

Spiritual Practice and the Patterns of Experience:
Rethinking the Form of Moral Education

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Abstract

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In the dissertation I argue for a reconception of moral education grounded in a Platonic conception of virtue and modeled on the form of spiritual practice. I argue that this education would be carried out through practices of virtue comprised of exercises designed to transform the practitioner's modes of seeing and being in the world. These exercises would take the form of deliberate encounters with objects of interpretive resistance and would be scaffolded to hone the faculty of attention and adapt the patterns of experience to the patterns of virtue: rhythm, harmony, systematicity, and economy. I suggest that the activities that would constitute such practices are in no way alien to contemporary academic curricula; any manner of interpretive work provides an opportunity for these forms of experience. To conclude the dissertation I address literary interpretation as one example of a curricular activity that could be adapted into a practice of virtue and demonstrate how specific interpretive exercises could be extrapolated from the basic form I have developed.

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Introduction

To call the work these pages comprise a theory of moral education is, though not altogether inaccurate, perhaps somewhat misleading. Insofar as it conceives of education as a process of dispositional transformation, and insofar as it assumes that transformation will ultimately be action-guiding, this project does deal explicitly in the kinds of concerns commonly understood to be the purview of moral education. That categorization, however, implies a distinction between moral and other educational considerations that for many of the thinkers I engage simply does not exist. I am tempted to count myself among their numbers: to commit myself to the position that there is no such thing as value-neutral education precisely because there is no such thing as value-neutral human experience. Humanity is a condition enmeshed in meaning; to educate is to help one's students trace the contours of significance that shape a life.

In his 2005 commencement speech at Kenyon College, later published under the title *This is Water*, David Foster Wallace contends that “learning how to think...means being conscious and aware enough to choose what you pay attention to and to choose how you construct meaning from experience” (54). I can picture him standing in full regalia at a temporary podium on that lush Ohio lawn, exhorting scores of sweltering graduates to recognize the “actual human value” of their liberal arts education (11). For Wallace, the goal and practice of education is to exercise some power over the meaning we construct from experience. To cultivate this power, to train one's attention: this is what it means to learn. It is not a matter of grit or character, or even values or virtues; it cannot be tidily contained in an addendum to the academic curriculum. This is a matter of learning to live, for, as Wallace puts it, “if you cannot exercise this kind of choice in adult life, you will be totally hosed” (55).

This conception of education has a long and diverse history, pieces of which I will investigate in some detail. I read it in Plato's *Republic*, in Foucault's and Hadot's accounts of ancient Greek philosophical traditions, in Simone Weil's mysticism and John Dewey's pragmatism, and in I.A. Richards's theory of literary criticism. It seems to me that for all these thinkers, whether they make it explicit or not, education as such is infused with ethical significance. For Dewey, education is synonymous with growth: it is the purposeful organization of human experience. For Richards, the study of literature is a means by which to initiate the psyche into the most "intricately wrought" forms of life; it is how we learn to experience our lives as poems (*Principles* 27). For Weil, even our most seemingly mundane scholastic pursuits are first and foremost opportunities to hone the faculty of attention, and thereby bring light into the soul (Weil, *Waiting*, 106). Indeed, attention is the very faculty that, according to Wallace, gives us the "power to experience a crowded, hot, slow, consumer-hell type situation as not only meaningful, but sacred, on fire with the same force that made the stars: love, fellowship, the mystical oneness of all things deep down" (Wallace 93).

Weil and Wallace echo the metaphysical commitments of the Stoics, Epicureans, and Platonists who devoted themselves to deliberate, consistent exercises of attention. This was the work necessary to achieve the universal perspective of the whole. In these traditions, as Foucault tells it, the distinction between moral and other forms of education would have been altogether unintelligible; knowledge was inextricably bound up with both *eros* and *askēsis* (Foucault 16). There could be no such thing as knowledge without truth, and no such thing as truth without the transformational forces of love and work. With the advent of modernity, however, there arises a conception of truth as guaranteed through mere rational awareness. Knowing is untethered from desire and so from the forms of practice that orient desire toward the good. This establishes a

divide between epistemology and ethics, and with it two distinct conceptions of education: one that deals in knowledge, and one that deals in character.

This distinction grounds the structure within which formal education has evolved. As Thomas Lickona puts it, “through history education has had two great goals: to help people become smart and to help them become good” (par. 3). Lickona, a proponent of the character education movement, aims to retrieve the significance of the latter after its degradation in the face of logical positivism. Rather than relegate moral considerations to the sphere of private, personal value judgments, he argues for their reincorporation into institutionalized forms of education. Based in a “traditional model of character development,” moral instruction as character education generally aims “to develop a student’s character through direct instruction in positive social values, coherent school policies, a recognition system for students and schools that demonstrate good citizenship, and a consistent and firmly enforced system of discipline” (Tatman et al par. 32). Whereas extant academic curricula account for the first goal of education—to help people become smart—the additional implementation of direct moral instruction, along with complementary systems of recognition and discipline, will ensure that schools are also working toward the second goal of education: to help people become good.

This account suggests that, as Matthew Pamental notes, “Many in the character education movement see moral education as a separable entity from other elements of the school curriculum” (Pamental 161). This supports the notion that moral education “can be approached through direct instruction, such as setting out definitions of the virtues, studying historical, contemporary, and literary figures who exemplify those virtues, discussing ways of practicing those virtues, and so on” (161). In this model, predetermined sets of values and virtues are presented as the discrete matter of their own subject, dissociated from the academic curriculum,

and moral education is undertaken as its own explicit endeavor. As Pamental points out, however, this approach will only serve to reinforce the pernicious conceptual divide between ethics and epistemology. He argues that “moral education cannot be taught separately from the traditional ‘content’ of the intellectual curriculum, since seeing some issues as primarily intellectual and others as primarily moral encourages the formation of separate habits—those of intellectual problem solving and those of moral reflection” (161).

Pamental implies that the work we do when we solve algebra problems is not categorically different from the work we do in order to make sense of—and construct meaning from—our own experience. If he is correct, which I suspect he is, then moral education cannot take place in a vacuum, sealed off from the rest of the curriculum. Quite the contrary: it must be woven throughout the daily scholastic work of solving problems, interpreting texts, analyzing systems, building concepts, and refining ideas. In the chapters that follow, I propose that this integration could take place through the adaptation of curricular activities to the form of spiritual exercise.

Given the epistemic complexity of virtue, its cultivation requires more than mere propositional knowledge of its constituent characteristics. It also requires a reorientation of desire and a process of dispositional transformation. The former might be achieved, as Mark Jonas and Yoshiaka Nakazawa suggest, through epiphanic experiences in which students are captivated and compelled by a glimpse of the good. The latter, however, requires substantially more time and effort: to transform our modes of being in the world takes extensive and dedicated work. To develop a form of moral education designed to foster the cultivation of virtue therefore requires some inquiry into what this work might entail. How do we facilitate and sustain the dispositional transformation necessary for the cultivation of virtue?

To respond to this question I turn to the spiritual practices undertaken in philosophical traditions such as Stoicism, Platonism, and Epicureanism. These practices aimed to transform the practitioner's mode of seeing and being in the world through the repetition of exercises designed to hone the faculty of attention and order the psyche. To model curricular activities on the form of such exercises could therefore render them conducive to the very dispositional transformation required for the cultivation of virtue. This adaptation would require an inquiry into what these kinds of exercises might look like in the context of contemporary classrooms. How would we go about adapting curricular activities to the form of spiritual practice?

Drawing on the work of Simone Weil and John Dewey I suggest that this adaptation would require the deliberate scaffolding of students' interactions with objects of interpretive resistance. We regularly ask students to contend with objects—poems, equations, compositions, systems—that defy immediate interpretation. The implied purpose of such interactions is usually comprehension: the ability to assimilate the object into the contents of the understanding. This emphasizes the product, rather than the process, of interpretive work. From the perspective of spiritual practice, however, the value of such work lies in the process itself: in its ability to hone the faculty of attention and adapt the patterns of our experience to a rhythmic balance of motion and pause. To adapt these interactions to the form of spiritual exercise would therefore require scaffolding that foregrounds the interpretive process rather than the interpretive product. To begin implementing such changes to academic curricula would therefore require an inquiry into what this scaffolding would entail. How should these activities be selected, designed, and organized?

For the most part, I leave this question open. Myriad curricular activities could be adapted in this way, and for each one the answer to that question will be different. I do, however,

examine the activity of textual interpretation as an illustration of how we might extrapolate the particulars of this scaffolding. Within the institution of schooling, reading is often taught as a method of processing information, and a means to knowledge acquisition. We ask students to read in order to find nuggets of information, to read until they can confidently answer questions, and then they are done. In order to sustain the kind of interpretive work that has the power to organize experience, however, we must read a text over and over again; we must train ourselves to attend.

The mind has a tendency to drift away: sounds and smells, the texture of the air, or a pang of hunger will steal our focus from the page. Each time we flag or wander, we call ourselves back. We read that sentence over again. We find the places where we get stuck, and we stay with them. We go back; we excavate; we draw lines; occasionally, we build a bridge or hop over a small gap. We retrace our steps. And in all of this work, we become more flexible and supple. We begin to notice when we are trying to bully or coax a square peg into a round hole. We notice when our hops become leaps. We notice when the chasms between our judgment and the sense of the language before us become daunting and threaten to turn us away. And in these instances, we take a step back, perhaps even walk away for a moment, and give ourselves the opportunity to reconfigure our approach. Then we return, and we pick up the text again.

This kind of reading could be fostered and encouraged by changes as simple as an emphasis on rereading, a foregrounding of interpretive process, a shift from assessment to reflection, and an expectation of revision. A simple change in the conception of reading from an instrument to a practice could transform the work of textual interpretation into a practice of virtue.

Chapter 1: Moral Education as the Practice of Virtue

In the first chapter, I take up the recent work of Mark Jonas and Yoshiaka Nakazawa who argue for the incorporation of specifically Platonic insights into contemporary theories of moral education. Jonas and Nakazawa emphasize the epistemic complexity of a Platonic conception of virtue: knowledge of the good, they argue, entails not only cognitive but also affective and conative dimensions. Education toward virtue must therefore do more than simply produce rational awareness; it must also transform a student's desires and dispositions. The catalyst for affective transformation comes in the form of epiphany: a brief, brilliant glimpse of virtue so captivating that it trains our gaze on the good itself. Epiphanies have the potential to radically reorient the trajectories of our lives, even after long periods of failed or faulty habituation. Dispositional transformation, however, requires more than just epiphany; it must take place through long and dedicated processes of rehabilitation.

Plato's dialogues provide ample representations of the epiphanic experiences of Socrates's interlocutors. They do not, however, contain any extensive descriptions or depictions of the rehabilitative processes through which those figures might bear out their renewed commitment to virtue. The mechanics of rehabilitation therefore remain somewhat mysterious, at least in the context of Plato's canon. In the interest of developing a more detailed and robust account of those processes, I turn to *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, in which Foucault suggests that for Plato, the pursuit of virtue would necessarily require a regimen of spiritual practice. Such practice would be comprised of exercises deliberately designed to foster the kinds of affective and dispositional transformation Jonas and Nakazawa attribute to a Platonic theory of moral education. These transformations take place through the adaptation of the patterns of experience to the form of virtue itself—a form that, for Plato, is characterized by rhythm, harmony,

systematicity, and economy. From this I conclude that the theory and practice of moral education based in a Platonic theory of virtue would necessarily entail the development of contemporary practices of virtue. Such practices, modeled on the form of spiritual practice, would be comprised of exercises designed to imbue experience with rhythm, harmony, systematicity, and economy and thereby adapt its patterns to the form of virtue itself.

To conclude the chapter, I speculate about how contemporary practices of virtue might be integrated into existing scholastic curricula. Such practices, I argue, need not be distinct from nor ancillary to other scholastic pursuits. Rather, they might be integrated throughout all areas of a standard academic curriculum. This integration would not require any massive overhaul of content, but instead an adjustment to the way we approach quotidian curricular activities. I suggest that many such activities are adaptable to the form of spiritual practice, which is to say that they could be scaffolded in such a way that to participate in them will be to render one's experience rhythmical, harmonious, systematic, and economical. In the chapter that follows, I develop a more detailed account of the purpose and form of exercises that might constitute contemporary practices of virtue.

Chapter 2: Transformation and Liberation: The Form of Spiritual Practice

In the second chapter, I turn to Pierre Hadot's accounts of the spiritual exercises of antiquity in order to further develop the concept of spiritual practice on which contemporary practices of virtue might be modeled. Hadot suggests that in traditions such as Platonism, Stoicism, and Epicureanism, all spiritual practice aims at the radical transformation of one's mode of being in the world through deliberate, attentive, exercises of psychic organization. Repeated participation in these exercises works to liberate the practitioner from the influences of

overwhelming desire and fear, which serve to coopt attention and cloud perception. Spiritual exercise thereby affords a more lucid apprehension of the self and the world. This lucidity, in turn, facilitates an elevation to the perspective of the whole: an initiation into the patterns of universal nature and thought. On this account, spiritual practice might be understood as the adaptation of the patterns of experience to the patterns of universal nature and thought through the repetition of exercises designed to train and hone the faculty of attention.

This model of spiritual practice is deeply rooted in a metaphysical commitment to the universality of the good, as well as the theoretical possibility of adopting the perspective of the whole. This poses a challenge for translating spiritual exercise into a set of contexts and institutions that do not necessarily share those same commitments. To address this challenge I turn to a recent article by Stephen Grimm and Caleb Cohoe in which the authors suggest that the purpose of spiritual practice remains intelligible even without these metaphysical commitments. They argue that even absent the theoretical possibility of a universal perspective, the broadening of perspective can still be understood as a good. Thus I suggest that contemporary practices of virtue might aim at the adaptation of the patterns of experience to the patterns of broader—though not necessarily universal—nature and thought. This adaptation would still take place through the repetition of exercises designed to train and hone the faculty of attention. In the chapter that follows, I develop a more detailed account of how these exercises might function, and what this adaptation of experience might entail.

Chapter 3: Experience, Appearance, and Attention: Moral Attention as Spiritual Exercise

In the third chapter I turn to two theorists of education, John Dewey and Simone Weil, to elaborate on the processes that might comprise contemporary practices of virtue. Though rooted

in distinct intellectual, social, and spiritual traditions, both Dewey and Weil incorporate elements of spiritual practice into their work. For Dewey, the goal of education is to form experience as a continuous, rhythmical process of growth; it is, in other words, to adapt experience to the broader patterns of nature and thought. For Weil, all practices of schooling should first and foremost hone the faculty of attention in preparation to receive truth. In both cases, the work of education shares the purpose and form of spiritual practice: the transformation of perception and experience through the deliberate exercise of attention.

For Dewey, to organize human experience into a process of growth is to render it rhythmic, harmonious, systematic, and economical. Experience so organized proceeds through a balance of motion and pause, which facilitates a rhythm of flow and consolidation. The goal of education is to facilitate experiences adapted to these patterns. Dewey argues that this can be achieved by ordering the objective conditions of educational scenarios such that they foster continuity between a particular educational task and the flow of the student's experience. The task must meet the student where she is, as well as motivate her to move through, and eventually beyond it. Organized in this way, Dewey suggests, curricular activities will facilitate continuous processes of hypothesis, reflection, and revision.

For Weil, the organization of human experience entails liberation from the influences that cloud and distort appearances. She suggests that our primary mode of interaction with our surroundings is interpretive: we make sense and meaning of the world as we move through it. This process, however, is largely automatic; what we experience is not the interpretive work itself but the appearance of the meanings it produces. On this account, the goal of moral education is, in a sense, to become better readers of the world. This requires that we mitigate the influence of individualistic concerns on our automatic interpretive processes. It requires, in other

words, that we gain some control over how the world appears to us. To develop this control, we must hone the faculty of attention. According to Weil, attention requires a balance between motion and pause similar to that which Dewey attributes to the educative form of human experience. To attend, we must proceed through the alternation of effort and rest. In so doing we are able to keep the contents of our experience present to mind, but quiet enough that it does not reach out to distort the appearance of the object itself.

The processes through which education takes place, on both Dewey's and Weil's accounts, might best be understood as the repetition of deliberately scaffolded encounters with objects of interpretive resistance. These encounters would be organized such that the object is familiar enough to be related to experience, but not so familiar as to simply recede into the background. In such encounters, our interpretive processes are slowed and made explicit, but not altogether stymied. They allow for the object's integration into experience but resist its automatic assimilation into the understanding. The purpose of such encounters would not be the ultimate interpretive product—some kind of right answer or definitive understanding—but rather the process of the interpretive work itself: the organization of experience into a rhythmic progression of motion and pause.

The possible forms of such encounters are myriad. Any object that resists immediate assimilation into the understanding could serve as the basis for a practice of virtue understood in these terms: a dense literary text, a complex mathematical proof, a sophisticated musical composition, an intricate set of taxonomical relationships. In the final chapter, I turn to literary interpretation as one example of a common curricular activity that could be adapted to this form and thereby serve as a contemporary practice of virtue.

Chapter 4: Encounters with Resistance: Reading as a Practice of Virtue

In the fourth chapter I suggest that the work of I. A. Richards and Sheridan Blau provides resources for theorizing how the work of textual interpretation—one of the most ubiquitous curricular activities—could be modeled on the form of spiritual practice. Richards’s theory is based in a commitment to the continuity of aesthetic form with practical experience: the former, he suggests, is just a highly organized manifestation of the latter. From this he concludes that the attentive work of literary interpretation might serve as a means of “strengthen[ing] our minds’ capacity to order themselves” (Richards, *Practical Criticism*, 301). To follow the patterns of meaning that emerge through close engagement with a literary text will train the mind to organize experience into those very same patterns. Given this insight, Richards set out to develop a method of literary study that would foster close, careful textual engagement.

This method would have to deter readers from relying on external sources to aid in their interpretive work. It would, in other words, prevent any appeal to established critical interpretations and assessments of the texts in question. Moreover, it would have to deter readers from substituting impression or association for interpretation—from imposing what Richards refers to as “mnemonic irrelevances” onto the text. In response to these challenges, Richards developed the practice of close reading, which required that readers engage closely with the features of the text itself in order to strengthen the capacity of attention necessary for careful interpretive work. In the context of Richards’s work, the practice of close reading is meant to scaffold encounters with (textual) objects of interpretive resistance in the interest of facilitating a more sustained, attentive, rhythmic encounter between reader and poem.

This practice, however, suffered some distortion and degradation in its translation from Richards’s theory into the context of institutionalized education. Attempts to standardize a

method of close reading in the interest of programmatic instruction ultimately reduced it from a robust interpretive practice to a thin set of directives for students to produce uniform, sanctioned answers on formal assessments. As a result, the practice itself came to be seen as a “rote and lifeless” approach to literary interpretation and suffered substantial criticism from progressive educators (Rejan, 10). Rather than throw out the New Critical baby with the programmatic bathwater, however, I argue that we might recuperate and revise the practice of close reading as the basis for a practice of virtue.

I conclude the chapter by suggesting that a robust theory of reading as a practice of virtue will require an emphasis on rereading. In his account of a workshop that aimed to improve professional practice in the teaching of reading, Sheridan Blau makes a case for the importance of rereading in English education. Practices of rereading, he suggests, can shift the focus from the production of an “accurate” account of the meaning of a text to the processes through which interpretive work takes place. As such it could further adapt the activity of reading to the form of spiritual practice, in which the goal is not production of knowledge but rather the undertaking of the exercise itself. I conclude the chapter with some speculation about the kinds of concrete changes that could be made in English instruction to reconfigure practices of reading as practices of virtue.

Conclusion

I conclude the dissertation with an acknowledgement that there would be impediments to any large-scale implementation of the theory I’ve outlined in the preceding chapters, and a set of recommendations for how to confront those impediments. Given the thoroughgoing instrumentalization of institutionalized education, a shift in emphasis from products to processes

would require a substantial reconfiguration of schooling practices. This might take place both from the top down through the loosening of curricular structures and expectations, as well as from the bottom up through the adaptation of educational activities to the form of spiritual practice. The most immediate practical recommendation for furthering the project is therefore in the development of these activities themselves. My hope is that the project might galvanize theorists and practitioners of education to think about what kinds of small, iterative shifts we could make, in all different fields at all different levels, to foreground processes over products and scaffold our students' encounters with objects of interpretive resistance such that they are guided to proceed through their interpretive work with a rhythm of motion and pause.

Chapter 1

Moral Education as the Practice of Virtue

In their recent book *A Platonic Theory of Moral Education*, Mark E. Jonas and Yoshiaki Nakazawa advocate for the incorporation of Platonic insights to augment the burgeoning literature on neo-Aristotelian theories of moral education. According to Jonas and Nakazawa, their “Platonic theory of moral education is, at its foundations for early education, nearly identical to neo-Aristotelian theories,” especially insofar as it focuses on “a method for cultivating the affective and conative dimensions of moral behavior” (Jonas and Nakazawa 167). Whereas intellectualist theories of moral education, such as Kohlberg’s once-ubiquitous “cognitive development” approach, focus exclusively on moral reasoning, more contemporary Aristotelian theories identify the necessity of not only rational argumentation but also the development of moral “desires and dispositions” (164). For Aristotelians, it is not enough to simply understand what the good is; we must also desire to pursue it and dispose ourselves toward it through deliberate and consistent processes of habituation.

Jonas and Nakazawa suggest, however, that their theory diverges from neo-Aristotelians’ in that they include “a method of virtue development for adult[s] or young adults,” which they suggest is “absent in Aristotle” (167). According to the authors, “Aristotelians argue that...if a child is badly raised and misses the critical formation of their desires, there is almost nothing teachers or even parents can do to change their desires later” (166). In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argues that the habits we acquire in early childhood serve to orient our desires, and that this early orientation will determine the trajectory of our character development in adulthood. From this the authors conclude that for Aristotle, if our desires are not oriented toward virtue by the time we reach young adulthood, our trajectory toward vice will be irreversible. Plato’s

theory, they suggest, is less fatalistic. For although he still places a great deal of emphasis on the importance of proper habituation in early childhood, Plato also “believes in the power of epiphanies and that young adults can have a radical reorientation of their desires and discover a new vision of what human flourishing is” (167).

Many of Plato’s dialogues dramatically depict instances of disruption in the lives of Athenians who have been badly habituated. In these dialogues, Socrates leads his interlocutors into a state of perplexity about their extant beliefs. This aporetic stilling of the intellect allows a glimpse of virtue itself, theretofore invisible due to the “‘encrustations’ that metaphorically weigh down the soul and block its vision” (43). These encrustations are the result of vicious habituation: “with each subsequent evil action, [they] get heavier and thicker” and further impair the soul’s ability to apprehend the good (43). In the moment of epiphany, however, the soul is lifted up, out from “under the ‘the shells seaweeds and stones that have attached themselves to [it]’” and desire is radically reoriented toward virtue itself (43). Thus the particular value of Plato’s philosophy, according to Jonas and Nakazawa, is that it provides the resources to theorize not only the more straightforward processes of habituation that might constitute early, formative moral education, but also a more radical, transformative progression through epiphanic reorientation and rehabilitation for young adults who, in the absence or failure of early moral education, have been habituated into vice.

Although I am not wholly persuaded by Jonas and Nakazawa’s account of Aristotle’s fatalism, their foregrounding of Plato’s work and its emphasis on transformation opens up some important and largely unexplored avenues of inquiry. In the first section of this chapter I will pursue two such avenues that, taken together, recommend a revised conception of moral education within the context of institutionalized schooling. The first is the significance of the

epistemic complexity of virtue. Before we begin to think about how to educate our students to become virtuous, we must figure out what kind of thing virtue is. For many virtue- or character-based theories of moral education, this means cataloguing and describing particular virtues and their components.¹ Such an approach, however, seems to be predicated on the notion that knowledge of virtue is merely cognitive. It suggests that descriptions and examples of virtuous figures and behaviors can lead us to understand virtue and thereby become virtuous: as long as we know what courage is, we can pursue it; as long as we have examples of temperance, we can cultivate it ourselves. From a Platonic perspective, however, this approach is epistemically reductive. For Plato, complete knowledge of virtue is not merely cognitive but also affective and conative. As Jonas and Nakazawa point out: “having full knowledge of virtue requires not only that we have cognitive knowledge about which actions are virtuous and which are not, but that we also have the desire to perform those virtuous actions and the strength of character to follow through on those desires” (12). The author’s claim here is not that rational knowledge of virtue is a prerequisite for the desire and will to act virtuously, but rather that the desire and will are themselves constitutive—at least in part—of knowledge itself.

A theory of moral education predicated on this conception of virtue must address its epistemic complexity and account for these affective and conative aspects of knowledge. In other words, it must take up the kinds of knowing bound up with our desires and dispositions—kinds of knowing that do not necessarily entail the intellect, and may sometimes even work against it. As Jonas and Nakazawa put it, “Virtue *as a whole* contains a cognitive component...and

¹ See for example Suttle, “Moral Education Versus Values Clarification”; Lickona, “The Return of Character Education”; Bohlin, *Teaching Character Education through Literature: Awakening the Moral Imagination in Secondary Classrooms*; Tatman et al, “Character Education: A Critical Analysis”; and the Core Virtues Foundation (<https://www.corevirtues.net/program-overview.html>).

affective and conative components...and therefore it requires a complex training process that uses a variety of methods to produce virtue” (41).

Although Jonas and Nakazawa provide some insight into the nature of this training process, they focus primarily on its catalyst: epiphany. As a result, their theory leaves quite a bit of room for inquiry into the form and mechanics of rehabilitation. This leads to my second avenue of inquiry: the role of practice in moral education. In *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, Foucault suggests that for Plato, the pursuit of virtue could only take place through practices designed to bring about complete perceptual and dispositional transformation. The rehabilitative “training process” to which Jonas and Nakazawa refer would therefore require more than mere behavioral conditioning. Such a process would entail something more like spiritual practice: a regimen of exercises through which the student organizes her psyche and clarifies her responsibilities to herself, others, and the world around her. To theorize a form of moral education based in a Platonic theory of virtue would therefore require an elaboration of such exercises: how they would be selected and designed, the form they would take, and the purpose toward which they would be directed.

In the second section of this chapter, I return to Jonas and Nakazawa’s work to suggest that such practices need not be conceived as distinct from or ancillary to other scholastic pursuits. Rather, they might be integrated throughout all areas of a standard academic curriculum. Indeed, Jonas and Nakazawa take up all different pedagogical scenarios as sites of moral education. From Mr. Keating’s impassioned lectures on Poetry to Socrates’ pastoral dialogue with Phaedo, their examples demonstrate how almost any subject of inquiry provides opportunities for epiphany and rehabilitation. The unifying aspect of moral education for Jonas

and Nakazawa is not its content but rather the form of the student's experience; for them, moral education is characterized by a process of epiphany and habituation.

Epiphanic experiences are well-suited to dramatic depiction: they are brief and brilliant, "an intuition of something inexpressibly beautiful that creates a desire to change our lifestyles or life directions" (117). Such experiences come in the form of a flash or "glimpse" of virtue itself, which activates the faculty of desire and reorients the student's gaze away from vice. Jonas and Nakazawa deftly analyze these epiphanic moments as they appear in Plato's dialogues, providing detailed and careful accounts of both their causes and their effects. As compared with this robust formulation of epiphany, however, the authors' account of habituation is relatively sparse. This is perhaps because, unlike epiphanies, processes of habituation are long and arduous; they are the consistent practices through which students of virtue "grow in the strength of character needed to continue that pursuit when they encounter obstacles" (141). As such, they are poorly suited to dramatic depiction and must take place (insofar as they take place at all) off the scenes of Plato's dialogues themselves. Thus whereas the authors are able to clearly extrapolate pedagogical techniques for eliciting epiphanies, the techniques they suggest for fostering habituation are largely reliant on the teacher's role as guide and exemplar. A more robust account would also take up ways in which the curriculum itself could be designed to be more conducive to processes of habituation. To that end, I draw on both Plato's own philosophy and the history of spiritual practice to theorize ways in which the habitative aspects of moral education might be integrated into an academic curriculum.

1.1 Virtue and Practice

Jonas and Nakazawa make a strong case for the epistemic complexity of Plato's conception of virtue. They reject interpretations of Socratic intellectualism that identify knowledge with mere cognition; a nuanced reading, they argue, will reveal that "Socrates has a much richer conception of knowledge than what is normally attributed to him, and that is what he calls *craft knowledge*" (Jonas and Nakazawa 20). This richer conception entails more than mere propositional knowledge, and it "is not acquired through thinking and reasoning alone" (20). Rather, the acquisition of craft knowledge "requires embodied practice and habit which also shapes our attitudes, dispositions, and desires" (20). This kind of knowledge entails a reconfiguration of our relationship to the world around us—a change in the way we perceive it, respond to it, and navigate it.

Full knowledge of virtue, the authors suggest, is best understood as a kind of craft knowledge, and its pursuit will therefore require the same kinds of processes. "In order for a novice cobbler to become an expert cobbler," they write, "she must be given instruction and then be required to practice that instruction over and over again, which leads to habitual ways of thinking, seeing, and feeling" (29). It is not enough to simply be told or even shown how to sole a shoe; in order to become a cobbler, one must enact that instruction and continue to practice it over and over again. This practice will slowly transform the way the novice cobbler engages with her craft: she will come to discern differences in the qualities of leathers that would previously have seemed identical; she will begin to recognize imperfections in the construction of a shoe that would otherwise be imperceptible; and she will become attuned to forms of shoe-beauty that, without this practice, would be altogether invisible. By analogy, Jonas and Nakazawa suggest, "A person who has devoted her life to learning and practicing the virtues, under the

guidance of a virtuous master, is the only person who has full knowledge of virtue” (29). The student of virtue, much like the novice cobbler, can never gain full knowledge without an extensive regimen of instruction and practice. And, by analogy, it would follow that this student’s education would be similarly transformative: just as the cobbler’s training opens her up to a privileged set of perceptual and affective experiences, training in virtue should do the same.

Given this conception of virtue, Jonas and Nakazawa recognize habituation as a necessary component of moral education. In order to cultivate the conative dimension of virtue—the “strength of character to follow through” on the desire to “do the right thing”—we must habituate ourselves “through instruction and practice to always act according to virtue” (30). Full knowledge of virtue, they contend, comes only to one who has “devoted her life to learning and practicing the virtues” (30). In their account, practice appears as a crucial component of habituation: one must practice virtue in order to habituate oneself into the desires and dispositions that constitute full knowledge thereof.

If habituation is a process, practice is perhaps best understood as the activity or set of activities through which that process takes place. Of course, not all habituation entails practice. I can habituate myself to hang my dog’s leash on the peg when we return from a walk by doing so every day for a matter of months. I become so accustomed to the action itself that I no longer have to think about it; it becomes automatic, second nature, habit. I would not, however, think of leash-hanging as a practice. Practices, like habits, require consistency and repetition, but there is something more to practice than the mere conditioning of a certain set of behaviors. When a pianist sits down to play scales each day, she not simply making a habit of tapping the keys in a particular order; she is practicing. Each time I return to my mat I am not simply making a habit of movement and breath; I am practicing. Practice, unlike mere habit, is dynamic and perfectible;

it prepares us for novelty and improvisation; it opens channels that allow for the apprehension and creation of more nuanced meaning and subtler forms of beauty.

Plato's craft analogy suggests that the form of habituation required for the cultivation of virtue is not the mere conditioning of a certain set of behaviors; it is not, in other words, the leash-hanging form of habituation. Rather, it is the piano-playing kind: habituation that takes place through the activity of practice. To ground a theory of moral education in Plato's conception of virtue will therefore require some inquiry into the forms of practice through which virtue comes to be known.

In *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, Michel Foucault suggests that for Plato, the notion of any knowledge as distinct and disassociated from practice would have been largely unintelligible. This notion, he argues, belongs to "the modern age of the history of truth," in which one "can recognize the truth and have access to it in himself solely through his activity of knowing, without anything else being demanded of him and without him having to change or alter his being as subject" (Foucault 17). Foucault traces the beginning of this modern age back to what he calls the "Cartesian moment," and indeed the image of René Descartes, alone in an empty room, eyes shut tight is illustrative here. The primary truth to which he has access is that of his own existence, and this is a truth guaranteed by nothing other than his own consciousness. He need not undergo any transformation, nor engage in any regimen of training or instruction; all he needs to do is apprehend his own being. Prior to the Cartesian era, Foucault suggests, this would have been an impoverished and partial conception of truth, which was accessed not through mere cognition or consciousness, but through an arduous set of embodied practices and preparations that were partly constitutive of truth itself.

According to Foucault, this paradigm shift is well illustrated by a parallel change in the relative significance of the “famous Delphic prescription of *gnōthi seauton* (‘know yourself’)” and the principle of *epimeleia heautou*, or care of the self (3). In the “reconstruction of its own history,” he suggests, Western thought has “accorded so much privilege, value, and intensity to the ‘know yourself’ and omitted, or at least, left in the shadow, this notion of care of the self” (12). In actual fact, however, the *epimeleia heautou* “seems to have framed the principle of ‘know yourself’ from the start and to have supported an extremely rich and dense set of notions, practices, ways of being, forms of existence, and so on...” (12). The value of self-knowledge, Foucault suggests, was once intelligible only through its position in the matrix of ideas and activities—“of notions, practices, ways of being, forms of existence”—proper to the principle of *epimeleia heautou*. Following the Cartesian shift, however, this value was intensified such that it came to obscure the significance of the very forms of life out of which it emerged; it came to be understood as greater than and autonomous from practice.

Arguably, this shift opened the space for a conception of moral education in which rational knowledge is all one needs to secure virtue. If virtue is taken to be a form of knowledge and “any person who knows the good will always do the good,” then knowledge of virtue is all that is necessary to ensure virtuous behavior (Jonas and Nakazawa 18). Thus if knowledge is identical to rational awareness, then the production of that rational awareness should be sufficient as a form of moral education. For Plato, however—as Jonas and Nakazawa point out—this would not have been the case. Knowledge would not have been identical to rational awareness, as—on Foucault’s account—it would have been intertwined with and determined by the *epimeleia heautou*.

According to Foucault, the *epimeleia heautou* was “a fundamental principle for describing the philosophical attitude throughout Greek, Hellenistic, and Roman culture” (Foucault 8). It is a certain “attitude toward the self, others, and the world...a certain form of attention, of looking” that also “always designates a number of actions exercised on the self by the self, actions by which one takes responsibility for oneself and by which one changes, purifies, transforms, and transfigures oneself” (10). This capacious principle of *epimeleia heautou* contains the mutually constitutive relationship between knowledge and practice, as it encompasses not only a disposition but also the activities and exercises through which that disposition is cultivated. It names a “form of attention, of looking” that is receptive, transformative, and generative: we attend to the self by undertaking “actions exercised on the self by the self” so that we are able to see more clearly (10). It names the onus of responsibility for one’s own being in the world: the clarity we pursue is not just so that I might know myself better but so that I might know others and the world around me better too. Finally, it names the very activities and exercises I must undertake in order to assume responsibility, cultivate clarity, and transfigure myself into one who is capable and worthy of accessing the truth. In sum, the *epimeleia heautou* requires that we take responsibility for ourselves by honing our attention through rigorous, consistent practice.

Within the context of the *epimeleia heautou*, rational knowledge is only one single node within a complex web of relationships between exercise, attention, and care; the injunction to “know oneself” is not an invitation for introspection but a demand that one take responsibility for one’s own attitudes and dispositions. Knowledge, in this case, is valuable only insofar as it contributes to “these researches, practices, and experiences...which are, not for knowledge but for the subject, for the subject’s very being, the price to be paid for access to the truth” (15). We

do not undertake these practices for the acquisition of knowledge—we do not research so we can know—but so that we can transform ourselves, prepare ourselves, and make ourselves capable of accessing the truth.

These researches, practices, and experiences constitute what Foucault designates as “spirituality.” In the modern era of the history of truth, we generally take cognitive knowledge and spirituality to be mutually exclusive: spirituality designates precisely those forms of knowing that deny rational proof. For Plato, however, “the philosophical question of ‘how to have access to the truth’ and the practice of spirituality (of the necessary transformations in the very being of the subject which will allow access to the truth), these two questions, these two themes, were never separate” (17). For Plato, spirituality was not merely one possible means by which we might come to apprehend truth. Rather, “the *epimeleia heautou* (care of the self) designates precisely the set of conditions of spirituality, the set of transformations of the self, that are the necessary conditions for having access to the truth” (17). In the context of the *epimeleia heautou*, the notion of truth as such is inextricably bound up with the transformative elements of spirituality and its practices: “there can be no truth without a conversion or a transformation of the subject” (15).

This transformation, Foucault suggests, takes place in two forms: *ēros* and *askēsis*—love and work. These are “the two major forms in Western spirituality for conceptualizing the modalities by which the subject must be transformed in order finally to become capable of truth” (16). The first of these modes, *ēros*, he defines as a “movement that removes the subject from his current status and condition (either an ascending movement of the subject himself, or else a movement by which the truth comes to him and enlightens him)” (16). This is the movement of desire, in which some intuition of truth drives us up toward it, or a glimpse of truth itself pulls us

in its direction. It is this very movement that Jonas and Nakazawa illustrate with their concept of epiphany: the “intuition of something inexpressibly beautiful that creates a desire to change our lifestyle or life-directions” (Jonas and Nakazawa 117); the “glimpse of virtue that calls to that innate longing for a virtuous life” (78). Shackled and blinded by the encrustations of vice, only the beauty of virtue itself can call us up and out of our pitiable condition and reorient us along its path.

Jonas and Nakazawa’s account of epiphanic experience opening onto the affective dimension of virtue maps beautifully onto the principle of *epimeleia heautou*. This principle, according to Foucault, “is a sort of thorn which must be stuck in men’s flesh, driven into their existence, and which is a principle of restlessness and movement, of continuous concern throughout life” (Foucault 8). The moments of epiphany Jonas and Nakazawa recount in their readings of *Lysis*, the *Republic*, and *Alcibiades I* are those in which Socrates deftly spears his interlocutors with this very thorn, igniting the desire for virtue that would commence a lifelong commitment to its cultivation. Epiphany alone, however, cannot sustain this commitment. Jonas and Nakazawa point out that both Glaucon and Alcibiades are “only temporarily transformed” through their epiphanic experiences, as “the only way individuals can become truly virtuous is for them to undergo a long habituation process whereby virtue becomes part of the fabric of individuals’ souls” (Jonas and Nakazawa 108). The conative dimension of virtue necessarily entails some process of habituation, whereby virtue itself is woven into the very being of the subject.

This process of habituation takes place through “a work of the self on the self, an elaboration of the self by the self for which one takes responsibility in a long labor of asceticism (*askēsis*)” (Foucault 16). It is not the mere conditioning of a particular set of behaviors, but a

deliberate regimen of activities and exercises undertaken in the interest of “self-realization and improvement” (Hadot 101). To practice the virtues, in this case, would not be to simply attempt moderation and courage at every opportunity—to give generously or enact truthfulness. It would be to engage in exercises and activities deliberately designed to organize the psyche and clarify one’s responsibilities.

Read against the backdrop of the *epimeleia heautou*, Plato’s philosophy provides a unique insight for moral education: habituation into virtue does not take place through mere behavioral conditioning. Rather, it takes place through the set of researches and exercises through which the student comes to take responsibility for her own transformation. It takes place through the love and work—the *ēros* and *askēsis*—that comprise the practice of virtue. To translate these insights into contemporary educational contexts requires an inquiry into the nature of these practices themselves.

1.2 Spiritual Practice and the Curriculum

Jonas and Nakazawa base their Platonic theory of moral education on “two foundational principles.” The first is “that it is possible and desirable for teachers to attempt to produce [moral] epiphanies in their students” (Jonas and Nakazawa 10). Because the authors are concerned primarily with the moral education of young adults who have been “trained by their parents, their friends, or popular culture” to pursue vice, they find themselves tasked with theorizing not only the cultivation of good habits, but also the undoing of bad ones. They therefore place a great deal of emphasis on moral epiphanies as means of intervention. These epiphanies are “dramatic internal events in which a student suddenly comes to realize that what they have [been] pursuing is not the happiest life and that pursuing a life of goodness and virtue

would make their lives better” (10). The authors suggest that these “moments of recognition...include a cognitive dimension (knowledge), an affective dimension (desire), and a conative dimension (commitment)” (10). With a brief glimpse of virtue, the student comes to know it, desire it, and commit herself to its pursuit.

The notion of a momentary commitment, however, is somewhat paradoxical. Commitments are precisely the kinds of things that must be borne out through continuous effort. This leads to the second foundational principle of Jonas and Nakazawa’s theory, which is that “human beings have very little chance of becoming virtuous unless they have been rigorously habituated in the virtues” (11). While epiphanies are necessary for reorientation, they are not sufficient for becoming virtuous. Indeed, many of Socrates’ interlocutors’ epiphany-induced commitments to moral transformation ultimately fail precisely because they abandon their commitments to a process of rehabilitation. “Both Glaucon and Alcibiades,” the authors note, “claim that they are willing to be rehabilitated after having their epiphanies, but in real life, neither of these individuals remained committed to the rehabilitation process, and therefore the epiphany grew dimmer and dimmer until they fell headlong into a vicious lifestyle” (109). Thus while the epiphany allows for a brief glimpse through the encrustations of the soul, it does not remove them; they will remain even after the epiphany has passed. Rehabilitation, on the other hand, is the process of clearing away those barnacles and seawrack; it frees the soul of its encrustations, facilitating a consistent and clear recognition of the good itself.

Given these two foundational principles, Jonas and Nakazawa’s Platonic theory portrays moral education as a process in which the student’s desire for virtue is first ignited by a momentary epiphany (which often follows on the heels of *aporia*), then goes on to fuel a rigorous and continuous process of habituation. The first part of this process is well illustrated by

Plato's dialogues themselves, as the brief, transient nature of epiphany lends itself to dramatic depiction. Processes of rehabilitation, however, are anything but brief and transient; they are continuous, arduous, repetitive, slow, and subtle. As such, they largely defy the dramatic representation to which epiphanies are so well suited. Because epiphanies take place within the drama of the dialogues, the texts themselves provide blueprints from which to extrapolate pedagogical techniques for inducing epiphanies. Indeed, Jonas and Nakazawa proceed through close, careful readings of *Lysis*, *Alcibiades I*, the *Symposium*, and parts of the *Republic* to illustrate this educational phenomenon and thereby demonstrate its crucial role in the moral education of Plato's interlocutors. Rehabilitation, however, takes place largely off the scene. Thus the dialogues provide no such examples of teachers fostering and guiding their students through it.

This is not to say that there is no textual support in Plato's works for a thick account of rehabilitation. As Jonas and Nakazawa point out, Socrates suggests in Book III of the *Republic* that "the habituation process consists in the development of a kinship with virtue" (67). This kinship is a harmony or formal resemblance between the individual soul and virtue itself. Its development takes place through all manner of activities and experiences, such as "music, poetry, imitation, physical training, [and] playing childhood games" (67). Thus while we never see this kinship developing in Socrates's interlocutors, it seems crucial to a Platonic account of the habitative process necessary for the full knowledge of virtue. Curiously, however, when it comes to making explicit pedagogical recommendations for the fostering of rehabilitation, Jonas and Nakazawa largely abandon the notion of kinship with virtue and the activities that cultivate it. Instead, they focus on the responsibility of the individual teacher to promote the processes of rehabilitation, without saying much about what that process might entail.

Fostering rehabilitation, they suggest, is the “more essential” and more challenging aspect of moral education; “as difficult as achieving epiphanies in the classroom is,” they write, “helping students voluntarily undergo a rehabilitation process is even more difficult” (141). They cite three reasons for this difficulty: first, that “teachers only get to spend limited time with their students”; second, that the culture surrounding the students “may not encourage the development of the virtues”; and third, that “old habits are hard to break” (141). Processes of rehabilitation are often hindered (or altogether stymied) by the inertia of extant habits as well as the resistance of social norms. Moreover, the teacher’s ability to intervene in or mitigate those forces is limited by time constraints built into the institution itself: she only has so much time to devote to each student, and each student only has so much time to devote to her class.

Despite these challenges, the authors argue that rehabilitation is “not impossible,” but that it will require a “clear vision and determination by the teacher” (142). They outline “three methods teachers can use to promote a rehabilitation process,” all of which “rely on emulation and role modelling” (142). They acknowledge that the first method, “one-on-one mentoring,” though it is “the most direct and straightforward method of rehabilitating students through emulation,” is perhaps not the most “effective.” For one thing, its success may be mixed; there is no guarantee that the teacher’s efforts to inspire the student’s emulation will succeed, nor is there a guarantee that even if galvanized, the student will interpret and imitate the virtues correctly. Moreover, the average teacher’s “opportunity to mentor her students in a one-on-one fashion is fairly limited” (146). The teacher will have to decide to which one or two of the 60 or 100 students in her charge she ought to devote her attention. Thus even with a high rate of success, she will ultimately guide only a very few students.

The second method, which they take to be more practicable given the constraints imposed by time and teacher-student ratios, is to create “a culture of virtue-emulation in the classroom” (146). In this method, rather than providing individual guidance to individual students, the “teacher’s own persona” provides an image of virtue, and thereby sets the tone for a “classroom culture where certain kinds of activities are promoted by the students themselves” (146). In this method, the teacher creates a microcosmic virtue bubble, mitigating the social and cultural resistance to virtue the students might experience outside the classroom. Jonas and Nakazawa recommend four strategies the teacher might use to develop this kind of culture. First, she might “seek opportunities to embody the virtues in the classroom and outside of the classroom” (150); second, she could share with students her own processes of deliberation so that “the students will feel bonded to her” and to “bring [the teacher’s] personality and...idiosyncratic passion for the virtue to bear in the classroom” (150); third, she should “highlight the virtuous activity particular students perform” without alienating or shaming others (151); and finally, she should “genuinely believe that every student in the class could, at any moment, have an epiphany, and refuse to give up trying to induce them in students, and refuse to give up trying to rehabilitate those who have already had an epiphany” (152).

These four strategies, while undeniably noble, ask an extraordinary amount of the individual teacher. The first requires that she herself pursue the full knowledge of virtue, defying the inertia of her own habits and the resistance of her own social world; the second asks that she bare her soul and make herself vulnerable to a classroom of strangers, year in and year out; the third requires that she walk the almost invisible line between, on one side, encouragement and friendly competition and, on the other side, favoritism and enmity; the fourth asks that she unfailingly support scores of students though they may work against her every step of the way.

Even the most capable and ambitious of teachers might find this a daunting set of responsibilities; we are, after all, only human. We have bad days and get angry at our spouses or eat a candy bar instead of a salad; we wall off parts of ourselves to keep them safe from the often-cruel outside world; we question our own judgment and err on the side of caution rather than courage; and we grow tired and disheartened when we suffer defeat. Thus even if this form of guidance promises better odds than mentoring students one-on-one, the teacher capable of providing it may be only one in a million.

Moreover, these strategies give the impression that rehabilitation is essentially carried out through acting virtuously—doing the right thing—over and over again. The teacher’s responsibility is to demonstrate and advise the students in sound moral deliberation such that they are conditioned to pursue virtue rather than vice. To return to the craft analogy, this would mean that the novice cobbler’s habituation would take place through emulation and role modeling: she would look to the expert cobbler to show and tell her what to do in each particular instance of shoe construction and repair. This instruction, however, accounts for only one aspect of the work it will take for her to gain expertise; she must also practice. Perhaps the expert cobbler asks her to tan all of the leather for months’ worth of new shoes, or to punch all of the lace-holes, or cut all of the soles, before she is ready to put any of these pieces together. Perhaps she must spend days or weeks taking apart pair after pair of shoes then reconstructing them to not only see but feel and experience how each one is made. Thus as much as the expert cobbler must demonstrate all of these skills and instruct the novice how to perform them, that is not the full extent of his role. He must also organize the novice’s practice and guide her through it. He must choose and design the exercises that will best initiate her into the work, then he must

require her to complete the tasks that he has set out in the interest of helping her come to understand, through her own consistent efforts, the nuances of her chosen craft.

Thus to theorize the rehabilitative aspect of moral education is not only to theorize the role of the teacher herself, but also the particular form and contents of the practices through which she must guide the student. Perhaps the most important insight of a specifically Platonic theory of moral education is that its instruction must come not only from the top down, through the pointed and explicit instructions of an individual mentor, but also from the bottom up, through the transformations we undergo as the patterns and forms of virtue imprint themselves on our souls. Thus while Jonas and Nakazawa are not wrong to identify emulation and imitation as important parts of rehabilitation, their account is only partial. A complete theory of Platonic moral education must also address the ways in which the curriculum itself might be designed as a regimen of morally transformative practices that would scaffold the teacher's work.

Here we might return to Plato's account of habituation as the development of a kinship with virtue for some insights into the form of these practices. In Book III of the *Republic*, Socrates claims that "education in music and poetry is most important...because rhythm and harmony permeate the inner part of the soul more than anything else, affecting it most strongly and bringing it grace" (*Republic* 401e). The education Socrates describes here is clearly transformative: the rhythm and harmony embodied in the forms of music and poetry "permeate" the soul and adapt it to their patterns. The soul itself is thereby harmonized with the patterns of world and mind from which the songs and poems gained their own forms. Thus taking the time and care to receive those forms into her soul, and allow them to transform her, the student is taking responsibility for her relationship to others, and to the world. She is practicing the care of the self.

Socrates also identifies music and poetry with an economy of form: “anyone who has been properly educated in music and poetry,” he suggests, “will sense it acutely when something has been omitted from a thing and when it hasn’t been finely crafted or finely made by nature” (401e). Repeated experience of the systematic wholeness characteristic of music and poetry can help attune the soul to the omissions and superfluities that are the marks of vice. Indeed, for Plato there is a direct causality between this economy of form and fineness and goodness per se: to know the former is to know the latter. Because the student of music and poetry can sense when something is afflicted by deficiency or excess, “he’ll praise fine things, be pleased by them, receive them into his soul, and, being nurtured by them, become fine and good. He’ll rightly object to what is shameful, hating it while he’s still young and unable to grasp the reason...” (401e). According to Socrates, the very forms of music and poetry can cultivate an awareness of the fine and the shameful even prior to any rational understanding of virtue and vice.

As Jonas and Nakazawa put it, “the recognition of the virtues that is found through harmoniousness and rhythmicity...is a kind of intuition by which one can *feel* the rightness and wrongness of some action” (Jonas and Nakazawa 62). The practice of virtue, then, might aim at the development of this intuition through a purposeful set of researches and experiences designed to adapt the soul to the rhythmic, harmonious form of virtue itself. And although Socrates identifies music and poetry as the prime exemplars of this form, they are certainly not the only ones. The academic subjects into which contemporary curricula get parsed essentially constitute a variety of systems of understanding, each one organized by its own intrinsic harmony and economy. Thus the vast majority of curricular work serves to initiate students into those very systems, each of which facilitates its own modes of perception and interpretation. The study of

language diversifies the store of concepts through which we organize experience; the study of mathematics allows us to perceive the world in terms of quantity, distance, and dimension; the study of biology initiates us into the intrinsic purposiveness of organic form. Moreover, the activities and methods through which those studies takes place—analysis, memorization, calculation, interpretation—are all adaptable to the form of spiritual practice. From this we might conclude that almost any curricular activity—rehearsing geometric proofs, learning to read music, interpreting a work of art—could be undertaken in such a way that it fosters the kind of intuition Jonas and Nakazawa describe. Thus virtue, as conceived by Plato, would be knowable—in the fullest sense—through these very kinds of practices. Moral education understood as the practice of virtue could therefore take place in any classroom at any time.

To integrate the practice of virtue into the curriculum would require no massive change to its content. Rather, it would entail a shift in the way we teach that content, guided by a clear understanding of why we are teaching it. Whereas we tend to present the ends of these practices as cognitive knowledge, or the acquisition of certain skills, perhaps we might reconceive the purpose of those practices as the transformation of the self: these pursuits are the means by which we take responsibility for ourselves—by which we cultivate our attitudes toward ourselves, others, and the world. When we rehearse scales on the piano or decline verb after verb, we are practicing a form of attentive repetition that ultimately transforms—even if only slightly—the very organization of the psyche. What if we were to apply that very same attentive repetition to all our curricular endeavors: solving equations and interpreting lyric poetry; proceeding through chemistry experiments and memorizing chronologies? Could that shift constitute all of these activities as the very kinds of practices that might change, transform, and

transfigure us? Could these activities serve as “an elaboration of the self by the self” that might organize the psyche and clarify one’s responsibilities? (Foucault 16)

In the chapter that follows, I will turn to some examples of spiritual practices as they were undertaken in the traditions of Greco-Roman antiquity to further develop the conceptual groundwork on which to build a theory of moral education as the practice of virtue. Drawing primarily on the work of Pierre Hadot, I suggest that through the repetition of exercises designed to hone the faculty of attention, spiritual practice adapts the form of human experience according to the very characteristics Plato attributes to the form of virtue: rhythm, harmony, systematicity, and formal economy. Thus to select and design educational activities oriented toward this adaptation and modeled on the form of spiritual exercise will be to develop an account of moral education as a practice of virtue.

Chapter 2

Transformation & Liberation: The Form of Spiritual Practice

In the previous chapter I suggested that moral education understood as the practice of virtue would aim to adapt the patterns of experience to the form of virtue through transformative exercises designed on the model of spiritual practice. There would be no canon of texts nor body of knowledge proper to the practice of virtue, as its constituent activities would be characterized not by their subject matter but by the way in which we undertake them. This form of moral education would not entail the replacement nor even augmentation of the contents of an academic curriculum; it would not, in other words, require that we change what we teach. Rather, it would require that we change the way we approach the activities that already comprise much scholastic work. These activities—analysis, memorization, calculation, interpretation—are adaptable to the form of spiritual practice. In fact, many of the exercises that comprised ancient traditions of *askēsis* entailed these very pursuits: according to Hadot, “thorough investigation,” “reading,” “research,” and “listening” were among the “panorama of Stoico-Platonic inspired philosophical therapeutics” (84).

Perhaps the most defining characteristic of all spiritual exercises is their shared purpose: “a profound transformation of the individual’s mode of seeing and being” (83). This same goal lies at the heart of the *epimeleia heautou*, which “always designates a number of actions exercised on the self by the self, actions by which one takes responsibility for oneself and by which one changes, purifies, transforms, and transfigures oneself” (Foucault 10). The purpose of spiritual practice is not the information nor skills one might acquire through its constituent activities, but the transformation these processes of reading, listening, and researching facilitate. We undertake spiritual practice in order to transform our modes of being in the world. This same

purpose will orient moral education understood as the practice of virtue. The practice of virtue will not aim to provide us with moral imperatives or merely intellectual awareness of virtue and its myriad characteristics. Through its constituent exercises, this practice will aim to transform us: to alter our perceptions and dispositions and initiate us into the affective and conative as well as intellectual dimensions of virtue. The focus of this chapter will be an elaboration on the nature of this transformation, as well as well as the form of the exercises that can facilitate it.

In what follows, I suggest that this transformation consists in the modification of experience through exercise designed to organize and clarify one's apprehension of both the self and the world. In the Platonic account presented in the previous chapter, we begin this modification of experience by assimilating rhythm, harmony, systematicity, and economy of form—receiving them into our soul—through the study of poetry and music (*Republic* 401e). This assimilation develops in us a form of moral intuition: it serves to hone our perceptual capacities such that we automatically recognize virtue as virtue and vice as vice. This “profound transformation” of our “mode of seeing” (Hadot 83) will ultimately effect a corresponding transformation in the way we comport ourselves. Because virtue appears to us as virtue, and vice as vice, the phenomena we encounter will command from us responses consistent with their forms; as Plato puts it, we will “praise fine things” and “rightly object to what is shameful” (*Republic* 401e). Through spiritual exercise, these corresponding transformations of seeing and being will continue to reinforce one another, further honing our perceptual capacities and organizing the form of our experience.

Building on Plato's account, I turn in the next section to Hadot's account of spiritual practices as they were undertaken in the philosophical traditions of Greco-Roman antiquity from which I extrapolate the unifying characteristics of their constitutive exercises: these practices all

took place through deliberate, attentive, repeated exercises of psychic organization designed to transform the practitioner's mode of being in the world. In the ancient Greco-Roman traditions—such as Platonism, Stoicism, and Epicureanism—the precise nature of this transformation was rooted in a shared commitment to the universality and objectivity of the good. To make progress in pursuit of this transformation is, in a sense, to make progress toward an Archimedean point from which one can achieve a perspective of complete objectivity and universality. This poses a challenge, however, to the translation of these practices into a contemporary context: there is no great unanimity among contemporary philosophical camps that such a perspective is even theoretically possible. Thus the question arises: without this metaphysical commitment to some objective form of the good, is the transformation at which these practices aim still intelligible?

This challenge finds some resolution in a recent article by Stephen Grimm and Caleb Cohoe, to which I turn in the second section of the chapter. In this article, which addresses the relevance of spiritual practice for contemporary conceptions of philosophy as a way of life, Grimm and Cohoe suggest that a metaphysical commitment to the objectivity of the good is not in fact necessary for a conception of spiritual practice as such. Even without the theoretical possibility of complete objectivity or universality, the transformation toward which spiritual practice is oriented can still be understood in more relative terms of broadening—rather than narrowing—our perspective. Insofar as such practices work to deconstruct our unreflective “default” concerns and the judgments those concerns elicit, they will broaden our perspective and afford us a more lucid apprehension of ourselves, others, and the world (Grimm and Cohoe 242).

2.1 Hadot on the Form of Spiritual Practice

According to Hadot, “No systematic treatise codifying the instructions and techniques for spiritual exercise has come down to us” (Hadot 83). Their unifying characteristics must therefore be extrapolated from accounts of their undertaking “in the context of Hellenistic and Roman schools of philosophy” (82). Hadot cites a catalog of such exercises, which includes “research (*zetesis*), thorough investigation (*skepsis*), reading (*anagnosis*), listening (*akroasis*), attention (*prosoche*), self-mastery (*enkrateia*)...indifference to indifferent things...meditation (*meletai*), therapies of the passions, remembrance of good things...and the accomplishment of duties” (84). From this list it is immediately apparent that spiritual exercise can take many diverse forms. Some of the activities Hadot lists quite obviously fit the description of a distinctly spiritual pursuit—meditation, for example, or attention and remembrance of good things. Others, however, might be construed as primarily “intellectual,” such as reading, listening, and research; still others are quite “active,” such as the accomplishment of duties or self-mastery (84). “Beneath this apparent diversity, however,” Hadot notes “there is a profound unity” among these exercises, “both in the means employed and in the ends pursued” (101).

The common goal of the spiritual exercises Hadot enumerates is a form of “self-realization and improvement” that entails “complete liberation from the passions, utter lucidity, knowledge of ourselves and the world” (102–103). According to Hadot, “all philosophical schools” shared the view that “mankind’s principal cause of suffering, disorder, and unconsciousness were the passions: that is, unregulated desires and exaggerated fears” (83). Plato’s metaphor of encrustation exemplifies this very notion: the “shells seaweeds and stones” that “weigh down the soul and block its vision” are analogues of the passions to which Hadot refers (Jonas and Nakazawa 43). In Plato’s account, faulty or failed habituation allows the

passions to proceed unchecked and undisciplined. Thus unregulated, our desires and fears command all of our attention, and we recognize as good only those things that might sate or assuage them. This is how the passions cloud and distort our vision: as worries and wants grow to dominate our consciousness, we find ourselves transfixed by their imaginary solutions. Thus caught in an ever-tightening spiral of lack and satiation, we are unable to see beyond the demands of the passions themselves.

According to these traditions, the only way to escape this spiral is to liberate oneself from the passions altogether. It is not enough to simply keep our desires and fears from mediating our actions; we must also keep them from mediating our perception. Liberation from the passions therefore requires “a profound transformation of the individual’s mode of seeing and being” (Hadot 83). This transformation takes place in part through the renunciation of the corporeal currency of the passions themselves: “the false values of wealth, honors, and pleasures” (104). Without these temptations and distractions, the spiritual practitioner is able to turn instead “towards the true values of virtue, contemplation, a simple life-style, and the simple happiness of existing” (104). This renunciation, however, is not altogether sufficient for the complete transformation of one’s mode of seeing and being; it must be accompanied by affective and imaginative exercises designed to reorganize the psyche.

One such exercise from the Stoic tradition is directed meditation on a single philosophical precept. In the passage below, Hadot describes this form of meditation, intended to organize the psyche around the Stoic’s fundamental rule of life: “the distinction between what depends on us and what does not” (84).

We are to steep ourselves in the rule of life (*kanon*), by mentally applying it to all life’s possibly different situations, just as we assimilate a grammatical or mathematical rule through practice, by applying it to individual cases. In this case, however, we are not

dealing with mere knowledge, but with the transformation of our personality. (84)

Just as we have come to assimilate syntactical norms and the concept of multiplication as intuitions, so we can assimilate this philosophical commitment as intuition as well. It begins as an explicit principle we deliberately use to guide our imagination through “all life’s possibly different situations.” Eventually, through this exercise, that principle comes to automatically filter or temper the way the world appears to us. Just as through the assimilation of grammar and mathematics the world comes to present itself to us in linguistic and quantifiable relations, through the assimilation of this fundamental rule some things will simply appear as that which depends on us, and others as that which does not. Thus by “steeping” ourselves in the rule of life, through the systematic application of imagination, our vision of the world is transformed. The assimilation of the rule rearranges our interpretive faculties such that perception is no longer mediated by the passions; instead, it is mediated by the rule itself.

In another example, Hadot describes the practice of methodical reflection on the things we have accomplished (or failed to accomplish) over the course of the day:

First thing in the morning we should go over what we have to do during the course of the day, and decide on the principles which will guide and inspire our actions. In the evening, we should examine ourselves again, so as to be aware of the faults we have committed or the progress we have made. (84)

This exercise is, in a sense, the converse of the previous example. Just as we must work to assimilate certain principles into automatic constituents of our interpretive faculties, we must also work to deliberately reflect on and organize the contents of experience that might otherwise remain muddled or inchoate. Meditation on our accomplishments and failures is an attempt to do just that: “to control inner discourse, in an effort to render it coherent” (84). Just as our perceptions of the outside world can be distorted by the passions, so can the narrative of

experience: our own accounts of the “faults we have committed” and “progress we have made.” To keep these accounts from being carried off on the zigs of desire and zags of fear requires deliberate practice. Thus each day we must meditate on our expectations and memories such that we might see them more clearly and prevent the passions from taking control of the narrative. We must edit the naturally jumbled form of experience such that its contents come to appear in an orderly fashion.

These examples help to illustrate not only the common ends of spiritual practice—“complete liberation from the passions, utter lucidity, knowledge of ourselves and the world”—but also their common means (103). In these ancient philosophical traditions, liberation and lucidity are achieved through deliberate practices of psychic organization and individual mastery. The key to these practices, Hadot notes, is attention: “continuous vigilance and presence of mind, self-consciousness which never sleeps, and a constant tension of the spirit” (84). The assimilation of life’s fundamental principles through systematic imaginative application requires extraordinary focus: we must keep the principle itself at the front of the mind while simultaneously conjuring each individual scenario in which its guidance might be required. Moreover, we must translate that attention and focus to the particularities of our own experience, keeping “life’s events ‘before our eyes’” so that we are able to “see them in the light of the fundamental rule” (85). To organize the narrative of our experience requires a great deal of focus and attention as well: we must call to the fore perceptions, interactions, thoughts, and feelings that might otherwise recede and merge into the background. We must attend to and reflect on even the most seemingly insignificant components of each day such that we can continue to clarify and refine their relationships to each other and to the principles that guide us.

Through these exercises, attention is not only applied but also strengthened and maintained. Of course, strength and maintenance require that we practice consistently; just as a muscle will atrophy without use, so the faculty of attention will weaken and dissipate if left idle. Hence the nature of exercise as such: to strengthen and maintain the faculties necessary to carry out the exercise itself. The purpose of spiritual practice is therefore best understood not as a product—some end state that, once achieved, would no longer require the efforts through which it was reached—but rather as the process of transformation itself. Indeed, as Hadot points out, in most philosophical schools the liberation and lucidity that serve as the ends of spiritual practice were “conceived as an ideal after which one strives without the hope of ever attaining it” (103). These ends are asymptotic: through exercise we can draw nearer and nearer to them, but they will always remain out of reach. The elusive nature of these ends suggests that in spiritual practice, attention must be accompanied by repetition. The examples above illustrate this necessity: the fundamental rule of life must be brought to bear anew on each of life’s possibly different situations; every single day we must pause, once again, to reflect on and organize the accumulating narrative of our experience. We must return to these exercises over and over and over again.

In spiritual practice, the elements of attention and repetition support and deepen one another. It is through repetition that we train ourselves to attend so that attention itself becomes second nature. The faculty of attention, in turn, draws us back to its objects—the contents of our experience and the world in which it takes place—over and over again, in search of greater clarity. Their combination allows us to see differently and see more with every new pass. Through the consistent exercise of the faculty of attention the mind grows flexible and supple, prepared to reorganize and reorient rather than digging deeper into well-trodden ruts of desire

and fear. This flexibility supports repetition as expansion: the widening, rather than narrowing, of perspective. Through these repeated practices of attention the practitioner “develops his strength of soul, modifies his inner climate, transforms his vision of the world, and, finally, his entire being” (102). Through spiritual exercise we are able—slowly and iteratively—to reorient our perspective such that it is consistent with our own capacities, the system of nature, and the form of the good; we “change from a vision of things dominated by individual passions to a representation of the world governed by the universality and objectivity of thought” (96). As the encrustations of the passions are sloughed off, the contents of our perception and the narratives of our experiences become increasingly lucid. “The ‘self’ liberated in this way is no longer merely our egoistic, passionate individuality: it is our *moral* person, open to universality and objectivity” (103). Through this process of liberation we can adapt the patterns of our experience to the patterns of “universal nature and thought”—patterns that, for Plato, would be characterized by harmony, rhythm, systematicity, and economy (103).

In the philosophical traditions of Greco-Roman antiquity, spiritual practice might best be understood as the adaptation of the patterns of experience to the patterns of universal nature and thought through the repetition of exercises designed to train and hone the faculty of attention. There remains, however, a question of whether such practices can be translated into a contemporary practice of virtue. As Hadot describes them, these practices are deeply rooted in the metaphysics of ancient philosophical traditions: a commitment to the objectivity and universality of the good. In the intervening millennia, however, the very foundations of that metaphysics have been challenged, as the notions of objectivity and universality have themselves been called into question. Thus to bring the insights of these traditions to bear in the context of contemporary moral education will require some translation.

2.2 Grimm & Cohoe: Translating the Ancients into the Present

In a recent article exploring the significance of spiritual practice in contemporary notions of philosophy as a way of life, Grimm and Cohoe (2020) suggest that despite the specific metaphysical grounds for the spiritual exercises undertaken in Hellenistic traditions, the concept of spiritual practice has the potential to be quite capacious. “For Hadot,” they write, “spiritual exercises...seem primarily related to a transformation of vision...that will allow someone to see and judge things rightly, where seeing and judging rightly is associated with adopting the view of the universe as a whole” (Grimm and Cohoe 242). On this account, the purpose of spiritual exercise is to achieve universality and objectivity: to adopt a view of the universe as a whole. If this perspective were integral to spiritual practice, the value of its exercises would seem to depend on the existence of an Archimedean point: to adopt a view of the whole, we must be able to position ourselves outside of it. As noted above, however, many contemporary philosophical perspectives either question or outright reject even the theoretical possibility of such a point. To develop a notion of spiritual practice consistent with such perspectives would therefore require a conception of its purpose that does not entail universal objectivity.

Grimm and Cohoe develop such a conception by suggesting that “seeing and judging rightly” need not be predicated on adopting a view of the universe as a whole. They write: “we all come equipped with certain ‘default’ judgments about what is more or less important in life, judgments often fueled by our passions, appetites, and cultural upbringing, and judgments that are often tied to anxieties about the future and regrets about the past” (242). The sources of our default judgments are analogous to Hadot’s “passions”: our desires and appetites; our anxieties, regrets, and fears; the systems of value in which we are immersed. These aspects of our

experience tend to imbue certain objects or states of affairs with excessive import, which leads to what Grimm and Cohoe call “value illusions,” the appearance of certain goods as disproportionately valuable. The exaggerated magnetism of these goods serves to throw our attachments out of order, as we gravitate toward them and leave others behind.

The judgments that result from these value illusions and disordered attachments tend in the direction of individuality. The more we allow our unique anxieties and appetites to guide us, the stronger their influence will become, thereby narrowing rather than broadening our perspective. “We can learn, however,” according to Grimm and Cohoe, “to rise above or detach ourselves from these default concerns in order to adopt a more objective point of view” (242). Insofar as the influence of these concerns tends to lock us inside the particularities of our own subjectivity, to lessen their influence would be to allow for a wider range of vision. Thus in Grimm and Cohoe’s formulation, objectivity is a matter of degrees rather than absolutes: regardless of whether we can ever achieve a view of the whole, to broaden our perspective is to move in the right direction.

On this model, the purpose of spiritual practice would be to liberate ourselves, as much as possible, from our default concerns and thereby achieve a more lucid apprehension of ourselves and of the world. This practice would consist of exercises designed to bring these default concerns out of the background such that we might attend to and reflect on them, and thereby achieve a clearer view of the concerns themselves as well as their sources. This would allow us to mitigate the influence of those default concerns on our value judgments so that, as Grimm and Cohoe put it, we could “learn to see and attend to what is actually more important in life, and learn to see and give less attention to (or rather, be less concerned about) what is actually less important” (242).

On this model, the term spiritual practice might apply, in the words of St. Ignatius of Loyola, “to every way of preparing and disposing one’s soul to rid itself of disordered attachments” (241). Such practice would not necessarily need to afford a universal perspective so long as it serves to bring “the various elements of the soul into proper alignment” by eradicating disordered attachments and value illusions (242). This formulation, however, raises an important worry: to loosen the tethers between the concept of spiritual exercise and the bodies of theory and practice out of which it emerged might ultimately render it so broad as to be almost vacuous. “Suppose it turns out,” Grimm and Coho muse, “that taking a serotonin inhibitor like Prozac helps to dispel value illusions,” or that “getting a good night’s sleep has similar effects, or taking long walks, or watching romantic comedies on TV. Would all of these things count as spiritual exercise?” (244) When considered in comparison to Hadot’s examples of meditation and the systematic application of imagination, these activities don’t seem to fit the category. While they may afford some kind of clarity, they lack any unity of purpose and process: the pursuit of lucidity is not integral to any of these activities, nor do the means employed by each resemble those of the others. Thus Grimm and Coho are faced with the difficulty of maintaining the capaciousness of the concept of spiritual exercise without altogether eliminating its boundaries.

In response to this challenge, the authors suggest two basic criteria that might help to distinguish spiritual practice from other forms of perceptual or dispositional transformation. The first identifies a unity of process: spiritual practice, they argue, is “self-directed” or “self-guided” rather than merely “self-initiated” (244). Whereas a self-initiated decision might be construed as anything we undertake voluntarily, a self-directed or self-guided decision, they argue, entails “guiding or being responsive to how [that decision] unfolds over time” (244). A self-guided decision requires that we stay present and responsive to each successive effect as it emerges from

the last; it requires, in other words, that we pay attention. This helps to distinguish between the example of taking a pill or a nap, which might serve as a catalyst for some kind of psychic shift, and that of directed meditation, which requires not only the initial decision to undertake the activity, but also persistent engagement in the form of the activity itself.

The second criterion identifies a unity of purpose: Grimm and Cohoe suggest that all spiritual practice is necessarily “truth-directed.” Truth-directed activities, they argue, “will help us to see and evaluate things as they really are” (244). Truth-directed activities need not aim at absolute universal objectivity as long as their goal is to afford a more lucid apprehension of ourselves and the world around us. On Grimm and Cohoe’s account, this would entail a liberation from or deconstruction of our default concerns and judgments such that we might attain a broader perspective. Thus insofar as we might nap or watch romantic comedies as means of escape or distraction from the world around us, even if those activities have the occasional or collateral effect of increased clarity, they would fall outside the category of spiritual practice.

Grimm and Cohoe’s account supports the claim that contemporary practices of virtue modeled on the form of spiritual practice might still be understood as the adaptation of the patterns of experience to broader patterns of nature and thought even without a commitment to their universality. If, in other words, we undertake exercises in the interest of lessening the mediating influence of our default concerns on our perceptual and interpretive faculties, those exercises would meet the criterion of truth-directedness without necessarily being geared toward objectivity as such. Moreover, Grimm and Cohoe’s designation of spiritual exercise as necessarily self-guided reinforces the claim that a contemporary practice of virtue modeled on the form of spiritual practice would take place through the repetition of exercises designed to train and hone the faculty of attention.

Having translated the form of spiritual exercise as it was undertaken in the traditions of Greco-Roman antiquity into a more contemporary formulation of the practice of virtue, the next task is to develop an account of moral education as taking place through such practice. The expansion of the category of spiritual practice outside those traditions rooted in the metaphysics of the ancients helps to reveal that although its import and influence has perhaps not always been explicit, it has in fact been integral to diverse conceptions of moral education over the course of intellectual history. In the chapter that follows, I turn to the work of two philosophers—John Dewey and Simone Weil—both of whom theorize forms of moral education consistent with the form of the practice of virtue as developed in the foregoing chapter.

Chapter 3

Experience, Appearance, and Attention:

Moral Education as Spiritual Exercise

In the previous chapter, I suggested that a contemporary practice of virtue would aim to adapt the patterns of experience to the broader patterns of nature and thought—patterns characterized by harmony, rhythm, systematicity, and economy—through the repetition of exercises designed to train and hone the faculty of attention. The elements of this practice, while not *au courant* in moral education, are also not altogether absent from its philosophical history. In this chapter I turn to two theorists of moral education—John Dewey and Simone Weil—to further elaborate the relevance of spiritual practice for moral education and further develop the specific characteristics of a contemporary practice of virtue.

Dewey's and Weil's theories of moral education are rooted in two very different intellectual and spiritual traditions. Dewey makes no distinction between moral and academic education: for any schooling to be considered educative, no matter what its content, it must build on human experience, facilitate human growth, and promote the “development within the young of the attitudes and dispositions necessary to the continuous and progressive life of a society” (Dewey, *Democracy*, 22). The purpose of all education as such is therefore grounded in a fundamentally moral concern: to foster the reciprocal relationship between human flourishing and the progress of collective social life. For Weil, too, there is a sense in which all education is, or at least ought to be, moral education. On her account, however, the purpose of such education is not the maintenance and progress of human social life but rather “increasing the power of attention with a view to prayer” (Weil, *Waiting*, 59). Whereas Dewey locates both moral and

educational good in the very relations that comprise and motivate social life, Weil locates them in the love and grace of God: schooling should prepare us to wait upon truth—“unique, eternal, and living Truth” (62).

Despite these divergent metaphysical commitments, however, both theorists suggest that moral transformation ultimately amounts to the ordering and organization of experience and perception through repetitive exercises of attention. For Dewey, this means establishing a harmonious balance between motion and pause which facilitates a rhythm of experience that allows it to flow and consolidate into a dynamic system of openness and reflection. For Weil, it means to liberate ourselves from the unreflective attitudes, dispositions, and desires that cloud and distort appearances, thereby facilitating a more lucid apprehension of ourselves and the world.

In both cases, the moral transformation constitutive of education as such will take place through repeated, deliberate, and scaffolded interactions with objects that resist our understanding. Such interactions will facilitate sustained rhythms of motion and pause in which we work to make sense of the object, step back and reflect on the influence of our own interests and inclinations on our efforts at understanding, then return to the object once more—now better able to suspend those forces—and allow it to appear more clearly. This is the training of attention: the alternate expenditure and relaxation of intellectual effort. A moral education that proceeds through the repetition of such exercises will ultimately serve to transform our modes of seeing and being: it will orient our relations and ramify into our comportment, guiding our interactions with others and with the world at large.

3.1 John Dewey and the Form of Experience

For Dewey, the adaptation of the patterns of experience to broader patterns of nature and thought is arguably the very purpose of education as such. As Dewey describes them, these broader patterns are largely identical to the Platonic account of the form of virtue. In chapter one, I argued that for Plato, the form of virtue is perhaps best characterized by rhythm, harmony, systematicity, and economy. In what follows, I argue that for Dewey, the purpose of education is essentially to adapt human experience to that very form, such that its characteristic qualities would come to imbue our movements, relations, and interactions. It is, in other words, largely identical to the purpose of spiritual practice writ large, and to the proposed purpose of a contemporary practice of virtue.

In human experience adapted to the form of virtue, “flow is from something to something. As one part leads into another and as one part carries on what went before, each gains distinctness in itself. The enduring whole is diversified by successive phases that are emphases of its varied colors” (Dewey, *Art*, 38). Here Dewey theorizes experience as a systematic whole, defined by the same harmony and formal economy Plato attributes to the form of virtue. Each part of the experience Dewey describes is unique and purposeful in its own right, but is given its full meaning through its relation to the parts with which it is in sequence. No part is superfluous; the shade of each one serves to emphasize each of the others’, rendering the whole more vibrant than the sum of its hues.

According to Dewey, the continuity proper to this form of experience comes from attentive engagement in the reciprocal processes of thought and action: motion and pause. “Because of continuous merging,” he writes, “there are no holes, mechanical junctions, and dead centers” in this form of experience. “There are pauses, places of rest, but they punctuate and

define the quality of movement. They sum up what has been undergone and prevent its dissipation and idle evaporation” (38). This form of experience is rhythmical; its motion is tempered by a stillness that conserves its meaning. The harmony between motion and pause that constitutes its rhythm is crucial, as an abundance of either will necessarily compromise the unity of experience.

On the one hand, Dewey writes, “Zeal for doing, lust for action, leaves many a person, especially in this hurried and impatient human environment in which we live, with experience of an almost incredible paucity, all on the surface” (46). Without the moments of pause to punctuate the motion, there is no chance for the consolidation of meaning. This happens when interpretive resistance “is treated as an obstruction to be beaten down, not as an invitation to reflection” (38). As a result, confusion, perplexity, and uncertainty will be met not with pause, but with acceleration and an increase of force. This kind of “continued acceleration is breathless and prevents parts from gaining distinction,” thereby actively working against the systematic and harmonious formation of experience (38). As a result, there is no rhythm to experience; its form becomes “dispersed and miscellaneous” (46).

On the other hand, an overabundance of rest will be just as detrimental to the organization of experience, which is “also cut short from maturing by excess of receptivity” (47). Without active participation in its composition, the form of experience will be jumbled and arbitrary. In these cases, experience “is the mere undergoing of this and that, irrespective of perception of any meaning” (47). Accumulation is pursued in its own right: “The crowding together of as many impressions as possible is thought to be ‘life,’ even though no one of them is more than a flitting and a sipping” (47). If an excess of motion drives us to bulldoze over that which resists, an excess of receptivity moves us to simply pluck it up, like a shell from the shore,

and toss it into an ever-filling basket of jetsam. In either case, “nothing takes root in mind when there is no balance between doing and receiving” (47). Without this balance, experience will only either accelerate or accumulate. This will foreclose the space and time necessary for each part to “gain distinctness in itself” (38). As a result, experience is kept from developing into the systematic whole that would impart meaning and distinctness to subsequent doings and undergoings. Without some harmony between motion and pause, there is no opportunity for experience to become growth. Thus for Dewey, human flourishing is constituted by a harmonious balance between motion and pause which facilitates a rhythm of experience that allows it to flow and consolidate into a dynamic system of openness and reflection.

Dewey’s theory of education is directly rooted in this theory of experience, as he recognizes “an intimate and necessary relation between the process of actual experience and education” (Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 20). This relationship is largely reciprocal: education is the expansion and organization of past experience such that we might proceed reflectively, purposefully, and continuously into future experience. Put simply, education builds on experience, and experience builds on education. Not all experiences, however, are constitutive of human growth, and so not all experiences are necessarily educative.

“Any experience is mid-educative,” Dewey writes, “that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience” (25). This arrest is essentially the narrowing of perspective through the ossification of habits: mis-educative experiences may “engender callousness” or “produce lack of sensitivity and responsiveness,” thereby restricting “the possibilities of having a richer experience in the future”; they may “increase a person’s automatic skill in a particular direction and yet tend to land him in a groove or rut,” thereby narrowing “the field of further experience”; they may “be immediately enjoyable and yet promote the formation

of a slack and careless attitude,” which attitude will “modify the quality of subsequent experience so as to prevent a person from getting out of them what they have to give” (26). In each of Dewey’s examples here, a failure to interrogate one’s default judgment serves to reinforce, rather than deconstruct or mitigate, its constituent forces. This leads to increasingly disordered attachments—a further exaggeration of our default concerns to the exclusion of others—and, as a result, increasingly mis-educative experience. It is a spiral that restricts, rather than broadens, our perspective.

Also mis-educative, according to Dewey, are experiences “so disconnected from one another that, while each is agreeable or even exciting in itself, they are not linked cumulatively to one another” (26). The converse of mis-education through the reinforcement of default concerns, such chains of experience are mis-educative precisely because “their disconnectedness may artificially generate dispersive, disintegrated, centrifugal habits” (26). Such experiences defy pattern altogether and “are taken, either by way of enjoyment or of discontent and revolt, just as they come” (26). Rather than throwing our attachments into disorder, these kinds of experiences seem to defy any form of attachment at all. Whereas the ossification of habit may land us in a rut, its reverse—an utter lack of experiential continuity—leaves us drifting here and there at the whim of the breeze.

Given this account, the primary goal of education will be to resist these restrictive or disconnected forms of mis-educative experience and instead facilitate those forms that promote growth. For Dewey, this means ordering the objective conditions of educational situations such that they foster two things: an active union of interaction “between an individual and what, at the time, constitutes his environment”; and continuity from one experience to the next (43). The first is the “lateral” or synchronic integration of the individual and the world in which he is immersed;

the second is the “longitudinal” or diachronic integration of the sequence of his experiences as they proceed through time (44).

One crucial component in this bidirectional integration of experience is, of course, the role of the teacher. According to Dewey, she must be able to “recognize in the concrete what surroundings are conducive to having experiences that lead to growth” and “utilize [those] surroundings, physical and social...so as to extract from them all that they have to contribute to building up experiences that are worth while” (40). She must work to organize the objective conditions of the educational situation as best she can and present those conditions to the student in such a way that he is able to integrate himself into their structure and assimilate their structure into his awareness. The teacher must also be able to “judge what attitudes are actually conducive to growth and what are detrimental” and exercise her capacity for “sympathetic understanding of individuals as individuals” in order to recognize “what attitudes and habitual tendencies are being created” through the student’s experiences (39). Beyond facilitating the student’s lateral, synchronic integration with his environment, she must also facilitate the diachronic integration of his experiences by constantly assessing and re-assessing the trajectory of his habits so that she might intervene to help shift that trajectory any time it seems to be running off course.

These responsibilities are large indeed, and will invariably make this form of education a “difficult affair to conduct successfully” (39). Just as in the case of Jonas and Nakazawa’s Platonic theory of moral education, here too the task of the moral educator might be bolstered by a curricular design that scaffolds her attempts at the lateral and longitudinal integration of her students’ experience. On Dewey’s account, that design will entail the selection and organization of exercises that proceed through an “orderly development toward expansion and organization of subject-matter through growth of experience” (74). The design of the curriculum itself must be

modeled after the iterative, broadening spiral that constitutes experience as growth. This growth, according to Dewey, “depends on the presence of difficulty to be overcome by the exercise of intelligence” (79). It depends, in other words, on interpretive resistance: encounters with objects that defy—at least initially—our understanding. Education toward growth will therefore entail the purposeful scaffolding of encounters with interpretive resistance such that students are guided toward experiences characterized by synchronic integration and continuity, rather than bulldozing, stifling, or dissipation.

For Dewey, this scaffolding must be founded on two principles: “First, that the problem grows out of the conditions of the experience being had in the present, and that it is within the range and capacity of the student” (79). This will ensure that the student is poised to experience synchronic, lateral integration: that she understands the problem on her own terms, in relation to her current position. The second criterion is that the problem “arouses in the learner an active quest for information and for production of new ideas” (79). She will therefore be not only able to immerse herself fully in the problem, but also galvanized to make her way toward greater interpretive clarity. The facts and ideas that result from her quest will then “become the ground for further experiences in which new problems are presented” (79). This will constitute the flow of experience as “a continuous spiral,” whereby the student’s perspective is iteratively broadened through successive educational experiences, each of which flows directly from the accumulation of previous experience and lays the ground for purposeful encounters with novel problems in the future.

One resource for the design of such a curriculum is, according to Dewey, the scientific method. He writes that the “scientific method provides a working pattern of the way in which and the conditions under which experiences are used to lead ever onward and outward” (88).

This has to do in part with the nature of hypotheses: to treat ideas as hypotheses, Dewey notes, rather than as “first truths in themselves,” means that “they must be continuously tested and revised” (87). To approach an idea, or an interpretation, as provisional rather than fixed is to take it up over and over again, testing each revised iteration anew. The complement of this repetition is, of course, attention: the testing of hypotheses requires “that the consequences of actions must be carefully and discriminatingly observed” (87). This is not the rote repetition of identical processes in the interest of ossifying patterns of thought. In the testing of ideas as hypotheses, each iteration facilitates deeper attention and thereby reveals greater nuance. It reinforces an attitude of openness and a curious disposition, leading us “ever onward and outward” (88).

For Dewey, curricular design would therefore consist of deliberate, scaffolded encounters with objects that pose interpretive resistance. The content of the object itself is largely immaterial: it could be a dense literary text, a complex mathematical proof, a sophisticated musical composition, or an intricate set of taxonomical relationships. The educative aspect of the encounter is not the knowledge the student stands to gain through the achievements of understanding but rather the experience of the patterns that form the processes through which that understanding is approached. These encounters would therefore need to be scaffolded in such a way that the student is led to pause, reflect, develop an interpretive “hypothesis,” then return to the object again. The repetition of such a process would begin to adapt the student’s experience to a rhythm of motion and pause, and to organize that experience as a purposeful and systematic continuity.

Dewey’s theory of education so articulated lends support to two of this project’s fundamental claims: first, that moral education understood as the practice of virtue would not require that we alter or augment the contents of an academic curriculum but would instead

require that we change how we approach its constituent activities; and second, that to model those activities after the form of spiritual practice would be to render them morally educative. Dewey does not differentiate between moral and non-moral education: education as such is the organization of experience such that it constitutes growth and human flourishing. Thus for an experience to be educative at all is for it to be morally educative. Moreover, what it means for an activity to be educative is that it be undertaken through processes of attentive repetition in the interest of gaining a broader perspective and increased interpretive clarity. This is the very form of spiritual practice articulated by Hadot and Grimm and Cohoe: for Dewey, moral education is a fundamentally truth-seeking pursuit, and its purpose is the adaptation of experience to the form of virtue—the patterns of universal nature and thought. Moreover, this adaptation takes place through self-directed exercises characterized by a confluence of attention and repetition: exercises through which we are led to encounter resistance, over and over again, with pause and reflection.

3.2 Simone Weil on Interpretation and Attention

For Weil, as for Dewey, interpretive resistance is a necessary catalyst for moral education. In her “Essay on the Notion of Reading,” Weil suggests that interpretive work is our primary mode of interaction, not only with texts, but also with others and with the world. The concept of reading encompasses a universal process of interpretive construction: “The sky, the sea, the sun, stars, human beings, everything around us is...only something we read” (298–9). To be in the world is to interpret it, to transform it into meanings: into matrices of sense and significance.

Weil complicates this picture, however, by suggesting that we do not always experience this interpretive process as deliberate, or even subject to our own agency: “at every moment of our life,” Weil writes, “the meanings we ourselves read in appearances take hold of us as though from outside” (Weil, “Reading,” 298). Whereas there may be times when I can see myself consciously deliberating about the sense of what is before me—when I pore over a complex passage of text or witness an interaction between strangers from afar—much of the meaning I construct in life seems less like the product of conscious interpretive work and more like a simple appearance. Weil gives the example of a woman who has just received a letter informing her that her son has died: “upon just glancing at the paper” this woman “faints, and until her death, her eyes, her mouth, her movements will never again be as they were” (298). The letter affects this woman with physical force: she is “overcome, bowled over as if by a blow” (297). In the case of a woman who receives the same news but cannot read the words—who cannot attach to them any sense, and therefore cannot derive from them any significance—the letter means nothing: she is not affected by it in the least. Upon glancing at the letter, her “expression, her attitude, do not change.” Thus, Weil concludes, “It’s not the sensation” (both women were presented with the same physical stimulus) “but the meaning which has grabbed hold of the first woman, reaching directly, brutally into her mind, without her participation, as sensations grab hold of us” (289). The letter presents itself to her, seemingly without her participation, as overwhelming distress, grief, and shock. Meanings reach out to us; they grab us without warning; they appear without being conjured—but only if we can read them.

At the end of this analysis, Weil finds herself faced with a paradox, for “what we call the world are the meanings we read – it isn’t real. But it grabs hold of us as though from the outside – so it is real” (298). The meanings I construct are not exclusively a product of my mental

faculties; I do not conjure the world from a void. Rather, the world addresses me, it reaches out to me, it presents me with phenomena. And yet, those phenomena and their appearances are constituted by my interpretive powers: they can only ever appear to me *as meanings*, and meanings are things I create. This may not seem so paradoxical when we imagine interpretation to be nothing more nor less than the deliberate derivation of meaning (which “isn’t real”) from matter (which “is real”). What Weil finds “remarkable,” however, “is that we are not given sensations and meanings; we are given only what we read” (298). In other words, there is a seemingly mystical confluence of world and mind—of the objective and the individual—that defies our ability to determine where one ends and the other begins. Weil’s assessment here amounts to the suggestion that meaning-making is more often than not an automatic process. And yet, it is a process characterized not merely by undergoing, but also by doing: we read the world—make sense of it—as we move through it. Reading, therefore, in all senses of the word, is a fundamentally creative act.

Whether we are aware of it or not, we participate in the construction of these meanings, and in so doing, we make the world around us. This making is something more than mere understanding; it is at least a partial constitution of the real itself. Moreover, the active nature of reading suggests that we “possess a power to change the meanings which [we] read in appearances and which impose themselves on [us]” (301). Because my interpretive powers determine, at least in part, the way in which the world appears to me, I must have some control over those appearances—at least insofar as I have some control over my own interpretive powers. This control, however, is not the function of sheer will; it “is limited, indirect, and exercised through work” (301). I cannot simply wish appearances other than they are; I cannot

simply decide to be addressed differently by the world. Any deliberate shift in my interpretive interactions can only come as the result of practice.

Weil suggests that one way we go about precipitating this shift is through “work in the ordinary sense of the term,” for, as she notes, “every apprenticeship is learning to read in a certain way” (301). Weil’s insights here recall Plato’s concept of craft knowledge: the kind of knowledge that “requires embodied practice and habit which also shapes our attitudes, dispositions, and desires” (Jonas and Nakazawa 20). To shape our attitudes, dispositions, and desires is to learn to read in a certain way; it is to exercise some control over our interpretive powers. Weil gives the example of an “experienced captain” whose apprenticeship to the sea will determine the way he reads a storm. In the storm, the captain reads “necessities, limited dangers, and the means of escape... a duty to act courageously and honourably” (Weil, “Reading,” 302). A passenger, on the other hand, who has undertaken no such apprenticeship, will likely read in the same storm “chaos, unlimited danger, [and] fear” (302). Because of the work he has done, the captain is able to make a kind of sense of the storm that is unavailable to the passenger. It appears to him as a clearer, less chaotic phenomenon.

The captain’s apprenticeship has taken place through repeatedly facing the conditions of uncertainty and limited control that characterize the activity of sailing. Uncertainty and limited control, like complicated syntax and intricate composition, are forms of interpretive resistance. They are therefore liable to elicit heedless aggression or thoughtless dismissal: the captain might deny the material realities of maritime peril or foist responsibility onto a crewmate; he might turn the ship around or abandon the profession altogether. If, however, he consistently meets uncertainty and limited control with careful attention and deliberate reflection, what he once met as sheer resistance might eventually come to appear with greater nuance and clarity. By

repeatedly attending to the particularities of his conditions and bringing his own experience to bear as he makes sense of those particularities, the captain is ultimately able to shift the way the meaning of the storm presents itself; he is able to shift the meaning he reads in its appearance. The storm does not appear to him as “fear” and “chaos” the way it does to the passengers. Rather, it appears as “necessities” and the “duty to act courageously.” As a result, it will command from him a different response: in the face of duty and necessity, the captain is more self-possessed and calmer; his movements are more purposeful; his decisions are better suited to the situation at hand.

In this example, the captain’s actions are determined not by reference to any set of general principles, but rather as his immediate response to the appearance of the storm itself: because of the apprenticeship he has undertaken, he reads in the sea the very response it requires of him. Similarly, Weil suggests, “A man tempted not to return something entrusted to him will not refrain simply because he has read the *Critique of Pure Practical Reason*; he will restrain himself, perhaps, as it may seem to him, even in spite of himself, if the very appearance of the thing entrusted to him seems to cry out that it must be returned” (302). For this man, as for the captain, the object, like the storm, reaches out and demands a particular form of response. But, as Weil has pointed out, that demand is a function not of the object itself, but of the appearance of the object insofar as it is constituted by interpretive construction. Thus, she suggests, “the problem of inquiring into...what technique enables us to pass from one reading to another – is more concrete than inquiring into whether it is better to keep or return something entrusted to us” (303). To have intellectual access to general principles of morality—to know, in some abstract and propositional sense, what is right and what is wrong—does not necessarily determine our

decisions and actions accordingly. It is not principles but appearances that warrant from us an immediate and active response.

Weil's account is echoed by Elizabeth Anscombe some twelve years later in "Modern Moral Philosophy": Kant's "rigoristic convictions on the subject of lying," she writes, "were so intense that it never occurred to him that a lie could be described as anything but just a lie" (Anscombe 2). In a sense, Anscombe here accuses Kant of falling prey to the very interpretive distortion against which Weil warns. His convictions about the nature of lying are, according to Anscombe, the result of a default concern: his desire to have reality fit neatly into his extant structure of understanding. The result is that he overlooks the very difficulty his own convictions enact: that even before we subject the lie to the test of the categorical imperative, we have interpreted it as a lie rather than as something else—an instance of protection, perhaps, or a kind gesture. Prior to any process of explicit moral reasoning, we read the situation to which our reasoning applies.

Thus, on Weil's account, the goal of moral education is not to achieve propositional awareness of the rules that ought to guide our conduct but rather to pursue the technique of passing from one reading to another. Put differently, it is to liberate ourselves from our default concerns: from those unreflective attitudes, dispositions and desires that cloud and distort appearances. For Weil, this liberation takes place through the exercise and cultivation of the faculty of attention: to attend is to suspend those default concerns and thereby forestall the judgments they might elicit. It is to develop an attitude of receptivity, which will ultimately allow us to apprehend the world more clearly.

Weil identifies attention as a "negative effort," one that requires us to resist the impulse to assimilate, as quickly as possible, each new object into the contents of the intellect (Weil,

Waiting, 61). The desire to understand can drive us to alter, distort, or simplify the appearance of an object so that we may reckon with it more easily. We might hastily elide an unfamiliar word from a poem or add an expected line to a figure where there is none. “Attention,” however, “consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object” (62). To pay attention is to open the mind; it requires that we still the desire to understand and thereby provide space for the object, in all its nuance and complexity, to present itself to us.

This suspension, detachment, and emptiness do not, however, amount to a complete evacuation of thought; attention also “means holding in our minds, within reach of this thought, but on a lower level and not in contact with it, the diverse knowledge we have acquired which we are forced to make use of” (62). This diverse knowledge—the contents of our previous experience—is the background against which the form of the novel object appears. “Our thought should be in relation to all particular and already formulated thoughts, as a man on a mountain who, as he looks forward, sees also below him, without actually looking at them, a great many forests and plains” (62). Weil’s metaphor suggests the very perspective that Grimm and Coho associate with the aim of spiritual practice: detached from the concerns that might train his gaze downward, the man on the mountain is able to see the vista before him in its entirety. He does not attend to his feet on the earth, nor the mountain below, nor even the forests and plains that expand beyond; he looks directly forward. And yet, his perspective is broad enough to include all the myriad elements that ground his position as well as the view that position affords.

For Weil, this is the perspective of attention, and its cultivation serves as the primary purpose of education. She writes: “the development of the faculty of attention forms the real object and almost the sole interest of studies. Most school tasks have a certain intrinsic interest as

well, but such an interest is secondary” (57). Although poring over a mathematical proof or dense historical chronology may result in some collateral intellectual gains, the real purpose of these exercises lies in the processes through which they train the faculty of attention. “If we concentrate our attention on trying to solve a problem of geometry, and if at the end of an hour we are no nearer to doing so than at the beginning, we have nevertheless been making progress each minute of that hour in another more mysterious dimension” (58). Here Weil’s mysticism shines through, reinforcing the distinction between spiritual practice and mere habituation: the true purpose of the encounter with the geometry problem is not merely to habituate us into mathematical patterns of thought; if it were, our failure to approach its solution might render the effort moot. The true purpose of the work, like that of all studies, is to exercise the faculty of attention. The effects of such work are indirect and mysterious: “Without our knowing or feeling it,” Weil writes, “this apparently barren effort has brought more light into the soul” (58).

This effort of attention is not one of sheer will; it necessarily proceeds through the rhythm of motion and pause Dewey identifies as characteristic of educative experience. When we find ourselves tiring in the face of resistance, Weil writes, we ought to “stop working altogether, to seek some relaxation, and then a little later return to the task; we have to press on and loosen up alternately, just as we breathe in and out” (61). Neither the “frowning application” of overwhelming effort nor the endless relaxation of distraction and procrastination will serve to cultivate the faculty of attention itself; this process can only take place through the harmonious balance of doing and undergoing. Thus, for Weil, as for Dewey, encounters with interpretive resistance must be scaffolded such that the rhythm of the encounter is consistent with the patterns of universal nature and thought. “In every school exercise,” Weil writes, “there is a special way of waiting upon truth, setting our hearts upon it, yet not allowing ourselves to go out

in search of it” (63). We must encounter each new problem, each new text, as the man on the mountain encounters the vista in front of him: with a steady but relaxed gaze so capacious that it can hold the magnitude of clouds ahead and the forests below. We must, in other words, do all the requisite work to prepare ourselves to receive the truth, then step back and let it come to us.

“So it comes about,” Weil writes, “that, as paradoxical as it might seem, a Latin prose or a geometry problem, even though they are done wrong, may be of great service one day, provided we devote the right kind of effort to them” (65). Insofar as that effort cultivates the faculty of attention—a capaciousness of vision and a rhythmic balance between motion and pause—it will provide us with a more lucid apprehension of ourselves and the world. Thus, Weil argues, such efforts may “one day make us better able to give someone in affliction exactly the help required to save him, at the supreme moment of his need” (65). Because they cultivate the “power to change the meanings which [we] read in appearances and which impose themselves on [us],” these efforts will prepare us to apprehend even the subtlest truths in the world around us—the affliction of a stranger, the help that he requires, the supreme moment of need—with a clarity that demands from us an immediate and active response (Weil, “Reading,” 301).

Weil concludes that the primary task of the educator “is to make known this method to [her students], not only in a general way but in the particular form that bears on each exercise” (63). Thus to develop an adequately robust theory of moral education understood as the practice of virtue will require not only the development of its basic form in the abstract, but also the extrapolation from that form of particular educational activities. In the final chapter, I begin this task by addressing one of the myriad possible exercises through which this practice might take place: the interpretation of a literary text. Building on the critical theory of I.A. Richards, as well

as Sheridan Blau's contemporary work in English Education, I develop a more detailed example of what a deliberate, scaffolded encounter with interpretive resistance might look like.

Chapter 4

Encounters with Resistance: Reading as a Practice of Virtue

In the previous chapter, I suggested that moral education understood as the practice of virtue would proceed through deliberately scaffolded encounters with objects of interpretive resistance. The purpose of such encounters would not be the product of the interpretive work but the processes through which that work proceeds. Through these processes, modeled on the form of spiritual practice, students would cultivate the faculty of attention and organize experience into a harmonious balance between motion and pause. This requires that the encounters be designed in such a way that, on the one hand, they provide enough resistance to necessitate pause, and keep the object from being effortlessly assimilated into the background. On the other hand, they must not pose such great resistance that the student simply cannot relate the object's meaning to her experience, finding herself altogether stymied and unable to proceed.

The particulars of these encounters—their objects and scaffolding—will be extraordinarily diverse. From one discipline to another, one grade level to another, one activity to another, there will be differences in their forms and contents. Much like the spiritual practices of antiquity, they will be unified primarily by their purpose: the transformation of the student's mode of seeing and being through exercises designed to hone attention and organize experience. In this chapter, I use one activity in particular—the activity of literary interpretation—to illustrate how this purpose might be borne out in a concrete educational situation. Turning to the work of I.A. Richards, I suggest that his conception of close reading as an interpretive process provides some resources for developing a pedagogy of reading as a practice of virtue. Although the practice of close reading itself has suffered some distortions—both theoretical and

practical—since its inception in Richards’s work, a recuperation (perhaps with some adaptation) of its original form could ground a theory of reading modeled on spiritual practice.

Richards shares with Dewey a philosophical commitment to the continuity of aesthetic form with practical experience. They both argue that the harmony, rhythm, systematicity and economy characteristic of the former are very same qualities that render an experience educative. From this commitment Richards develops a theory of literary criticism as an inherently pedagogical undertaking. Literature, he suggests, and poetry in particular, is a finely-honed technique for the expression of human experience. The study of poetry can therefore serve as a means of “ordering the mind” such that one’s own experience might shift and adapt to its form (Richards, *Practical Criticism*, 327). This ordering, however, requires a sustained interpretive interaction between reader and poem; it cannot be simply imparted by a scholarly authority or learned by consulting a secondary text.

This conception of literary study led Richards to conduct an experiment in which he distributed poems without any identifying information—not even the name of the author—to students of literature and asked them to interpret and comment on the poems. This set of conditions would theoretically facilitate a much more intimate interaction between the reader and the poem: without recourse to historical and biographical information, nor the critical preconceptions that might otherwise have informed their readings, the students were required to contend directly with form and contents of the poem itself. They were left, in other words, without any resources for evading or circumventing interpretive resistance. These conditions, however, did not infallibly facilitate sustained, attentive interactions with the texts. The participants in Richards’s experiment often encountered the interpretive resistance posed by these poems as insurmountable. In response, they fell back on their store of “stock responses” or

conjured “mnemonic irrelevances” to fill in interpretive gaps (12–13). From this Richards concluded that in order to embolden readers to employ their own experience and practical faculties in the absence of critical preconception he would have to develop a method of interpretive instruction.

The insight Richards gained from this experiment served as the groundwork for the interpretive method of close reading, characterized by “close attention to textual detail” (North 24). In the context of Richards’s theory, this method was meant to sustain a direct, attentive interaction with a text. Rather than placing an emphasis on the product of interpretive work—an “accurate” account of the meaning or aesthetic value of the text—the practice of close reading would foreground the interpretive process itself. In doing so, it would recast the activity of reading as a deliberately scaffolded encounter with an object of interpretive resistance in the interest of honing the faculty of attention and adapting the experience of textual interpretation to the rhythmic, harmonious, systematic, and economical form of the text itself. It would, in other words, recast reading as a practice of virtue.

Despite its immense theoretical potential, the practical application of close reading as an educational activity has been met with various forms of resistance over the past century. It was adopted and adapted in the New Critical tradition as well as Louise Rosenblatt’s work on transactional reading, both of which took up the mantle of Richards’s critical theory. These two critical vectors diverged, however, at first over the course of their theoretical development, then eventually—and much more drastically—in their operationalization as pedagogical methods. In both cases the translation into the context of institutionalized schooling entailed a substantial distortion of the original theory. New Criticism would be cast as a “rote and lifeless” approach to literary study; Rosenblatt’s theory would be caricatured as an unbridled affirmation of subjective

association masquerading as interpretive work (Rabinowitz and Bancroft 7). The theory and practice of close reading have suffered collateral damage as a result of these distortions and are often either outright rejected or degraded to a set of “technologies” for producing “correct” interpretations (7).

Despite these distortions and criticisms, I suggest that the practice of close reading could be revised and recuperated to ground a theory of reading as a practice of virtue. This would require that it be contextualized in and oriented by a clear understanding of its purpose: to hone the faculty of attention and cultivate the capacity to organize experience. I argue that it would also entail a strong commitment to the value of rereading. The chapter concludes with a turn to Sheridan Blau’s account of an NEH workshop in which a group of educators came to realize, through their own interpretive journeys, that something as simple as taking up a practice of rereading could shift the focus of interpretive work from its product to its process. This shift would further adapt the activity of reading to the form of spiritual practice.

4.1 Richards’s *Principles of Literary Criticism*: The Theory

Dewey’s philosophy of human experience, outlined in the previous chapter, is rooted in a commitment to “the continuity of esthetic experience with normal processes of living” (Dewey, *Art*, 9). There is a commonly conceived division, he writes, “between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience” (2). The former, he suggests, are “often identified with the building, book, painting, or statue in its existence apart from human experience” (1). These products of human effort are emblematic of aesthetic form, and so are commonly taken to be the exclusive constituents of the category of the aesthetic. According to

Dewey, however, “the actual work of art is what the product does with and in experience” (1). Those things we designate as works of art are in fact only crystallized and reified instances of the same characteristics Dewey attributes to the form of educative experience: rhythm, harmony, systematicity, and formal economy. Thus while the works themselves may serve to both capture and catalyze certain forms of experience, it is the experience itself that more fully constitutes the aesthetic.

Richards shares this commitment to the continuity of the aesthetic with the “normal processes of living.” In *Practical Criticism*, he echoes Dewey’s analysis, arguing that “there is no such gulf between poetry and life as over-literary persons sometimes suppose” (300). Poetry, he argues, is not the exclusive purview of an elite initiate—though it is often approached as such. On the contrary: like the building, book, painting, or statue, poetry is simply a sophisticated technique for the expression of human experience. In *Principles of Literary Criticism* Richards writes:

The arts are our storehouse of recorded values. They spring from and perpetuate hours in the lives of exceptional people, when their control and command of experience is at its highest, hours when the varying possibilities of existence are most clearly seen and the different activities which may arise are most exquisitely reconciled, hours when habitual narrowness of interests or confused bewilderment are replaced by an intricately wrought composure. (27)

For Richards, works of art serve to chronicle the “highest,” most “clearly seen” and “exquisitely reconciled” experiences. These are the hours of “intricately wrought composure,” in which one’s vision is so open as to see the myriad possibilities expanding out to the horizon, and so lucid as to recognize the patterns that emerge out of the tapestry they form. Such experience requires the patient attention of Weil’s man on the mountain and is characterized by Dewey’s balance between motion and pause: it defies both the “narrowness” of acceleration and the

“bewilderment” of accumulation. The works of art that chronicle and prolong this form of experience constitute “only a further development, a finer organization of ordinary experiences, and not in the least a new and different kind of thing” (Richards, *Principles*, 12). There is no categorical difference, he argues, between the aesthetic and the ordinary; the arts may record a superlative form of human experience, but it remains human experience nonetheless.

For both Dewey and Richards, the division between art and experience is not only false but also pernicious. To interrupt their continuity is to obscure the significance of art for human experience, and vice versa. “When an art product once attains classic status,” Dewey writes, “it somehow becomes isolated from the human conditions under which it was brought into being and from the human consequences it engenders in life experience” (Dewey, *Art*, 1). Its rarified status effectively severs the work of art from the matrices of meaning and value that organize the contexts of both its production and its reception. Around it, “a wall is built...that renders almost opaque [its] general significance” (2). This wall engenders what Richards describes as “a view of the arts as providing a private haven for aesthetes,” to which “we need bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas and affairs, no familiarity with its emotions” (Richards, *Principles*, 13). It is as though the meaning and significance of the arts simply does not translate into the structure of ordinary human experience. For Richards, this view is “a great impediment to the investigation of [the arts’] value”; if aesthetic form cannot map onto ordinary experience, then it can bring nothing to bear on the interpretation and organization of daily human life (13).

Richards and Dewey both worry that the disassociation of aesthetic value from practical experience will leave us ill-equipped to recognize the human purpose of the arts. To suppose a categorical difference between art and experience is to suggest that whatever we might glean from an engagement with the formal qualities of an artwork will be relevant only in the context

of other categorically aesthetic considerations, and not our own ordinary experience. This designates the purpose of artistic criticism—and for Richards, literary study in particular—as the mere assignation and ranking of an artwork’s peculiarly aesthetic value. According to Richards, however, this is an impoverished and largely distorted account. “It is less important,” he writes, “to like ‘good’ poetry and dislike ‘bad,’ than to be able to use them both as a means of ordering our minds. It is the quality of the reading we give them that matters, not the correctness with which we classify them” (Richards, *Practical Criticism*, 327). For Richards, the purpose of literary study is not to produce an authoritative reading or accurate accounting of aesthetic value. His sentiment here echoes Weil’s conviction that the intrinsic interests of particular studies are merely secondary. Their primary purpose, for Weil, is the exercise of the faculty of attention—an exercise that is perhaps quite closely akin to Richards’s “ordering of the mind.”

According to Richards, the form of the poem is particularly well-suited to this purpose. Poetry, he writes, is the “unique, linguistic instrument by which our minds have ordered their thoughts, emotions, desires” (301). It is the manifestation of experience formed by harmony, rhythm, systematicity, and economy. As such it is an ideal means by which to “artificially strengthen our minds’ capacity to order themselves” (301). The work required to make sense of the poem will exercise and strengthen those capacities that help us adapt our own experience to its form. This can only happen, however, if that interpretive work is scaffolded in such a way that it proceeds through the exercise of attention and a rhythm of motion and pause.

4.2 Richards’s *Practical Criticism*: The Method

In order to bear out his theory of literary criticism in educational practice Richards found himself charged to establish a set of conditions for interpretive work that would facilitate an

attentive, rhythmic, balanced interaction between reader and text. In *Practical Criticism*, Richards documents and analyzes an extensive literary experiment designed to do just that. Over the course of several years, readers, most of whom were “undergraduates reading English with a view to an Honours Degree,” were given “printed sheets of poems—ranging from a poem by Shakespeare to a poem by Ella Wheeler Wilcox,” without any identifying information about the poet (Richards, *Practical Criticism*, 3). The readers were asked to “comment freely” on the poems over the course of a week, after which Richards would collect and examine their responses. By removing any information about the poem’s context of production, Richards foreclosed any preconceptions about its sense or significance based on authorial biography or social context. He also effectively prevented the reader from turning to preexisting interpretations or critical evaluations for aid in generating their own interpretations. Theoretically, these conditions would facilitate a more intimate encounter between the reader and the text on the page: without anywhere else to turn for interpretive aid, the reader would have to attend directly to the poem.

Richards discovered that without recourse to any external resources, the readers did indeed have to engage much more closely with the poem than they otherwise might have. Over the course of the week, they “recorded as many as ten or a dozen readings,” and had “devoted no little time and energy to their critical endeavor” (4). Unable to turn elsewhere when faced with confusion, the readers were required to pause, step back, then return to the text, over and over again. Rather than seek out prefabricated interpretations, they spent time with the poems themselves, attending to them closely in their efforts make out their sense. At first glance it seemed as though the conditions of the experiment had organically generated an interpretive method characterized by the attention and repetition proper to the form of spiritual practice. The

readers would “press on and loosen up alternately,” attending to the poems for a time, relaxing their attention, then returning once again (Weil, *Waiting*, 61). Their interpretive work seemed to proceed through a balanced rhythm of motion and pause.

On closer inspection, however, Richards observed that his readers were in fact subject to a predictable set of interpretive difficulties. At one end was persistent bewilderment: even despite their repeated readings, when left without any form of external interpretive guidance many readers ultimately found themselves at sea. At the other end Richards discovered the opposite problem: an overreliance on subjective impression. The inverse of dependence on external resources, this problem manifests as a set of interpretive tendencies that turn the reader’s focus inward away from the poem. Among these Richards enumerates “sentimentality” (an “over-facility in certain emotional directions”), its counterpart, “inhibition,” and a phenomenon he calls “mnemonic irrelevances”: the “misleading effects of the reader’s being reminded of some personal scene or adventure, erratic associations, [and] the interference of emotional reverberations” (Richards, *Practical Criticism*, 13). When faced with confusion, readers who demonstrate these tendencies substitute association for interpretation, and impression for meaning.

While the interpretive conditions Richards established were able to control for the use of external resources, they could not always instill sufficient confidence in the reader’s own ability to interpret texts without those resources. Moreover, they could not control for the interference of what might be interpreted in this context as default concerns: sentimentality, inhibition, or mnemonic irrelevances. There was nothing to keep the readers oriented toward the text if, in the face of interpretive resistance, they were moved to turn instead toward their own associations and impressions. As a result, the experiment was not always successful in maintaining a direct,

attentive relationship between the reader and the text. “Without *some* objective criteria” Richards writes, the reader “feels like a friendless man deprived of weapons and left naked at the mercy of a treacherous beast” (296). Stripped of their usual critical artillery, the readers were forced to contend directly with the juggernaut of the poem. Overwhelmed by its presence, many of them turned inward, evading it with misdirection.

According to Richards, however, this fear in the face of the poem is altogether misguided. Given the commonly perceived disassociation between art and experience, the poem’s aesthetic status shrouds it in a veil of esoteric mystery and hides it away, like a monster in the closet. Its otherworldliness renders it fantastical and terrible...until the closet door falls open and the monster reveals itself to be nothing more than a pile of coats and boots. Thus in reality, Richards observes, “the treacherous beast [is] within [the reader],” not the poem itself. The poem’s treachery, just like that of the closet monster, is nothing more than a manifestation of the reader’s discomfort in the face of the rarefied unknown. From this Richards concludes that any “critical weapons...would only hurt [the reader]” as their use would reinforce his sense of inadequacy (296). In truth, Richards writes, the reader’s “own experience—not as represented in a formula but in its available entirety—[is] his only safeguard” (296). Because the poem is nothing more nor less than an “intricately wrought” account of human experience, the reader’s own experience—in all its complexity—provides the resources necessary to formulate the poem’s sense and significance. Thus, Richards concludes, “if [the reader] could rely sufficiently upon [his experience], he could only profit from his encounter with the poem” (296). If the reader’s bewilderment is born of an imagined inadequacy due to overreliance on “critical weapons,” all he must do to orient himself is trust his own experience “in its available entirety.” He must, in other words, work to integrate the sense and significance of the poem into the

contents of his own past and present experience. This will enable him to encounter the poem not as an adversary to be overcome, but as an ally with which to communicate, and from which to learn.

Richards's experiment reveals two significant impediments to a reading process that could exercise the mind's capacity to order itself. The first is an overreliance on critical preconception: turning away from the interpretive resistance posed by text itself and toward external resources to aid one's understanding. The second is the intimidation readers feel in the face of the poem's interpretive resistance when stripped of those external resources. This intimidation leads them to turn away from the text as well, this time inward to their own subjective associations and impressions. In order to facilitate a method of reading that could sustain a direct relationship with the text, both of these impediments—the preconceptions themselves and the intimidation in their absence—would have to be removed. Richards therefore makes a case for the systematization of literary study through the development and incorporation of a robust theory of interpretation. Rather than provide students with authoritative critical readings of the works in question, he proposed to equip them instead with the resources necessary to generate readings of their own. This would train readers in the practice of literary interpretation without subjecting them to the mis-educative influence of critical preconception. The training itself would help to prevent intimidation, thereby quelling the need to resort to association and fostering a more sustained, direct, attentive interaction with the poem.

These insights laid the foundation for the method of close reading. Based in Richards's commitment to the continuity of the aesthetic with the practical, this method was directly oriented to a clear and specific purpose: to "strengthen the mind's capacity to order itself" (301). In the words of Joseph North, Richards's method of close reading was meant to be "the most

rigorous and precise way [to] put works of literature into a productive relation with their contexts of reception” (43). Close attention to textual detail was meant to mobilize the reader’s practical faculties: she was to put her whole self into the work of making sense of the poem. In fact, North points out, Richards devotes much of *Principles of Literary Criticism* to showing “how much of life” the relationship between a text and its reader involves: “Morals and capacities for morals; pleasures and capacities for pleasure; opportunities and capacities for cognition and analysis”—we bring all of these faculties with us to the text, and in our encounter with it, every one of them is exercised and honed (32). According to North, this form of “aesthetic education” amounts to a broadening of perspective in the most capacious sense: the cultivation of “new ranges of sensibility, new modes of subjectivity, new capacities for experience” (6). Thus the method of close reading, deeply rooted in its philosophical foundations, stands poised to transform the activity of reading into a practice that could facilitate the transformation of one’s being in the world such that it harmonizes with the patterns of nature and thought. It could transform the activity of reading into a practice of virtue.

4.3 The Trajectory of Close Reading: Rosenblatt and the New Critics

Despite its rich theoretical foundations and pedagogical promise, the method of close reading has, over the past century, been the subject of much controversy in the field of English education. This root of this controversy might best be understood as the bifurcation of Richards’s influence into two vectors that, though largely akin in their inception, would eventually diverge into oppositional approaches to the teaching of literature. In a 2017 article in *English Education*, Andrew Rejan recounts this process as one that began in the late 1930s with the simultaneous emergence of New Criticism and Louise Rosenblatt’s work on transactional reading. According

to Rejan, Rosenblatt and the New Critics were “shaped by the shared influence of I.A. Richards” as well as Dewey’s theory of experience (Rejan 11). Like Richards, they were motivated by concerns with students’ overreliance on critical preconceptions on the one hand, and tendency toward “mnemonic irrelevances” on the other (11). Taking a cue from Richards’s work, they advocated for the practice of close reading as a way to combat these interpretive difficulties. Despite their unified points of origin, however, the pedagogical traditions that emerged out of these two theoretical camps would ultimately diverge—from Richards’s theory and from each other—to the point of opposition.

The source of this divergence might best be located in the New Critics’ and Rosenblatt’s respective responses to the problem of mnemonic irrelevances in particular. This form of interpretive difficulty, as Richards discovered through his experiment, hinges on the distinction between those associations that are genuinely relevant to one’s understanding of a text and those that, though elicited through one’s response a text, are ultimately irrelevant. The New Critics addressed this problem by emphasizing the necessity of a strong focus on the text itself: attending more closely to the words on the page would diminish the opportunity for far-flung mnemonic associations. Rosenblatt, however, was perhaps more wary of discounting the value of what she calls “mnemonic relevances”: those points of connection between text and experience that are, for Richards, the key to interpretive work (Rosenblatt, “Pattern,” 1008). As a result, she was ultimately “more tolerant” than the New Critics “in allowing for a multiplicity of interpretive possibilities” (Rejan 25).

The actual theoretical discrepancies between Rosenblatt’s work and that of the New Critics seem, on Rejan’s account, to be little more than shades of emphasis: Rosenblatt acknowledges the problematic nature of mnemonic irrelevances but foregrounds the importance

of mnemonic relevances; the New Critics acknowledge the importance of mnemonic relevances but foreground the problematic nature of mnemonic irrelevances. As their theories were translated into educational practice, however, those shades would eventually be exaggerated into much greater contrast.

In their (2014) article “Euclid at the Core: Recentering Literary Education,” Peter Rabinowitz and Corrinne Bancroft make what Rejan describes as a “crucial distinction between the original works of the New Critics and ‘Zombie New Criticism,’ the distorted version of New Critical techniques that continues to infiltrate secondary schools” (Rejan 13). According to Rabinowitz and Bancroft, New Criticism was, in its inception, “a strong position grounded in theoretical claims about the nature of language, the nature of meaning, the nature of poetry—as well as implicit metaphysical claims about the nature of human experience” (7). In the 1960s, however, New Critical theory was “co-opted by the analytic/decoding literacy movement” and operationalized in the service of programmatic models for textual interpretation (Rejan 34).

This standardized form of New Criticism retains its emphasis on the importance of textual detail but jettisons its simultaneous commitment to the relevance of individual experience for interpretive work. In programmatic instruction, this work is “fractionated” into discrete exercises that proceed through “narrowly prescribed steps” (34). To complete these exercises students are tasked with choosing a single, correct answer that has been determined in advance by textbook authors and editors. This model of textual interpretation leaves little to no room for mnemonic association of any kind: if the meaning of the text is objectively determinate, and the purpose of interpretation is to discover that meaning, then interpretive work must be restricted to a “close analysis of the text’s formal features” without the intrusion of any other interpretive influence (10). This co-option and standardization of the once-robust New Critical paradigm

reduces it to “a technology for producing readings” (Rabinowitz and Bancroft 7) in which the practice of close reading is distorted into “routine formulae for analysis” (Rosenblatt, “Acid Test,” 73). Whereas Richards theorized the practice of close reading as a way to meaningfully integrate individual experience and textual detail, the institutionalized form of New Criticism distorted that practice into a rote technique for extracting meaning from the formal features of a text. This is the foundation for the prevailing (if not altogether nuanced) narrative in which “New Criticism...spawned a rote and lifeless approach to literature in classrooms across the country” (Rejan, 10).

The exaggerated emphasis on textual detail, and corresponding deemphasis on individual experience positioned this distorted form of New Criticism in opposition to Rosenblatt’s theory. What had originated as a difference in emphasis came, through this distortion, to appear as an outright disagreement over the role of human experience in literary interpretation. Rosenblatt’s work is primarily concerned with the transactional relationship between reader and text. Indeed, the purpose of *The Reader, the Text, the Poem*, she writes, is to “admit into the limelight the whole scene” of an act of reading: “author, text, and reader” (Rosenblatt, *Reader*, 5). Given the relative paucity of attention paid to the role of the latter, however, she is “especially concerned with the member of the cast who has hitherto been neglected—the reader” (5). As a result, her work emerged on the educational scene as a corrective to the myopia of the now prevailing (Zombie) New Critical Doctrine: the stultifying emphasis on formal analysis would be supplanted by a vibrant, diverse proliferation of interpretive voices.

The prevailing narrative thus continues with the contention that Rosenblatt “gave voice and direction to a generation of progressive English teachers” who defied the proscription of mnemonic association and “empowered students to become active creators of meaning” (Rejan,

10). It is perhaps no surprise that just as the New Critics' commitment to textual detail was exaggerated, so was Rosenblatt's commitment to the importance of the reader's experience. In some instances, that commitment has been foregrounded even to the point of diminishing or obscuring the role of the text itself: "Some of the pedagogies inspired by Rosenblatt's theories," Rejan writes, "dismissed Richards's concern with mnemonic irrelevances" altogether (18). Thus although Rosenblatt's work incorporates a robust account of close reading and all it entails, the most caricatured versions of her theory jettison the practice altogether. Given close reading's degradation (through the distortion of New Criticism) into a set of standardized technical requirements, it seems to have no place in an approach to literary study founded on the primacy of individual human experience.

In the 21st century, Rejan writes, "professional and political discourse surrounding the teaching and learning of literature continues to be dominated and diminished by [these] misinformed caricatures of New Criticism and Reader Response" (11). The practice of close reading is correspondingly caught in the middle of this discourse: a largely exaggerated ideological battle among caricatures of what had been robust and nuanced responses to the interpretive challenge Richards's work had posed. It seems to me, however, that we ought to extract the practice from that battlefield, however, and attempt to recuperate it in the spirit of Richards's original theory.

The goal of close reading is to provide students with the confidence and resources necessary to sustain extended interpretive interactions with unfamiliar texts: to bring their experience to bear on their interpretive work, and their interpretive work to bear on their experience. In the following, final section I suggest that the natural correlate to that attentive practice is the repetitive practice of rereading. Combined, these two standards for the form of

literary study would lend it the form of a spiritual practice, and thereby establish it as a practice of virtue.

4.4 Blau, Process Orientation, and the Power of Rereading

In “Transactions Between Theory and Practice in the Teaching of Literature,” Sheridan Blau recounts the proceedings of “an NEH-sponsored Literature Institute for Teachers” that aimed to “improve the teaching of literature” by replicating a model of professional development implemented a few years prior for the teaching of writing. In the Literature Institute, “a community of experienced English and language arts teachers, representing all grades from elementary school through college, collaborated...to study (with guidance from leading specialists in literature and in pedagogy) a number of difficult literary texts” (Blau 19). Not altogether dissimilar to Richards’s empirical work some seventy years prior, the workshop would serve as a space for educators to engage in and reflect on their own interpretive processes in the interest of extrapolating pedagogical principles and methods that could be translated into classroom practice.

In the early days of the workshop, Blau discovered that the majority of the participants’ interpretive work was implicitly informed by (Zombie) New Critical standards (34). Though they largely refrained from imposing such standards when responding to the writing of their students or fellow workshop participants, their “discourse on a literary text seemed to be directed to finding...a reading that satisfied their sense of what, according to New Critical criteria, would constitute an adequate reading” (34). In the case of conflicting interpretations, the participants were likely to seek out the support of external critical authority to defend their readings. Thus, as Blau recounts, “the discourse in the reading groups was largely...characterized by appeals to the

authority of experts—appeals which appeared to discount the immediate reading experience of many members of the reading group” (35). These appeals imply both that the purpose of literary interpretation is to produce the most “accurate” reading of a text and that critical accounts hold superlative value for that purpose. Critically unsupported interpretations founded in individual experience are thus received as speculative at best, and at worst simply wrong.

Blau’s workshop participants found themselves inadvertently enacting the very interpretive tendencies Richards had aimed to reverse. Their appeals to the authority of “experts” established and reinforced a collective sense of inadequacy in the face of the texts themselves: “whoever finds his own readings invalidated by the authority of normative or critically sanctioned readings must be tempted to doubt the efficacy of his literacy” (36). When one participant enters the interpretive fray brandishing her critical weapons, the others find themselves lacking armaments that, until then, they hadn’t even known they needed. This “imposition of an authoritative reading” ultimately “undermines the capacity of the eccentric reader to exercise his own interpretive skill in the interest of making sense of literary texts” (39). So convinced of his inadequacy to the interpretive task, the reader resorts to “literacy by proxy,” making “no attempt to understand texts” for himself, and eventually letting his own capacities atrophy from disuse.

For the workshop participants, this discursive atmosphere constituted a “social hermeneutic crisis” that had to be resolved (37). They came to a conclusion similar to the one Richards had reached in *Practical Criticism*: to “produce intellectually responsible readings of difficult literary texts while working together in a spirit of collaboration and mutual affirmation” they would need to avoid appeals to critical authority and develop constructive methods that could exercise and hone the readers’ own interpretive skills (36). The participants thus began to

build, from the ground up, a “more satisfying set of literary teaching practices” based in part on the insights they had gained through their experience in professional development in the teaching of writing (21). Whereas reading instruction is often more “right-answer” or “product” oriented, writing instruction tends to take a more process-oriented approach (20). Thus one consequence of modeling reading instruction on practices of writing instruction is a shift in emphasis from the development of an interpretive product to the interpretive process itself. The example of writing instruction also helps to recast that process as one that takes place through sustained attention across multiple cycles of hypothesis, reflection, and revision.

Blau compares the preliminary reading of a text to a writer’s first draft: just as the “roughness and provisional character” of that first draft is not “symptomatic of illiteracy” but rather “evidence of an emerging writer’s competence,” the “puzzlement” one feels in the “first reading of a difficult text is not a sign of [one’s] insufficiency as [a reader] but part of the process that is experienced and endured by all competent readers when reading difficult texts” (42). Indeed for Blau, puzzlement—i.e. interpretive resistance—is not only inevitable, it is a source of educational value: it comes “with the territory of trying to read many of the texts that are most worthwhile reading—worthwhile, in part, precisely because they enact structures of meaning that are unfamiliar and therefore difficult to grasp” (42). The purpose of reading is neither to quash nor avoid confusion, but rather to undertake the work necessary to make sense of unfamiliar structures of meaning. It is to proceed through a sustained interaction with an object of interpretive resistance.

When reading is approached as a process, the ultimate resolution of puzzlement becomes less important than the reader’s response to it, as this response will ultimately guide the reader’s experience. Moments when a text resists our understanding are the nodes of experience at which

we are most tempted toward either the narrowness of acceleration or the bewilderment of accumulation. We may meet that resistance as “an obstruction to be beaten down” with a breathless acceleration of force, or simply marvel at it as another bewildering impression to be “crowded together” with all the others. We may, however, treat it as an invitation to reflect: to pause, step back, clear our minds, then return to the text once more. Encounters with unfamiliar structures of meaning are opportunities to hone the faculty of attention and to balance motion and pause.

The participants in Blau’s workshop discovered that one of the most effective methods for facilitating this balance was in fact quite simple: to place an emphasis on practices of rereading. Just as the participants in Richards’s experiment found themselves returning to each poem ten or a dozen times, the participants in Blau’s workshop undertook “their own layered processes of making sense of the difficult texts they were reading by rereading and gradually reconstructing their sense of the text” (42). The process of making sense is one of reconstruction and revision through the iterative consolidation of meaning. Each time we read, we see something new: a word or phrase that had faded into the background suddenly stands out; a connection that had gone unnoticed becomes vibrant and compelling. We pause to reflect on those discoveries, then we return to the text once more, weaving them back through the inchoate patterns of sense that have emerged thus far.

“Rereading,” Blau acknowledges, “would seem hardly to deserve recognition as an innovative teaching strategy, yet its importance to the reading process and to the acquisition of literacy is often not recognized in conventional curriculum planning” (41). Certainly there is an expectation that students will return to a text with which they have struggled, but that expectation is rarely scaffolded through explicit instruction, built into curricula, or enacted in classroom

practice. Moreover, this lack of curricular integration gives the impression that the only reason to reread a text is to be able to demonstrate adequate comprehension, either in the form of essays, test answers, or classroom discussions. To build a practice of rereading into all interpretive work, however, would be to recast that work as an intrinsically valuable process.

Together, Richards and Blau advocate for a practice of reading characterized by attention and repetition and purposed toward a clearer, more deliberate, more intricate organization of experience. They advocate, in other words, for the activity of reading to be modeled on the form of spiritual practice and undertaken as a contemporary practice of virtue. To integrate this practice throughout English education curricula may entail little more than a few slight changes: to the purpose we attribute to the activity of reading; to the pace at which we move through content; to the modes of assessment we employ; to which aspects of a given task we tend to emphasize. These changes might entail little more than the reassurance that students' experience is relevant to their understanding of the text, no matter what shape that experience has taken. Perhaps we might require students to reread a text four, five, even six times, regardless of any demonstration of comprehension. We might even refrain from assessing comprehension at all, and instead ask students to write reflections on their own interpretive processes.

It seems possible to me that even these small, concrete, practicable shifts could have an extraordinary impact on the form of literary study. Moreover, they could recast textual interpretation as fundamental component of moral education understood as a practice of virtue. Of course, none of these changes is in fact as simple as it seems. In the final pages of the project, I speculate about the practicability of these kinds of shifts, and of the broader implementation of the theory I have developed in the preceding chapters.

Conclusion

In the preceding chapters I have argued for a reconception of moral education grounded in a Platonic conception of virtue and modeled on the form of spiritual practice. This education would be carried out through practices of virtue comprised of exercises designed to transform the practitioner's modes of seeing and being in the world. These exercises would take the form of deliberate encounters with objects of interpretive resistance. They would be scaffolded to hone the faculty of attention and adapt the patterns of experience to the patterns of virtue: rhythm, harmony, systematicity, and economy.

The activities that could constitute such practices are in no way alien to contemporary academic curricula; indeed, any manner of interpretive work provides an opportunity for these forms of experience. I have chosen literary interpretation as one example of a curricular activity that could be adapted into a practice of virtue. Using this example I have attempted to demonstrate how specific exercises could be extrapolated from the basic form I have developed. As Richards suggests, the process of interpreting a literary text, of coming to make sense of the words on the page, is one through which we can be initiated into the balance of motion and pause that helps to order the mind and adapt experience to the broader patterns of nature and thought. To read a text closely, over and over again, is to engage in a form of spiritual practice.

As the history of close reading demonstrates, however, the institutionalization of such practices faces significant impediments. Perhaps the most apparent obstruction to this process is the thoroughgoing instrumentalization of education at both the macro and micro levels. At the macro level, schooling is perhaps most commonly understood as a means of acquiring the necessary knowledge, skills, and credentials to enter and become a productive member of the workforce. Thus at the micro level, individual educational tasks generally focus on the product to

be acquired. This product tends to materialize as a demonstration of comprehension and corresponding quantitative assessment: a paper or a test and the grade it earns. In both cases, the processes through which schooling takes place tend to be thought of and valued only insofar as they provide the means to that knowledge, that skill, that grade, that diploma.

This structure is, in and of itself, antithetical to the form of education I propose here. Thus it will be important to resist any impulse to simply import the changes I have outlined into the organization of educational institutions as they stand. What I have described in the preceding chapters is not just another program in moral education; rather, it is a change in ethos, a change in culture, which can only take place through a reconstruction of institutional values and expectations. I suspect that to cultivate this ethos might require two separate kinds of endeavors.

The first would come in the form of latitude: loosening the existing curricular structures and allowing the time and space to build new practices from the ground up. In discussing my research with a colleague not long ago, he asked whether I have taken measures to implement some form of this pedagogy in my own classes: whether I have reduced the number of texts I teach and focused more carefully and closely on those that remain; whether I have built re-reading into my syllabus, not merely as a recommendation but as a necessary component of the work in the course. My answer, I am sorry to admit, was: not really. The courses I teach are required for all students, and there is a set of core texts that all instructors are required to cover. Although the university is in the process of revising and augmenting that canon, the perspectives it currently represents are somewhat limited. I would not dream of removing those texts from my course (Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and Kant's *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*) even if given the opportunity, but I also feel I have a responsibility to contextualize them within a broader narrative. I face a set of not unreasonable expectations from the university, the

department, and my students to present a breadth of content representative of diverse perspectives without assigning hours and hours of work each week. These expectations limit opportunities to ask my students to read a text three or four times in a single semester. Of course I do my best to motivate them to engage in practices of rereading if, for example, they find themselves particularly intrigued or puzzled by a piece of writing. I do not, however, require them to do so.

This may sound like a set of predictable, banal complaints and excuses for my conformity to institutional expectations (and general failure to exercise courage in the face of resistance), and in part that's precisely what they are. My point, however, in voicing them here is this: although the role of the instructor is perhaps the most important aspect of any educational scenario, there are ways of organizing institutions and curricula that do better and worse jobs of facilitating even the most devoted instructor's commitment to substantial, robust, formative and transformative education. I am committed to the theory I have elaborated in the preceding chapters, and to the notion that approaching academic work—and interpretive work in particular—as practice is beneficial for all humans. Despite this commitment, however, I have not found it easy to put my money where my mouth is. This has to do, in large part, with the influences of extant curricular structures and institutional expectations. It will be much easier for individual teachers to lead their students to epiphanic experience and guide them through processes of rehabilitation—to use Jonas and Nakazawa's terminology—if the curriculum is deliberately organized in a way that opens up the space and channels for them to do so.

This brings us to the second endeavor that might alter the ethos of educational institutions: the implementation of curricular changes from the ground up. This would proceed through the same kinds of processes that comprise practices of virtue themselves—slow, iterative

shifts in the way we design courses in each individual subject at each individual level. These shifts could take all different forms, from drastic to subtle and everywhere in between. At the radical end we might imagine the abolishment of formal assessment altogether. As Weil writes:

Students must...work without any wish to gain good marks, to pass examinations, to win school successes; without any reference to their natural abilities and tastes; applying themselves equally to all their tasks, with the idea that each one will help to form in them the habit of that attention which is the substance of prayer.
(*Waiting*, 59)

Perhaps the most effective way to shift the focus of curricular work from the product to the process is to remove the product from the equation altogether: to refuse the comfort of a determinate goal and challenge students to put their faith in a process of transformation that is both indefinite and unpredictable.

More modestly, we might begin by simply reducing the amount of content to be covered in any given course. Rather than covering ten texts over the course of a year, perhaps we might cover only three, or only one. With fewer objects to engage, students will be able to spend more time attending to each. We might do the same in mathematics or history or natural science courses. Rather than emphasizing an accumulation of knowledge, we might instead foreground the processes through which students hone and exercises their perceptual capacities by immersing themselves in different interpretive systems.

My hope is that this project acts as a call for the institutional latitude that would facilitate these kind of curricular changes as well as a springboard from which to begin exploring what they might look like. Thus my first and most immediately practical recommendation for further research would be to take up this exploration: to conceive, devise, and implement these changes, in actual classrooms in actual schools, through slow, careful, dedicated processes of hypothesis, reflection, and revision.

The second channel I hope to have opened points toward the significance of spiritual practices in all forms of life. Although I have explicitly advocated for their value in the context of moral education, it seems to me that given the continuity Dewey posits between education and experience, the boundaries of that context are largely imaginary. This suggests that—within or without the walls of a schoolhouse—there is some value to the adaptation of even the most quotidian activities to the form of spiritual practice. Of course, this adaptation would require something other than the distillation of Stoic and Epicurean practices into tidy step-by-step guides for moral edification: “There can be no question,” Hadot writes, “of mechanically imitating stereotyped schemas” (108). Moreover, the truths toward which those practices aimed cannot simply be passed down: “for their meaning to be understood, these truths must be *lived*, and constantly re-experienced” (108). I read Hadot’s words as a call to rethink—indeed, to never stop thinking—the relevance and the shape of spiritual exercise for every life, in every moment, in every age.

To conclude, I will offer some experiential, anecdotal, and even speculative evidence that to transform any activity into a practice of virtue might be as simple as revisiting—over and over again—the concepts we’ve understood, the skills we’ve mastered, the texts we’ve interpreted, and the paintings we’ve analyzed; it might be as simple as asking ourselves to attend to them anew with quiet curiosity. Here is my evidence: my daughter will request (demand) to read the same book countless times over the course of a day, a week, a month, a year. Each time we return to its words, its pictures, its story, she sees, notices, feels, realizes, understands something new. The silver-blue circle is the moon, and the orange circle is the sun; apples and oranges, though similar in shape and size, are not the same thing; the caterpillar has grown fat from eating so many snacks, just like our dog; the white oval that rests on the leaf is an egg, similar to the

ones that come in the carton. And while my daughter is still years away from the being able to render the world in a language as sophisticated as Carle's, every time we return to the book, she is learning to read—not yet the words on the page, but the world she has recently come into.

As she moves her attention back and forth from the book, with its constant and familiar patterns, pictures, concepts and cadence, to the world, in all its novelty and variability, she is learning to use each to make sense of the other. And although we could perhaps debate the actual moral content of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (which deftly teases patience, curiosity, and moderation out of the very fabric of nature) there is something about the process—the return to a familiar pattern, the testing of that pattern against the world itself, and the refinement of each—that bears the marks of a spiritual practice. Thus perhaps it is as simple as returning to the same text, the same song, the same proof, or the same work of art, over and over and over again, not because we haven't gotten it “right” yet, but because each time we return we will weave another thread into the fabric that constitutes the tapestry—strange and beautiful—of our own experience.

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