
This is an electronic reprint of the original article.
This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.

Tervo, Juuso

A Step Not Beyond Education's Autonomy

Published in:
POLICY FUTURES IN EDUCATION

DOI:
[10.1177/14782103231162124](https://doi.org/10.1177/14782103231162124)

Published: 01/04/2023

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published under the following license:
CC BY

Please cite the original version:
Tervo, J. (2023). A Step Not Beyond Education's Autonomy. *POLICY FUTURES IN EDUCATION*, 21(3), 286-298. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14782103231162124>

This material is protected by copyright and other intellectual property rights, and duplication or sale of all or part of any of the repository collections is not permitted, except that material may be duplicated by you for your research use or educational purposes in electronic or print form. You must obtain permission for any other use. Electronic or print copies may not be offered, whether for sale or otherwise to anyone who is not an authorised user.

A step not beyond education's autonomy

Juuso Tervo 

Department of Art and Media, School of Arts, Design and Architecture, Aalto University, Finland

Policy Futures in Education
2023, Vol. 0(0) 1–13
© The Author(s) 2023



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/14782103231162124

journals.sagepub.com/home/pfe



Abstract

Many arguments for education's autonomy put forward a repeated yet undefined claim that there is an identifiable, dividing line between education and its outside, and that it is within the distinct contours of "the educational" where the nomos of its autonomy lies. Approaching this claim from a literary perspective, I conduct a critical reading of the language of education's autonomy that runs on the interplay between internal and external laws, and thus frames education's distinctiveness (or its indistinctiveness) as a question of governance. I claim that such emphasis on governance ties the discussion of education's autonomy to narratives of progress associated with occidental modernity and forms a self-generating feedback loop where self-governing education and self-governing human life serve as each other's arche and telos. As an alternative, antinomic figuration of education's autonomy, I offer a reading of a scene from Johan Amos Comenius's utopic novel *The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart* and pair it with Maurice Blanchot's writings on the neuter. While acknowledging that an ungovernable approach to education's autonomy poses challenges for educational thought, practice, and policy, I see that it nevertheless allows to question education's intelligibility and progress that governance assumedly guarantees.

Keywords

education's autonomy, self-governance, occidental modernity, John Dewey, Johan Amos Comenius, Maurice Blanchot

In the dramatic peripeteia of Johan Amos Comenius' utopic novel *The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart*, the protagonist of the story, Pilgrim, finds himself at "the end of the world and light" (Comenius, 1998/1631: 186). Pilgrim, who embarked on a journey to seek "peaceful and pleasant life" (Comenius, 1998/1631: 62) with the help of his two guides, Ubiquitous and Delusion, throws away the colored eyeglasses his guides had given him and walks alone to the edge of an abyss. He recounts,

Corresponding author:

Juuso Tervo, Department of Art and Media, School of Arts, Design and Architecture, Aalto University, Otaniementie 14, Aalto 00076, Finland.

Email: juuso.tervo@aalto.fi

I beheld fearful darkness and gloom of which neither the bottom nor the end could be fathomed by human reason, and in which there was nothing but worms, frogs, snakes, scorpions, pus and stench, and the smell of brimstone and pitch overwhelming body and soul. In sum, unspeakable horror! (Comenius, 1998/1631: 186)

Just when he is about to jump into this horrific void, Pilgrim hears a “soft voice” asking him to “return.” Unable to locate its source, Pilgrim listens to the voice as it pleads him to “return whence you came, to the home of your heart, and shut the door behind you!” (Comenius, 1998/1631: 186) Then,

I obeyed this counsel as far as I understood it, and I did well to obey God who was counseling me; but even that was his gift. Then, collecting my thoughts as well as I could and closing my eyes, ears, mouth, nostrils, and all external passages, I entered into my heart and found that it was dark. But when with blinking eyes I looked about a little, I could see a faint light coming through the cracks, and I distinguished up above, in the vault of this little chamber, a large, round, glass window. But it was so dirty and smeared with grime that hardly any light could penetrate. (Comenius, 1998/1631: 187)

When approximating the question of education’s autonomy, I cannot help but to think of Pilgrim’s peculiar entrance to his heart. Much like how the orifices in Pilgrim’s body mark the border between the gloomy labyrinth of the world and the paradisaical home of his heart, the recent discussion concerning education’s autonomy seems to suggest a dividing line between education and its outside. Echoing Dewey’s claim that “to go *outside* the educational function and to borrow objectives from an *external source* is to surrender the educational cause” (Dewey, 1929 as cited in Yosef-Hassidim, 2021: 53, emphasis added), this line governing the contours of “the educational” allegedly allows us to “ask educational questions about education” (Norris, 2021: 130). While the border between education and its outside remains vaguely defined, it clearly presents a problem for educational thinkers. For example, Herner Saeverot argues that: “perhaps the main problem with education as an interdisciplinary [is] its willingness to borrow objectives, concepts, theories, and methods from *external sources*” (Saeverot, 2021: 114, emphasis added). Similarly, Trevor Norris claims that in order to understand what makes education “distinctive from what is *outside*” “we must question and pursue what makes it distinct in ways that do not, inadvertently, obscure that distinctness” (Norris, 2021: 129, emphasis added).¹

What makes Pilgrim’s mystical self-enclosure an intriguing companion to these arguments is that while the “faint light coming through the cracks” suggests a coming enlightenment (which, indeed, arrives at the end of the book), the dark, dirty, and grimy chamber of Pilgrim’s innermost keeps him in a similar “darkness and gloom” he had just managed to escape. Instead of considering this indistinctiveness as a problem, I see that it helps to conduct a critical reading of a language of education’s autonomy that runs on a clear distinction between what lies *within* the educational and what remains external to it.

I am not suggesting that arguments for education’s autonomy are unfounded. Taking into consideration the current institutional pressures to frame educational thought and practice both in institutional and non-institutional settings through “entrepreneurialism, economic growth, and the creation of human capital” (Norris, 2021: 131), I am both personally and professionally very aware of how educational discussions about education repeatedly turn into managerial discussions about management. Just as Dewey was critical of “the uncontrolled succession of waves of one-sided temporarily dominating interests and slogans that have affected educational practice and theory” (Dewey, 1929: 51), the recent discussion of education’s autonomy offers important insights into the

very *work* of education and strategies to resist its reduction into the shortest imaginable path between two, abstract points defined by whatever jargon is currently in vogue.

My critique is, instead, targeted toward the repeated yet undefined claim that there is an identifiable, dividing boundary between education and its *outside*, and that it is *within* the imaginary contours of “the educational” where the *nomos* of education’s autonomy lies. By this, I do not mean that educational thought and practice would (or should) not differ from other professional fields or practices. Rather, my claim is that to associate this difference with internally regulated boundaries directs us to approach education’s autonomy as a question of governance, and thus prevents us to imagine “the educational” aside from either internal or external laws (*nomoi*). What makes this language even more complicated is that the assumedly internal *nomos* of education’s autonomy does not belong to education alone. Akin to how Plato in *Phaedo* separated the governing, invisible soul (*psūkhē*) from the obeying, visible body (80a), this language has the tendency to locate the inner *nomos* of “the educational” within the figural contours of an active, self-governing human being guided by its own, internal consciousness. Consider, for example, the following passage:

autonomous education is a self-governing entity ... that has its own “nervous system.” As an independent sphere, education has the legitimacy and capacity to define its own concerns and priorities and to make its own decisions without necessarily considering other matters; independent education is a self-determining entity that has its own “mind” or “consciousness.” (Yosef-Hassidim, 2021: 56–57)

In other words, what we find guarded within the “autonomous social sphere” (Yosef-Hassidim, 2021: 56) of “the educational” is not education per se, but an idea(l) of a self-conscious human individual whose “legitimacy and capacity to define its own concerns and priorities” depends on its innate ability to separate its “mind” from anything deemed alien (i.e., *external*) to its “nervous system” or “consciousness”—an ability that education as an autonomous social sphere with its own “mind” or “consciousness” allegedly secures.

Why I am hesitant to adhere to such conceptualization of education’s autonomy is that the interlaced self-governance of human life and education seems to be predicated on an imaginary boundary between internally governed, self-conscious life, and externally governed, a-conscious existence. This, in turn, commits the search for a distinct, governing principle of what I call *an educational life* to narratives of progress often associated with “Occidental modernity” (Seth, 2022). As Sanjay Seth (2022) argues, these narratives have the “curious character” (Seth, 2022: 232) of treating (self-)knowledge both as the cause and the effect of a progressive realization of “rationality immanent in social institutions, the most basic content of which is autonomy and free self-determination” (Seth, 2022: 235). From this perspective, even if the immanent rationality and the autonomy it guarantees were understood as historically and culturally contingent, the circular co-constitution of autonomous education and human life creates a spatio-temporal feedback loop that not only figures “the educational” through an interplay between (desirable) internal and (rejectable) external laws, but also positions exclusionary self-governance as the precondition *and* the denouement of a distinctively educational life. If, then, “to enhance the idea of education’s autonomy” requires that “the question about being human must be kept open and educational” (Yosef-Hassidim, 2021: 53), I am interested in approaching the *openness* that education’s autonomy seeks aside from a circular enclosure governed by assumedly immanent rationality.

This brings me back to Pilgrim. Fabled by the patriarchal figure par excellence of European history of universal education and lifelong learning for whom life and education were inseparable processes of continuous spiritual growth (c.f., Sadler, 2007), Comenius’s Pilgrim can be read as a figuration of an educational life searching for itself. As Pilgrim’s entrance to his heart shows,

Comenius shared the conception that it is from within that we must search for life and education unrestrained by ephemeral, external follies and fancies. And yet, as suggested above, it is precisely the boundary between the internal and the external that this scene also helps to question. To borrow terminology from Maurice Blanchot (an author to whom I will return in the latter part of this article), the very moment of Pilgrim's entrance to the murky home of his heart can be read as *le pas au-delà*, translated by Lycette Nelson as *the step not beyond* that resists the totalizing closure of clear distinctions, differences, and taxonomies. Playing with the double meaning of the word *pas* in French, this aporetic step (*pas*) does not (*pas*) negate nor affirm the difference it seeks, but, as Nelson puts it, "transforms the *pas* of negation into the *pas* of patience, passion, and passivity, taking its power of negation away through the powerlessness of the unaccomplished" (Nelson, 1992: xviii). By paying close attention to Pilgrim's movement in the dark, my intention is to see what happens to education's autonomy when a step within "the educational" reveals not some internal nomos governing both life and education, but instead, a passing glimpse of their ungovernability.

Granted, writing about Pilgrim's retreat to his heart might not be the most obvious suggestion for educational thought or policy today. However, since one of the central aims of the current discussion of education's autonomy is a "radical change in what education means" (Yosef-Hassidim and Baldacchino, 2021: 37), I see that inflicting such a change requires us to *imagine* education and its autonomy otherwise—sometimes in ways that might seem strange. By this, I do not mean mere daydreaming, but a careful recognition of the multiple ways that we are and, most importantly, could be *with* education—both in theory and practice. By focusing specifically on the language being used when claiming to the distinctiveness of "the educational," I take a literary approach to educational thought that recognizes the world-making potential of metaphors and other literary devices not only in fiction, but also in research, policy, and everyday life. As such, my approach resonates with that of Jordan Harper and Henry Jenkins (2022), who have recently called for "radical imagination" in higher education to resist academia's compliance with neoliberalism and white supremacy. As they see potential in horror and science fiction genres to confront "the all-too-familiar on the way to the radical and otherworldly" (Harper and Jenkins, 2022: 74), so too I see potential in a Blanchotian reading of Comenius's allegory to reconfigure education's autonomy in a way that questions the all-too-familiar recognizability of "the educational" along the lines of a self-governing, ever-developing human life.

Since Dewey's *The Sources of a Science of Education* has provided an important background for the current discussion of education's autonomy (Yosef-Hassidim, 2021; Yosef-Hassidim and Baldacchino, 2021), I begin my inquiry with a close reading of it. Conducting a reading that is more literary than strictly philosophical or historical, I focus on traces of language that locates the nomos of education's autonomy within "the educational" and blurs the spatio-temporal boundaries between self-governing life and self-governing education. Drawing from Seth's (2022) characterization of Occidental modernity, I discuss what kind of externality the internal nomos of Deweyan educational life entails, and on what kind of divisions between self-conscious life and a-conscious existence Deweyan language of education's autonomy depends. After that, I return to Pilgrim's entrance to his heart and conduct a Blanchotian reading of the scene. Drawing from Blanchot's concept of the neuter, my intention is to seek an approach to 'educational questions about education' without residing to either internal or external forms of governance. While acknowledging that such an approach might not secure education a distinct presence in society, I claim that an *antinomic* conceptualization of 'the educational' may help to imagine a "change of education" (Yosef-Hassidim and Baldacchino, 2021: 37) far more profound than narratives of progress and development.

Entering education's autonomy: Dewey

Dewey's *The Sources of a Science of Education* presents an attempt to delineate a realm of thought and action particular to educational practice and the science that investigates it. What Dewey was looking for in this realm was something general that educators may lean on without, however, reducing every educational act under a generalizing, normative framework. Acknowledging that there are individual educators who succeed in their work without any scientific knowledge of education, he saw that "the existence of science gives common efficacy to the experiences of the genius; it makes it possible for the results of special power to become part of the working equipment of other inquirers, instead of perishing as they arose" (Dewey, 1929: 11). In other words, by ensuring that the "special power" of individual educators is harnessed in the field's "steady and cumulative growth of intellect" (Dewey, 1929: 10), education may simultaneously overcome its particular instances while at the same time strengthening its unique characteristics as a field of its own.

It is when further elaborating on the sources of these "special powers" that Dewey turns to a spatial language of "the educational." For example, Dewey characterized classroom teachers as "an almost unworked mine" (Dewey, 1929: 46) of educational knowledge, and scolded scientists for not making use of this source. As he put it, "the final reality of educational science is not found in books, nor in experimental laboratories, nor in the class-rooms where it is taught, but *in the minds* of those engaged in directing educational activities" (Dewey, 1929: 32, emphasis added). This did not mean that education would merely be an idealist endeavor "confined with the mind" (Dewey, 1929: 58). Rather, Dewey claimed that its "effect is found only in operation" and that "[f]or a philosophy of education this operation is found in enabling practitioners to carry on their work in a more liberal spirit, with escape from tradition and routine and one-sided personal interests and whims" (Dewey, 1929: 58). Differently put, what the science of education must excavate from these minds/mines is not "tradition, "routine" or "one-sided personal interests and whims," but rather the very "work" of education.² From a methodological perspective, this requires "some kind of vital current flowing between the field worker and the research worker" without which "the latter is not able to judge the real scope of the problem to which he addresses himself" (Dewey, 1929: 44). Only then educational science may properly recognize distinctively educational knowledge *within* educators themselves, and subsequently advance the work they do without going "outside the educational function" (Dewey, 1929: 74):

The sources of educational science are any portions of ascertained knowledge that *enter into* the heart, head and hands of educators, and which, by *entering in*, render the performance of the educational function more enlightened, more humane, more truly educational than it was before. (Dewey, 1929: 76, emphasis mine)

As Dewey's repetitive usage of the word "more" suggests, this interpenetration of the general and the particular within "the heart, head and hands of educators" is not merely spatial, but also temporal operation. Claiming that education is "by its nature an endless circle or spiral" (Dewey, 1929: 77), Dewey connected the internal sources of educational knowledge with a flow of time that ensured the conscious and controlled "growth" and "progress" (Dewey, 1929: 77) of education both as science and practice. Writing that "to look to some outside source to provide aims [for education] is to fail to know what education is as an ongoing process" (Dewey, 1929: 75), Dewey argued that it is this "process" itself, not individual educators, that make educational practice "more truly educational." "It would be presumptuous if it had been said that *educators* should determine objectives [of education]. But the statement was that the *educative process* in its integrity and continuity should

determine them. Educators have a place in this process, but they are not it, far from it” (Dewey, 1929: 74). Hence, “there is no way to discover what is ‘more truly educational’ except by the continuation of the educational act itself. The discovery is never made; it is always making” (Dewey, 1929: 76).

It is Dewey’s conflation of the interconnected dimensions (spatial and temporal) and qualities (general and particular) of “the educational” that helps, I claim, to grasp what kind of nomos of education’s autonomy can be seen to stem from his thought. When entering the individual minds (“mines”) of educators, what educational science finds is not education per se—since, as Dewey put it “educational science has no content of its own” (Dewey, 1929: 50)—but an ever-continuing, general educative act flowing *within* (i.e., the heart, head, and hands) and *between* (i.e., “vital current”) educators and educational scientist. While this process cannot be discovered as such, a truly “educational” science of education can, according to Dewey, tap into it and thus turn education from a passive object of scientific interest into an active subject that “*includes science within itself*” (Dewey, 1929: 77). Eventually, what this means is that, for Dewey, education is no more or less than “a mode of life, of action” (Dewey, 1929: 75) that is never fully reducible to mere “sociological information” (Dewey, 1929: 76).

It is possible to say, then, that the language Dewey uses in *The Sources of a Science of Education* characterizes “the educational” akin to an active, ever-generating life force that strives for an autonomous educational life. Functioning like a circulatory system running within a living body, this force keeps the field of education alive and together by ensuring the “continuation of the educational act” in the work of individual educators and, by continuing it, renders it “more enlightened, more humane, more truly educational than it was before.” However, unlike the circulatory system, this force exceeds its particular manifestations since educators have a place in it but “are not it.” For the conceptualization of education’s autonomy, this means that the nomos that governs the form and function of an educational life is at the same time locatable and unlocatable: locatable because it is only *within* “the educational” that it can be discovered, and unlocatable because its “discovery is never made” as “it is always making.”

This formulation certainly helps to resist education’s reduction into mere “sociological information” and reject “fixed and final set of objectives” (Dewey, 1929: 75) that would limit the work of education to a means to predetermined ends. As such, it also resonates with Dewey’s vision of democracy as a pluralistic “way of life” (Boyte and Finders, 2016) that ensures that civil society is not governed by, for example, economic reason or military force alone. It is worth noting, however, that the openness this formulation grants to both human life and education rests on a spatio-temporal distinction between two modalities of being: active, generative life guided by *internal* consciousness and passive, menial existence that stays under the “abdication” and “surrender” (Dewey, 1929: 77) of *external* causes.³ Considering that for Dewey it is only the former that ensures the “growth” and “progress” of “the educational act,” the “mode of life” that he saw education to be can be understood as “action” governed by an inner organizing principle (nomos) that reveals itself only through introspection.⁴ In other words, the foundational open-endedness of autonomous educational life seems to be predicated on an introspective enclosure meant to grant education a “mind” its own that, subsequently, ensures that as the “animating spirit” (Dewey, 1929: 75) of society, education cultivates well-reasoned individuals untethered by “tradition,” “routine,” and “one-sided personal interests and whims.”

Not only does this reasoning bring in mind Plato’s aforementioned distinction between the invisible soul and the visible body but it also guides us to imagine education’s autonomy through a set of divisions—internal, external; progress, stagnancy; activity, passivity; subject, object—that guards the contours of an autonomous educational life. Going back to Seth’s (2022) characterization

of Occidental modernity, this means that the nomos of education's autonomy operates like an immanent rationality that keeps its "endless circle or spiral" running through self-inflicted differentiation from whatever education ought *not* to be: something external, stagnant, passive, and object-like. Positioned in a co-constitutive intersection of autonomous human life and autonomous education, this "animating spirit" serves both as the *arche* and *telos* of self-governance: without it, educational life would assumedly remain governed by external rationalities that prevent its proper growth and progress.

What, then, might Dewey teach us about the language of education's autonomy embedded in a spatial division between education and its outside? Based on my reading of *The Sources of a Science of Education*, it is possible to say that the introspective enclosure that allows "the educational" to govern itself from within and thus to be open to the world on its own terms seems to necessitate the existence of *externality* that the nomos of autonomy must banish from the realm it governs. In Hegelian fashion, the existence of this externality—for example, external causes—ensures that "the educational function" becomes "more enlightened, more humane, more truly educational than it was before," but only if the external is included in 'the educational' in the same way that Dewey saw educational science to include science within itself: as an additional, not primary, element in inner growth. In other words, the external operates in the contested middle sequence of a narrative arch of educational imagination that begins and ends with education's self-identification, self-transparency, and self-governance; all which can be understood as preconditions for progress in Occidental modernity.

What I find troublesome about such approach to education's autonomy is that the Occidental narratives of progress that rest on an idea(1) of self-governed consciousness have a long and complicated track record in conceptual and concrete practices of exclusion. Having operated as an imperial frame of reference that differentiates people, groups, institutions, and entire cultures (not to mention non-human entities) into those allegedly capable of grasping their immanent rationality—and, subsequently, govern themselves from within and grow—and those who are seen incapable of self-governance and thus remain governed by others (c.f., Masuzawa, 2005; Rifkin, 2017), the externality these narratives perpetuate should not be accepted as such. While a more elaborate analysis of Dewey's dependency on such exclusionary traditions of thought is beyond the scope of this article,⁵ I see that questioning the language of education's autonomy that seems incapable of imagining educational life without an organizing principle governing it (either internally or externally) allows us to think and practice education aside from self-generating feedback loops striving to save life and education from all things considered *alien* to their *proper* progression.

Take, for example, Matthew J. Hayden's and William Gregory Harman's (2021) approach to education's autonomy. Rehearsing a Marcusean critique of "desublimated" education that reduces educational thought and practice to "technocratic performativity" (Hayden and Harman, 2021: 93), they call for a resublimation of education via a recourse to "concepts that require the sublime: intangibility, ineffability, holism, or transcendence" (Hayden and Harman, 2021: 91). This is because, according to them, "[b]y removing the sublime nature or elements, we lose the thing itself" (Hayden and Harman, 2021: 91). While their language does not lean on a spatial division between education and its outside, the fear of "losing the thing itself" entails a similar circular imagination and narrative arch as we found from Dewey. In other words, education is presented as a nameable yet ineffable force of life that is both the precondition as well as the ever-fleeting objective of "person's holistic self-construction" (Hayden and Harman, 2021: 94). What technocratic performativity desublimates is, then, not education per se, but an ideal figuration of human life whose innate potential for self-consciousness, self-determination, and self-governance only a sublimated education can actualize. Thus relocating the nomos of educational life from "narrow ideologically

constrained distortions” (Hayden and Harman, 2021: 94) to a numinous plane of ever-developing life striving to become conscious of itself, Hayden and Harman sublimate the preconditions of autonomy and, by doing so, grant education’s autonomy a strong salvific characteristic: there are those who are capable of grasping the ineffable “thing itself” of education and thus able to free themselves from all ideological “distortions,” and those who are ruled by a consciousness other than their own and because of that remain in a constant state of arrested development. Again, what we have here is a foundational division between self-conscious, self-governed life and a-conscious, externally governed existence; a division that grant education’s autonomy the contours of its intelligibility.

If this is the case, what would it mean to approach education’s autonomy without a constant recourse to governance? What might happen to “educational questions about education” if these questions were disjointed from circular narratives of ever-progressing educational life? With these questions in mind, let us return to Pilgrim’s tenebrous homecoming and see how this scene might help us to reimagine education’s autonomy.

Pilgrim’s step not beyond

When trying to imagine education’s autonomy without an internal or external nomos governing its contours, Comenius seems an odd choice for a thinker. After all, as someone who saw the world as a “school of God’s wisdom” (Comenius, 1938/1668: 1), Comenius divided human life into eight different “schools”—birth, infancy, boyhood, adolescence, early manhood, manhood, old age, death—that each had their own place and function in the course of one’s spiritual growth (Dobbie, 1986). Moreover, his chiliastic view of history granted his vision of universal, continuous education a strong revelatory narrative. As he put it, “the Christian ... depends so confidently on what is invisible, absent, and future, that things that are present disgust him” (Comenius, 1998/1631: 199). When combined, these attributes connect Comenius’s vision of education closely to heavenly governance, or, to use a more technical term, providence.

It is worth acknowledging that Comenius’s narrative has a specific literary context. As a scene, Pilgrim’s inward turn belongs to a tradition of thought in which the body is seen as a worldly vessel for its immortal, animating soul; a tradition which has required various thinkers—including Plato in *Phaedo*, apostle Paul in his letters, Augustine in *Confessions*, and Thomas à Kempis in *De Imitatione Christi*—to come up with metaphoric language that speaks of the interconnectedness of the visible and the invisible in human life. It also resembles Descartes’s method—developed around the same time as Comenius wrote his *Labyrinth*—of imagining himself with “no hands, no eyes, no flesh, no blood, no senses at all” (Descartes, 2010/1637: 16) so that he could confirm his existence as a “thinking thing” (Descartes, 2010/1637: 20).⁶ While in these narratives the uncertainty related to the turn within eventually turns into absolute certainty of its necessity, the neat dualism between the two realms united by this movement can be seen to be conditioned by a third, less certain element: (non) time and (non)place of indistinctive in-between that, I believe, Pilgrim’s self-enclosure grants a figure. In order to attend to this (non)time and (non)place, Pilgrim’s entrance to his heart must be approached idiosyncratically, as if pausing or significantly slowing down the scene. To borrow Don Byrd’s terminology, this means to rehearse “poetic knowledge” that allows one to “think about one thing at a time” (Byrd, 1994: 23). What I am suggesting, then, is a reading of this scene that attempts to grasp poetic precision from Comenius’s side to think *nothing but* the turn within an educational life.

What do I mean by this? The difficulty of distinguishing the difference between the labyrinth and the paradise in the fleeting event of Pilgrim’s entrance to his heart offers, I believe, a glimpse of an educational life ungoverned by neither spatial nor temporal progression. His dutiful

obedience to the voice coming from nowhere leads him precisely to the nowhere from which this voice emanates: “I looked around to see who was calling me and where he was commanding me to return. But I saw nothing” (Comenius, 1998/1631: 187). While “nothing” is precisely what seems to happen (at least at first), this transient event nevertheless marks the first “truly educational” event in the entire story: it changes *everything*, even the language that Comenius uses later in the book.⁷ It is true that Comenius eventually fills this “nothing” with meaning and by doing so, connects it to a chain of events leading to a cathartic unity with the divine. However, the fact that this decisive change itself is figured as an event that neither affirms nor negates its own decisiveness suggests that the very border separating the external from the internal loses its explicatory force, and, subsequently, resists to be read merely as a point of division between progression and decline, or knowledge and ignorance.

This is why I find Blanchot an intriguing bedfellow for Comenius. As a writer who ceaselessly wrote towards the dissolution of writing, Blanchot approached language with a poetic precision not merely toward its possibilities, but its impassés as well. His fragmentary récit *The Step Not Beyond* offers an example of writing in which he put his concept of the neuter in practice. Being a concept that, by its definition, resists a definition, the neuter can be considered as a step not beyond writing that Blanchot rehearsed throughout his long career. As Lycette Nelson puts it: “Beginning from the neuter, Blanchot displaces first the subject, then identity in general, and finally the present itself” (Nelson, 1992: ix). Or, as Blanchot himself writes:

The power to name the neuter was, always, the power not to name it, to dedicate to it, from closer and closer, all language, all that is visible and all that is invisible of language, and yet to withdraw it from language precisely by this donation that reduces the neuter to being only the recipient of its own message. As if the dusk where the night and day seem to trade places, in favor of darkness that illuminates and of a clarity that dissipates itself, in an indifferent equality, were not the interval impossible to fill up, nor the difference always previously marked, out of which there could be an eternal day, an eternal night, and their perpetual exchange. (Blanchot, 1992: 83)

When Blanchot’s elusive writing of the neuter is applied to education’s autonomy, Pilgrim’s self-enclosure as a step not beyond does not grant a distinctive form to a self-conscious, self-transparent subject that produces itself endlessly, but instead presents a withering away of the contours of this subject and tampers with the life it is expected to govern. This allows, I believe, to imagine the openness of ‘the educational’ aside from inner or external governance; that is, openness without a nomos designed to expel “external sources” from the “inner” workings of an educational life. Going back to the idea that Blanchotian step/not (*pas*)—one of the (im)possible names for neuter—resists the power of negation through “the powerlessness of the unaccomplished” (Nelson, 1992: xvii), Pilgrim’s step not beyond would be a step within an educational life where life and education are in perpetual exchange without, however, being recipients of their own messages. In other words, rather than governing life with education and education with life, both life and education would keep each other ungovernable: not only in relation to “external” forces, but, most importantly, forces that allegedly emanate from “within.”

This reading resonates, in part, with Yosef-Hassidim and Baldacchino’s “weak” and “kenotic” characterization of education’s autonomy, which entails a “possible yet ungrounded (and therefore weak) notion of a “no place” where everything could happen” (Yosef-Hassidim and Baldacchino, 2021: 41). This, in turn, leads them to argue for a utopian, “polysemic character of autonomy” (Yosef-Hassidim and Baldacchino, 2021: 43), meaning that:

in affirming the plural meanings and possibilities of autonomy, and in refusing to be strictly named and defined, education's autonomy stands to free up those plural spaces of practice where, to use Dewey's words ... education becomes "free to determine its own ends." (Yosef-Hassidim and Baldacchino, 2021: 44)

However, their critique of "education's disenfranchisement by other names" (Yosef-Hassidim and Baldacchino, 2021: 44) seems to suggest a general, shared meaning that marks "everything" that education could mean or do with a *proper* name.⁸ Differently put, the contingency that the polysemic character of education's autonomy opens up is governed by a necessity of returning to the *true name* of education that, like the name of God in Bible, is never fully emptied in its enunciation but nevertheless should not be said in vain. Hence, instead of confirming the proper name of education (even if this name were considered polysemic), I see that Pilgrim's step not beyond has the potential to leave education radically anonymous:

The anonymous after the name is not the nameless anonymous. The anonymous does not consist in refusing the name in withdrawing from it. The anonymous puts the name in place, leaves it empty, as if the name were the only to let itself be passed through because the name does not name, but is the non-unity and non-presence of the nameless. (Blanchot, 1992: 34–35)

Without a proper name, "the educational" takes up an antinomic rather than simply autonomous character. This does not mean that it would become like Carl Schmitt's antinomic sovereign, who occupies the threshold between law and lawlessness (c.f., Davies, 2010). Instead, a step not beyond education's autonomy interferes with the circular imagination that begins and ends with *nomos*, and by doing so, loosens the taken-for-granted connection between presence and power. This, I believe, encourages us to reimagine "the conditions that make it possible for us to identify something as 'educational'" (Norris, 2021: 129) without residing to fashionable jargon (e.g., entrepreneurialism, economic growth, creation of human capital) or transcendental(ized) idea(l)s (e.g., the self-conscious subject of Occidental modernity). Like how Blanchot's neuter unravels "a thought perpetually other than itself, and other than the other" (Hill, 2012: 63), such antinomic and anonymous figuration of "the educational" keeps educational imagination open to its own otherness (and the otherness of that otherness) by endlessly questioning the very contours of its governability. While this approach to education's autonomy might not grant education a clearly recognizable distinctiveness, I see that it allows to be attentive to forms of educational life that *question*—and not simply affirm—"the educational."

Conclusions

If education's autonomy is meant to inflict a "change of education" that denotes "a radical change in what education means, in its status in society, and in its goals" (Yosef-Hassidim and Baldacchino, 2021: 37), I see that this change might require us imagine what might make education ungovernable, even to educators themselves. By this, I do not mean some *laissez-faire* attitude toward education, but, on the contrary, an approach to 'the educational' that retains a resistance toward all attempts to define its assumedly proper form and function. A Blanchotian, antinomic figuration of Comenius's Pilgrim suggest a way of being with education that inflicts a 'change of education' by changing the very conditions of its recognizability.

This certainly poses some challenges for policy. However, inspired by what John Baldacchino calls "a *polis* without walls" (Baldacchino, 2021: 111), I am arguing for educational imagination

unconfined by imaginary contours of governance. I see that the metaphoric language hinging on the distinction between inside and outside makes *exclusion* the modus operandi of education's autonomy and, by doing so, keeps educational imagination compliant with political thought that assigns agency to some while denying it from others—even *within* the walls of polis. Basing this exclusion on the distinction between active life (governed from within) and passive existence (governed from without), such language cannot do away with managerial mindset that allegedly “desublimates” education because it is management (qua self-governance) that this language pursues as well. Hence, while an ungovernable approach to educational policy might seem like an aporia, I see that aporetic figurations of “the educational” may allow us to put the *polis* of its policy in a strange light (akin to the dusk Blanchot writes about), and question the clarity that governance assumedly guarantees.

If, then, the “change of education” would be so radical that “the educational” became unrecognizable even to educators themselves, how can we even talk about education or its autonomy? I wish to underline that I am not arguing for a retreat to shadowy nihilism or apophatic mysticism. On the contrary, this article is meant to sketch an approach to ‘the educational’ that is radically open—not to something ‘more truly educational’ as Dewey had it, but to the very change that education so eagerly pursues. I admit that this might leave education conceptually unclear or, at worst, give it an aporetic appearance that is as equally circular as the governance I have critiqued. However, rather than suggesting a leap of faith into the unknown, I see that a step not beyond “the educational” encourages us to ask “educational questions about education” in ways that keep up with the radical potentiality of these questions; that is, to approach them as a possibility to imagine, think, and practice education otherwise.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Johanna Sitomaniemi-San, Antti Saari, Tuomo Alhojärvi, and Kirsi Pauliina Kallio for reading and commenting an early draft of this text. I also wish to thank each anonymous reviewer for critical and constructive feedback.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Juuso Tervo  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5938-7890>

Notes

1. Not directly related to these discussions but strongly resonating with the language being used, Naomi Hodgson, Joris Vlieghe, and Piotr Zamojski have argued: “In current formulations, taking care of the world is framed in terms of education *for* citizenship, education *for* social justice, education *for* sustainability, etc. in view of a particular notion of global citizenship and an entrepreneurial form of intercultural dialog. Although perhaps underpinned by a progressive, critical pedagogy, the concern in such formulations of

- responsibility for the world is with *ends external to education*” (Hodgson et al., 2017: 18, last emphasis added).
2. This, of course, reflects Dewey’s pragmatist approach to knowledge. As Lauri Väkevä puts it: “Because knowing [for Dewey] is a function of active experience, its object is not something that resides in the subjective mind nor in the extra empirical reality: the object of knowledge is the actualization of meaning potential of a situation” (Väkevä, 2012: 274).
 3. Given that Hegel played an important, albeit alternating, role in Dewey’s thought (c.f. Juuso, 2012; Väkevä, 2012), such a reasoning comes not as a surprise.
 4. It is worth noting that Dewey did not completely discard external influences. Writing about the possible “segregation” of the field, he warned against approaching “educational affairs without a sufficient grounding in the non-educational disciplines that must be drawn upon, and hence [exaggerating] minor points in an absurdly one-sided way, and [grasping] at some special scientific technique as if its use were a magical guarantee of a scientific product” (Dewey, 1929: 50). What this implies is that the “sufficient grounding” provided by “non-educational disciplines” must not be considered as the “source” of educational science, but rather an aid helping to recognize this source within the field of education itself.
 5. On the influence of recapitulation theory in Dewey’s thought, see Fallace (2015).
 6. Comenius and Descartes did meet in person in the 1640s. On the similarities between Comenius and Descartes, see Harries (1998). On Descartes’ critique of Comenius, see Rohls (2008).
 7. As Alfred Thomas (1995) observes, this event changes the narrative from negative allegory to positive allegory, eventually leading allegory to disappear altogether.
 8. Another example of the dependency on a proper name of education can be found from Hayden and Harman, who argue that “we should never apply the word ‘education’ to any experience that does not encompass all these things [i.e., everything they consider to grant education’s autonomy its “full meaning”]” (Hayden and Harman, 2021: 94).

References

- Baldacchino J (2021) Formative autonomy: lessons from Elio Petri. *Educational Theory* 71(1): 95–111.
- Blanchot M (1992) *The Step Not Beyond* (Nelson L, trans). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Boyte HC and Finders MJ (2016) “A liberation of powers:” agency and education for democracy. *Educational Theory* 66(1–2): 127–145.
- Byrd D (1994) *The Poetics of the Common Knowledge*. Albany, NY: The State University of New York Press.
- Comenius JA (1938) *The Way of Light* (Campagnac ET, trans). London, UK: Hodder and Stoughton (Original work published in 1668).
- Comenius JA (1998) *The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart* (Louthan H and Sterk A, trans). Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press (Original work published 1631).
- Davies K (2010) The sense of an epoch. Periodization, sovereignty, and the limits of secularization. In: Cole A and Smith DV (eds) *The Legitimacy of the Middle Ages*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 39–69.
- Descartes R (2010) *Meditations* (Clarke DM, trans). London, UK: Penguin Books (Original Work Published in 1637).
- Dewey J (1929) *The Sources of a Science of Education*. New York, NY: Horace Liveright.
- Dobbie AMO (1986) *Comenius’s Pampaedia, or, Universal Education*. Dover and Kent: Buckland Publications.
- Fallace TD (2015) *Race and the Origins of Progressive Education, 1880-1929*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Harper J and Jenkins H (2022) Confronting horror, embracing fantasy: a conversation about Lovecraft Country and radical imagination in higher education. *Policy Futures in Education* 20(1): 73–85.

- Harries K (1998) Descartes and the labyrinth of the world. *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 6(3): 307–330.
- Hayden MJ and Harman WG (2021) Schooling's relative nonautonomy: technocratically subordinated schooling and desublimated education. *Educational Theory* 71(1): 75–94.
- Hill L (2012) *Maurice Blanchot and Fragmentary Writing*. London, UK: Continuum.
- Hodgson N, Vlieghe J and Zamojski P (2017) *Manifesto for a Post-Critical Pedagogy*. Santa Barbara, CA: Punctum Books.
- Juuso H (2012) The origins and educational significance of John Dewey's philosophy. In: Siljander P, Kivelä A and Sutinen A (eds) *Theories of Bildung and Growth*. Rotterdam, Netherlands: Sense Publishers, 227–245.
- Masuzawa T (2005) *The Invention of World Religions*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Nelson L (1992) Introduction. In: Blanchot M (Author) *The Step Not beyond*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, v–xxi.
- Norris T (2021) What is educational about education? The distinctiveness of education. *Educational Theory* 71(1): 129–148.
- Rifkin M (2017) *Beyond Settler Time. Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Rohls J (2008) Comenius, light metaphysics and educational reform. In: Hedley D and Hutton S (eds) *Platonism at the Origins of Modernity: Studies on Platonism and Early Modern Philosophy*. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer, 63–74.
- Sadler JE (2007) *J. A. Comenius and the Concept of Universal Education*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Saeverot H (2021) How may education be organized to safeguard its autonomy? *Educational Theory* 71(1): 113–128.
- Seth S (2022) Knowledge, progress and the knowledge of progress. *The Sociological Review* 70(2): 232–247.
- Thomas A (1995) *The labyrinth of the World. Truth and Representation in Czech Literature*. München, Germany: Collegium Carolinum.
- Väkevä L (2012) Experiencing growth as a natural phenomenon: John Dewey's philosophy and the Bildung tradition. In: Siljander P, Kivelä A and Sutinen A (eds) *Theories of Bildung and Growth*. Rotterdam, Netherlands: Sense Publishers, 261–279.
- Yosef-Hassidim D (2021) Advancing education's autonomy through looking educationally at philosophy. *Educational Theory* 71(1): 53–73.
- Yosef-Hassidim D and Baldacchino J (2021) Education's autonomy as a utopian polysemic possibility: challenges and a path forward. *Educational Theory* 71(1): 35–51.

Juuso Tervo is a Senior University Lecturer and the head of Nordic Master in Visual Studies and Art Education MA program at Aalto University School of Arts, Design and Architecture, Finland. His research and writings combine historical, theoretical, and literary inquiries into art and education, drawing from fields such as literary theory, poetics, theology, philosophy of education, and philosophy of history. He serves as the Editor-in-Chief of *Research in Arts and Education* journal and is currently engaged in national and international discussions concerning visual art education historiography. He received his PhD in Arts Administration, Education and Policy from The Ohio State University in 2014.