (Wall 1999, p. 152) Instead of either being drawn or pulled to certain possibilities and not others, or wilfully asserting our purposes, the studier stands before all possibilities with a certain detached indifference to outcomes and ends. Through this suspended state, the studier is able to study the question of being with a certain level of detached or indifferent openness. Without either the pull of worldly solicitations or the command of a will pursuing self-improvement, the hubris of Promethean production halts and the sacredness of things becomes a kind of profane abandon.

In studying, the world is taken as it is: without significance, composed of remnants or fragments of meaningless resources. Yet this state of leveling becomes an opportunity as much as a crisis for opening up and sustaining a new notion of freedom, beyond willful production or sacred solicitation. Here, the studier experiences a willing openness to the potentiality of the world to be rather than what it has become without forcing any particular actualization of this potentiality. When all ontological differences disappear (thus nothing calls for action), all that is left is a clearing for new possible uses. This state of suspension of ends and of willful calculation is reminiscent of Heidegger’s description of originary thinking, which “does not affect any results, as it has no need of effect.” (Heidegger 1998, p. 237) Instead of obsessing on ends, evaluations, and measurements, the kind of thinking experienced through study suspends the logic of means and ends. However, the result is not simply nihilism. Through study, the retreat of the sacred becomes in-fancy: a state which, for Agamben (2007), rests between no-longer simply being paralyzed by the loss of a meaning-rich world and not-yet gripped by new meanings. The studier lacks a will and thus, from the outside, the studier appears to be melancholic or passive. Yet rather than a pathological response to the leveling of meaning in a nihilistic world, study returns humanity to its origin in in-fancy before intellectual conceptualization, curious affection, or willful production; a state of stupification. In the state of arrested development that is in-fancy, the studier does not simply endeavor to produce a willed existence or wait for future solicitations, but rather receives the lack of solicitations as a solicitation to study the potentiality for solicitation as such – a kind of demand placed upon the studier that has no content and thus, is perpetually open. Citing Hölderlin, Heidegger argues, “But where there is danger, there grows also what saves.” (Heidegger 2001, p. 115) The destruction of education by the collapse of the sacredness of the world under technological “enframing” is not to be lamented.
(as with Dreyfus and Kelly), but rather to be strategically employed as a new anchoring point for an education beyond either nihilism or sacred reverence. It is here, in a state of in-fancy, that we find the one who studies – the one who would prefer not to continue the production of willful self-creation, and instead remains quietly attuned with willing openness to the only thing that remains when the gods have fled and the world stands in darkness: the silent call of potentiality. For the studier, the teacher does not need to hide the authority of the will, for the will has become inoperative. Indeed, there can be no authority over potentiality, nor can there be any sense of mastery. Here, the teacher is not the one who secretly organizes experiences so as to correctly correlate will and desire, but rather the one who merely opens up the time and space for self-study where the studier finds nothing more than what remains in a world that does not call, that is not sacred, and does not offer solicitations. In this sense, we can finally close the chapter of educational philosophy, which Rousseau (inadvertently) opened; a chapter dominated by the problem of the will, freedom, and the sacred. What opens before us is an alternative vision of a stupid education, which grants us access to the sad yet inspirational experience of our naked and vulnerable potentiality.

References
