

Daring to Fear: Optimizing the Encounter of Danger through Education

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Abstract

Through its would-be extrication from education, fear just gets forced into a less detectable and hence more efficacious *modus operandi* characteristic of anxiety and deep boredom. Since proscribing fear protects students not against the danger it foreshadows but against acknowledging the existence thereof, a conditional acceptance of it might empower them to manage their lives superlatively. Being only bureaucratically objective when conveying threats to their future, as schools do, is a limitation imposed upon a more responsible, deeper-level intersubjective involvement to which fear holds the key. Schools are best placed for attempting to restore the public management of 'individual' fears.

Keywords: motivation, privatized fears, improvised despair, theatrics of fear, bureaucratic neutrality

"We now use the country itself as its own map, and I assure you it does nearly as well."

Lewis Carrol, *Sylvie and Bruno concluded*

1. Introduction

The banning of fear from education especially after WWII has been amply acknowledged. "Fear in America," writes Valsiner, "has been removed historically from a major control mechanism to become one of the emotions of 'no positive function.'"

(Valsiner 2007, 332) I will argue that, even if fear were so completely worthless – an assumption challenged in this essay – the possibility of its removal might itself be less than guaranteed. Postmodern thought has made us cautious about such bold eradication campaigns, which often amount to mere displacements instead of disappearances in a strong sense. The suspicion addressed here is that, through its would-be extrication from education, fear just gets forced into a less detectable and hence more efficacious *modus operandi* characteristic of anxiety and deep boredom.

Liberating individuals from explicit fear-mediated forms of social control is apt to deliver them to even wilder, i.e. more unpredictable and unmanageable anxieties (Bauman 2007, 2; Salecl 2004, 120) not to mention the dependence on high levels of excitement as induced form of social control. This concern justifies the present investigation into the possibilities and limits in education of an admittedly problematic alliance with fear apt however to diminish the need for a brow-raising ‘liberation’ from it. Since proscribing fear protects students not against the danger it foreshadows but against acknowledging the existence thereof, I will try to show that a conditional acceptance of it might empower them to manage their lives superlatively.

If psychoanalysis is essentially an assisted mapping of our least manageable, already constituted fears, does it make sense to envisage an education that assists their very genesis? What happens with the privacy of one’s fears at that original level where the realms of the representing and the represented are still vaguely delimited? How much does the subject’s awareness of the others’ apprehensions contribute to the mapping out of her ‘own’ and how does this affect the adequacy of the map to reality? When addressing these questions, the main assumption here is that being *only* objective when conveying threats to someone else’s future, as schools do, is a limitation imposed upon a deeper-level intersubjective involvement to which fear holds the key. The fear experienced by the subject depends upon the explicit acknowledgement of this intersubjective involvement by the messenger of the threat

(in this case, a teacher disclosing the dangers looming upon a demotivated student's future).

For the purposes of the present discussion, fear is the primordial existential attrition that guarantees the possibility of any negative valuation – the effective privative force that most originally closes subjectivity off to a range of possibilities thereby disclosed as ‘negative.’ “It is almost forgotten – writes Salecl – that philosophy and psychoanalysis discussed anxiety as an essentially human condition that may not only have paralyzing effects, but also be the very condition through which people relate to the world.” (Salecl 2004, 15) Historically this was Augustine's position¹ later elaborated by Heidegger into a full-fledged existential analytic to which I also subscribe. Thus understood, fear subtends a heterogeneous affective field that spans the uneasiness of boredom, repugnance, disgust, outrage, horror, and their various cognates *including suspicion*. Indeed doubt, the much-celebrated guardian of intellectual freedom, can be regarded as a mild fear of the intrinsically truculent and ever-unsettled appearances.

2. Desperately Fearless

There are no indubitable signs that social control has simply loosened its grip on us; an increased transparency of social practices and institutions may have forced it to adopt subtler modes of working instead of simply ceasing to exist. It is perhaps safer to claim that it gets now exerted more indirectly – through other, culturally sanctioned emotions, such as the jubilation of winning, and a new type of discourse from which explicit threats have largely been dropped. Yet with justified fear becoming less and less familiar, its terrifying potential increases and, in proportion to that, the ill-defined uneasiness of one's wait for the next encounter with it, or anxiety, often disguised as boredom. “In fear states – notes Bourke – individuals are consciously able to take measures to neutralize or flee from the dangerous object, while purposeful activity fails individuals whose subjective experience is anxiety.” (Bourke 2005, 190) Remediating this state of affairs by empowering students to engage in purposeful activity directed at the

dangerous object could be the beginning of a fruitful reorientation in education.

Defence against fear may mean running ahead of it straight into despair, which is its terminal stage, and its hopeless certainty as shelter from uncertainty. Furedi notes the erosion of hope in our increasingly misanthropic culture (Furedi 2007, xiv-xvi) – perhaps just the projection of a generalized lack of self-confidence that Bauman correctly blames on the absence of practice with the fearsome (Bauman 2007, 3). Insofar as it lacks a clear and distinct object, anxiety constitutes “a defence against fear, a refusal to know what we are frightened of” (Phillips 1995, 59) – a process aided by that random and constant shifting of one’s attention commonly known as boredom and the voracious appetite for high-level excitement it generates.

But anxiety can also be regarded as a form of despair at the nerve-wracking deferral through social control (the ban on fear) of a more immediate knowledge of the fearsome, which is the approach taken here. Hope does take audacity; before being anything else, the present dropout crisis in America, for instance, is a declaration of hopelessness with regard to the school system and calls for a reexamination of the very foundations educational policies rest on. Insofar as severe, chronic demotivation and apathy can be associated with extreme anxiety before the uncertainties attending the outcome of human action, it may be worth exploring, among other things, an alternative to the engineering of ‘fearlessness.’ By internalizing social control as self-control, a partial openness toward fear promises to enable the individual in her struggle with herself toward eventually surmounting through trivialization her subjection to the fearsome. The same habituation process would render an abuse of fear inefficient and hence uncommendable.

The present reassessment of fear’s role in assisting human development aims to foster a socially sustainable version of courage (understood here as the capacity to manage fear) that, far from leaving ethics behind, rejoins it at a different point and in another way. Allowing fear to permeate the students impervious to the seduction of agency in general

need not be an attempt to deprive them of a higher freedom; to the contrary, it enables them to assume the *human* limitations of freedom by resisting that disintegration of the self that haunts an absence of constraints. Closer to disability, the suspension of agency in anxiety leaves intersubjectivity behind and with it the possibility of social recuperation of the individual. Instead of endorsing a shaky self-confidence and a deceitful inner safety in the anxiety-ridden ‘absence’ of fear, helping students confront the fear of their own fallibility promises to make them either take better hold of themselves, or turn to others for support, thus promoting the socially valuable trust and reciprocity.

The banning of fear from education has proceeded in basically two ways: first, the spurring of individual action through fear has largely yielded to a feverish quest for motivations. Alluring rather than coercing, playing on desire rather than fright defined the shift. However, in this move the structural difference between fear and desire has remained much less understood than promoted – an unbalance this paper tries to make up for from a philosophical perspective. “Currently we are a long way from knowing how fear operates in education,” points out Jackson before calling for a multi-disciplinary approach of the topic (Jackson 2010, 40). The ultimate consequences of decisions in psychology have the best chances to surface in a philosophical analysis; it seems that a higher level of protection and a strong sense of entitlement do not spare students the ravages of despair (Twenge 2007).

Second, when the motivating efforts failed, fear has reluctantly been allowed to re-enter the stage but only through the backdoor and up to a safe distance, to wit, as a horizon of meaning rather than in the immediacy of social interaction. The teacher’s traditional role as messenger-*cum*-impersonator of the fearsome was dropped in favour of a distancing from the latter that taps into its power to mobilize only by reference, through semiotic mediation. Accordingly, the present inquiry is two-pronged: 1. how a direct experience of fear compares to the rational contemplation of its distant possibility and 2. what is lost when motivation replaces fear as principle of action

3. Fear and Educational Guidance

Optimizing the conditions of encounter with danger is, among others, the business of education; it is another way of saying that one can and ought to be trained to rise up to the existential challenges coming one's way. The individual taste for engaging the feared rather than fleeing it needs cultivation and fear management is the key to a constructive confrontation of dangers. Presently though a version of subjectivity supposedly liberated from fear-mediated social control is pitched against an array of carefully selected and partly 'tamed' objects of fear – an increasingly controlled environment. Thus, whatever inner stability this strategy provides is acquired through external manipulations rather than *self*-control, the potential for which remains underdeveloped.

Removed from one's field of possible experiences, real fears leave behind a realm of virtuality where liberty itself is but an engineered effect among others. Conversely, when responsibly impersonated by a familiar figure – say, a teacher or parent – the fearsome acquires a face, thus lending itself to being directly addressed, brought into a form of exchange, assessed more realistically, dealt with more rationally and consequently better managed. This makes its presence in education more recommendable than anxiety, the vagueness of which denies action an application point.

When it comes to avoiding the major dangers looming over one's life and designated by the mainstream discourse on values, educational activities move within the virtual dimension of the 'as if': the very point of having a lesson about danger is to give oneself a chance to steer clear of it, to experience it not in fact but in effect only. Obviously, readiness for a direct encounter with danger as such renders superfluous any mediation of lessons about avoiding it. Given the proverbial incisiveness of reality, the very *raison d'être* of lessons about dangers is to offer a somewhat toothless, anaemic replica of them *in lieu of them*. But from this one may wrongly conclude that by multiplying and gradating such substitutes in terms of their fidelity to real fear the latter can be accounted for (its 'economy' can be done).

If through its 'away from' prompt fear fundamentally orientates us within our field of existential possibilities, its 'absence' might be responsible for that disorientation experienced as block before the unknowable, indeterminate, fuzzy future. Commonly taken as a motivational crisis, this anxiety paralyzes action: one is not moved toward anything in particular but lingers in the midst of what only *from outside* looks like a field of possibilities. However, to the subject in case they may well appear neither possible, nor impossible but utterly irrelevant, as things tend to do in states of deep despair. The whole issue of enablement through education ceases to be an issue to the subject as a resigned indifference preemptively sets in. In this context, it is worth remembering that, following Gregory the Great, Aquinas saw in sloth the main cause of despair (Aquinas 1990, 477). In that extreme state of fear that despair is, the torments of uncertainty are expediently brought to an end through the self-induced certainty that nothing is worth trembling for. Claiming that one's educability hinges on the capacity to negotiate this certainty is not an overstatement.²

All educational structures at work in the family, school and other institutions involve what semiotics usually terms 'blockers' – i.e. signs supposed to conjure up negative affective responses that discount certain courses of action, thus limiting individual freedom. Cultural guidance of the individual mind hinges on the capacity of institutionally endorsed representations to render these narrowing mechanisms *effective*; in this respect, education in the largest sense is responsible for activating the semiotic discounting mechanisms – securing the passage from an objectively produced, instrumental being of their constitutive meanings to the actual limitative subjective experience thereof. Granted this process never went without saying, a mass defection of students from schools, as in America's dropout crisis, allows one to lodge doubts about the judiciousness of the campaign for absolutizing the power of motivation at the expense of fear: such a 'fearlessness' of the future too closely resembles its extreme opposite, which is despair.

As it professes to avoid dangers to students' future – common candidates being failure, delinquency, addiction, discrimination, ignorance, exposure, losing face, boredom and waste of resources – educational guidance is often puzzled by the inefficacy of its relevant semiotic blockers. No matter how explicit and ubiquitous their messages, these warnings of danger are frequently met with indifference, as if real fear failed to be conveyed through mere signs thereof. Claiming that there might be an undetected meta-sign of the opposite sense – i.e. a promoter – at work at a higher level of decision-making merely restates the omnipotence of referring or, put differently, the absolute permissiveness of the medium to semiotic mediation. Enter the multiplication of signs together with their escalation toward the zenith of this 'meta' – a proliferation of exsanguinate warnings that often feeds on its own futility.

The problem might be that, as bridge between its material support and its immaterial signification, the sign can also let appear the rift itself, the gaping vacuity subtending our guided actions and insinuating itself in every movement of the mind – a particularization of Zeno's paradox to the displacement that semiotic reference enacts. After all, the capacity of signs to refer could be just as fallible as that of any other piece of equipment, thus revealing a human subjectivity essentially under the threat of helplessly stranding in the midst of and despite plentiful social guidance. The nothingness at the interface between signifier and signified appears able to well up within the subject and severely impair her agency. No quantitative increase in guidance can suppress this constitutive ambiguity of signs and rid them of their capacity to conjure up not only the signified but also the severing power of the gap separating it from the signifier. This is not a remark about the subject's interpretative freedom vis-à-vis the sign but about not assuming agency and free choice at all, which comes closer to disability.

4. The Ontological Status of Fear

Does fear most originally precede and make possible negative valuation, or does it only follow the latter in the

structural order of phenomena and lends itself to being somehow removed? Is it an inaugural, irreducible stimulus, or rather a derivative response to and a subjective superimposition upon something that supposedly could be more originally and objectively perceived in fearlessness? The second possibility is largely endorsed by semiotics and the analytic tradition, which claim that values get added to a neutral depiction of a phenomenon disclosed through a value-free act (Valsiner 2007, 131). The first alternative, which I also support, is examined by the continental tradition in a movement traceable back to Heidegger, Aquinas and Aristotle. It favours the view that the emotional 'colouring' of experience constitutes its very essence and can be abstracted from it only *a posteriori*, through an intellectual operation with derived, *après-coup* status (that also happens to be the theoretical foundation of social control).

At stake in this debate is the very possibility of effectively altering a course of individual action socially perceived as headed toward dangerous consequences. Ascribing fear a derivative, instrumental status and proceeding as if it could be discarded or adopted at will following politico-pedagogical decrees³ might not suffice to undermine its *de facto* primacy; rather, fear would recede in the background of its would-be absence and haunt it in ever less detectable ways. As early as Plato's *Laches* absence of fear and courage were carefully distinguished (Plato 1961, 197 b). Needless to remind, it takes courage to assume agency, i.e. the capacity to transform oneself and the world through action, the outcome of which is less than guaranteed⁴; with frustration menacing it from the start, even mere desire can be considered a form of exposure to contingency, hence of bravery. Yet without this minimal courage the human condition itself becomes highly questionable.

A fundamental circularity structures the experience of fear; by virtue of it, signs of the dangerous conjure up real fear only if the latter has already been felt most directly. Without this backing of reality in one's personal history signs stop short of conveying an actual inner trembling, namely, at the horizon of meaning to which factuality is irreducible. To recognize the

fearsome as such one must have somehow already lived through it *as fearsome* in fear. The issue is, of course, whether such a regression to the ‘raw core’ of fear is compatible with the full development of each individual that education professes. In this context, it is worth noting that, as defining trait of nobility, historically the capacity to manage fear is at the root of social distinction and the hierarchies based upon it; conversely, the generalized flight from fear into despair could mark the end of history as a process shaped by human agency and the beginning of post-history as evolving indifference to the world.

Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* gives two reasons why people remain unmoved in the face of danger: “they may have no experience of it, or they may have the means to deal with it.” (Aristotle 1941, 1383 a 28-30) The second reason suggests a protective, possibly *over*protective environment that makes these means readily available rather than allow for their being developed in direct confrontation with the danger. From directly controlling the individual to controlling her through manipulations of her environment the difference may not be significant enough and the ‘freedom’ thus gained not worth touting. As for the first reason, Aristotle’s example – people at sea who remain calm before the approaching gale because of having never actually lived through one – conveys particularly well the gap between direct experience and mere representations thereof: the difference is rooted in the body, at a vegetative level of reactivity that largely resists rational control. In §30 of *Being and Time* where he discusses fear Heidegger follows the same reasoning as Aristotle. “Circumspection sees the fearsome because it has fear as its state-of-mind.” (Heidegger 1962, 180) According to him, it is fear as a state-of-mind that discloses the world most primordially in terms of a fearsome entity imminently approaching a fearful one, not the *après-coup* reaction of a previously fearless entity to the neutral perception of the fearsome. “Pure beholding – he claims – even if it were to penetrate to the innermost core of the Being of something present-at-hand, could never discover anything like that which is threatening.” (Heidegger 1962, 177) This is precisely what, bound by the ban on fear, education does when motivating

efforts fail: offer students mere representations of dangers to be grasped in a purely rational, apprehension-free fashion. Understandably, this purified, socially engineered version of beholding has difficulties altering the beholder's customary course of action. How much emotional neutrality is itself the intellectual product of a social engineering rather than of its deconstruction needs to remain an open question.

5. The Good Works of Fear

The havoc fear plays with individual development is relatively familiar to most readers: inhibition or even paralysis of action, diminished appetite for achievement, mistrust of others and reduced self-confidence, violent conflict with the object of fear, neurosis, conversion disorders, withdrawal from social interactions, and the list could continue. It is less clear though if destructiveness has to do with the level of intensity of fear, or is an intrinsic quality thereof. It might even be that with this phenomenon the distinction quality-quantity reaches a limit of applicability: does sameness of the object of fear legitimize a talk of the *same* fear at two levels (in two different situations)? Fear seems to be circumstantial through and through – indeed, our existential situatedness itself.

Despite its negative effects on one's psyche when excessive, fear has the invaluable virtue of instantaneously bridging the gap between perception and action. It can mend a rift within oneself clandestinely revealed by promoters and inextricable from their structure. Contemporary liberation ideologies permeating the scientific discourse in education have downplayed its importance and formative value. Rather like a potent drug, it can both boost one's deficient involvement in the world and reduce it even further depending on the dose, mode of administration and receiver's individuality. Fear can wreak havoc with one's decision-making process only thanks to its more primordial power of wresting decision out of indecision and action out of inaction. The fact that on occasion it can paralyze action proves first and foremost that it is a key to the individual sources thereof (Chrétien 1990, 251).

Prior to reaching the excessive levels where the capacity

for action is impaired, fear makes one experience the uncertainty of the future and the precariousness of things otherwise taken for granted. It is in fear that what one fears for starts ‘tottering’ back and forth in the uncertainty between presence and absence, thus announcing the possibility of loss that lurks behind each and every thing the subject relies on, including a certain self-image. Vice-versa, fear attests that what in it is discovered as uncertain, starting with one’s own security, has a subjective value in proportion to the worry experienced. In Phillips’ words, “fear signifies proximity to something of value, perhaps of ultimate value. And so, by implication... there is something about what we most value, or about what is most integral to our lives, that frightens us. Fear becomes a guarantor of validity.” (Phillips 1995, 56)

Following this reasoning, the value a subject ascribes to his own position among other subjects depends on its *instability* – a disturbing though not extravagant conclusion. Who tries to scare whom by breaking the ranks is a value-or-lose-me game that spans the whole of Western history from Achilles to contemporary school dropouts. But the mastering of this instability through a hands-on-the-job experimenting with the theatrics of fear is not at all equivalent to the stabilizing of one’s environment through a pedagogical decree against fear.

The veridical disclosure fear operates is an act of knowledge and as such shares in the latter’s value. Usually a sense of agency – understood as one’s capacity to secure the future by preventing the meaningful things from disappearing – emerges out of it that prompts the subject to make demands on the future and to set about achieving guarantees of it. In some cases though the reaction to fear is simply a deepening thereof: instead of investing the world with claims to what she finds desirable the subject self-defensively desists from desiring altogether. This is not surprising given that essentially fear rests on a subjective foundation that can cave in for no apparent reason. Since it constitutes the main justification for banning the use of fear in education, it should be added that a lack of familiarity with fear is likely to increase the disproportion between the objective threat and its subjective experience, hence one’s fragility.

The absence of strong demands on the future can at least partly be imputed to the increased guarantees and stability of the environment from which fear of loss has been screened out. Not only threats can be overestimated but also the absence thereof, i.e. one's invulnerability; allowing fear to permeate such illusory, narcissistic shields is then tantamount to ushering in a precious albeit unpleasant truth. Feeling secure can suffer in reverse from the same subjective distortions of reality as feeling insecure, with a diminished drive to achieve tokens of security as its corollary. Yet it goes without saying that allowing a fearsome truth to surface and lending it a human face can under no circumstances dispense with all-important considerations of tact and responsibility.

In fear not only what one fears for starts vacillating on the brink between presence and absence but also the subject's self-confidence and self-love – indeed the subject herself. By most intimately disclosing our vulnerability, fear has the virtue of highlighting our need for at least social if not divine support, as well as for tapping into our previously unexploited inner resources. Both stimulate personal growth, albeit in different ways; as an effect of fear, in principle deflating one's illusions of mastery calls for a subsequent work of reconsolidation and reconstruction. As Chrétien puts it, “if fear is an encounter in which we ourselves are at stake, it does not leave us intact and sends us back to ourselves transformed and renewed. It only preserves by hurting and maintains by changing.” (Chrétien 1990, 251, translation mine) The function of preservation acquires its due importance especially when realizing that nothing less than human agency is jeopardized, as in anxiety and boredom.

This notwithstanding, due to excessive fear the subject can also get bogged down in a protracted mourning of the lost self-image instead of experiencing a renewal of his appetite to achieve. The idea of an education that preserves and enhances the self *by hurting* is likely to have difficulties gaining recognition in the contemporary social context dominated by market ideologies and their overrating of pleasure *but this does not in the least alter its truth, which is more complex* and sometimes recognized as such (e.g. Jackson 2010, 39).

Maintaining an irrational fear of fear is the inaugural move in establishing the uncontested reign of marketing (Glassner 1999, xxviii; Furedi 2007, 1). Comparatively, developing from early on the individual's capacity to manage fear is far less lucrative.

For the early Sartre, fear turns us away from the monstrous indeterminacy of our future (Sartre 1996, 80-82). At the level of the impersonal transcendental consciousness Sartre credits us with, we are said to be so free from determinisms of any kind that our choice spans a wider range of possibilities than bearable – indeed, a *frighteningly* vast one, illustrated with the case of Janet's female patient. Choice is in principle able to take a vertiginous leap away from the habitual into the unknown. In this rendition, fear signals a rupture from one's past that can occur any moment and, through this very signalling, prevents it from actually happening most of the time. We actualize the return of the same, we call the past back as buffer against the abysmally different possibilities opening ahead of us (the less defined, the more dreadful). Here fear can be credited with a synthesis of the self – bringing it together from the dispersion and dissolution that an incommensurable freedom threatens it with. As Phillips points out, its positive role is that of regulator between excess and scarcity of individual possibilities: too many in the radical break from the past and not enough in the defensive repetition thereof (Phillips 1995, 54).

Yet no matter how tempting Sartre's early account of freedom, nothing warrants that the subject always perceives what lies around him *as possibilities* and shrinks back only from their unfamiliarity or multitude. Nor do they have to be perceived as impossibilities; to think something possible or impossible takes the minimal courage of prying open the future dimension of existence, of casting oneself ahead in a prospective act, of caring about something not yet settled but coming upon us. However, a radical and perhaps desperate form of indifference seems able to compromise the very relevance of this dimension, which opens only to the subject *as agent*, i.e. endowed with the good faith and courage to act.

The point here is that we might not be as condemned to

freedom as Sartre is famous for claiming: apathy provides an escape as easy to reach as it is self-induced (not unlike the self-disablement that some have recourse to in order to avoid a mandatory conscription in times of war).⁵ His version of freedom implies a sense of care about the distance separating the choice of the past from that of an unknown future; fear of making the wrong choice is operant in it. On the limbo of apathy, though, instead of being dropped in favor of security (that of the past) a risky freedom *is not even considered to start with*. But nor is a repetition of the past ushered in for that matter, at least not in a strong sense. Whether despair as one's self-induced disablement to choose can still be considered an implicit choice constitutes a social verdict on agency that defines the limits and sustainability of intersubjectivity: it is the commonality of our care about the future that ultimately keeps us together.

If taken in stride, the repeated failure to seduce of human agency – the whole game of wrestling a future out of indeterminacy – might lead to a chronic irresponsiveness hardened by habit. Sometimes called 'post-history,' the forsaking of agency resembles a dubious 'playing dead' in which the very difference between play and reality, between intention and lack thereof risks to be irretrievably blurred. Granted human nature is not as strongly defined as ideologies pretend, the play at being unable to find any motivation to act, if systematically practiced and eventually politically granted as a right, has the potential to become a second nature taking over *any* putative 'first' one.

In other words, if agency is made light of in some kind of prolonged farcical refusal, will there still be an end to and a way out of the latter? Or will agency prove to be nothing but a passing fad in our biological destiny, a use-it-or-lose-it given? If we are less than condemned to action, is it justifiable to use fear as cure from the vertigo of inaction? Has the abuse by extreme political movements and individual villains totally compromised that evolutionary channel that fear is and whereby truth as uncertainty has revealed itself to us? Can its worth be redeemed?

6. The Habit of Believing in the Future

The subject's capacity for uninterruptedly sustaining a specific desire cannot be taken for granted and, because of this, in the hiatuses that occur, fear may provide individual action with consistency when imperatively required by one's own previous commitments supported by the meaningful others. Although itself undesirable, fear can temporarily replace a faltering desire thus allowing the latter to resume at a later point in the course of its fulfillment without the whole project being compromised.⁶

There is no reason to consider the break between desire and its object more certain and ultimate than it needs to be; its status as irrevocable and irreversible decree allowing of no after-thoughts and rescue attempts on the part of the meaningful others might be seriously distorted. Depending how its oracles are interpreted, individuality might be a more tractable divinity and its socially constructed sacredness more negotiable than ordinarily thought. The transparency of its own intentions to itself is, as postmodernism has convincingly proven, a myth that allows for different retellings. The multiplicity of voices suppressed by its peremptory decrees tends to diffract the force of any 'last-word' negation. A tacit 'no' to agency becomes *only* a 'no' through the coercive silencing of a more heterogeneous reality comprising 'yes'-favouring murmurs – a decision *in which the social reception plays a crucial role*. If, as Heidegger suggested, fear is an attunement [*Stimmung*] to alterity, one's meaningful others represent a resonant space with variable geometry apt to amplify or dampen specific components of the tune.

As indefinite motivation remains indistinguishable from the mere quest for one, motivation can be considered a desire for a definite object. Insofar as it depends on the seduction of a specific object for being awoken, it appears to have a less direct access to the subject than fear does. Unlike it, in the diffuse form of anxiety, fear is already at work within us even before it finds its object; it has a location regardless of succeeding or not in this latter enterprise. Motivation pushes one to expand the

already available possibilities whereas anxiety compromises even the available ones.

The object mediates between the desire of others and that of the subject: I 'read' the meaningful others' desire starting from its object and they become meaningful to me insofar as we perceive the same object as desirable; inversely, by declaring it undesirable, I perform an implicit self-exclusion from the group. Fear however does not need the mediation of an object. In panic, it gets amplified and transmitted without its object being known: one is afraid of the others' fear 'read' directly on their bodies, which makes fear feed on itself independently of its original object. Indeed in panic the others' fear permeates me *precisely because* I ignore its object and actually might fail to do so once this ignorance gets dispelled.

Somewhat counter-intuitively, in the uncertainty that fear thrives on the rupture within – the 'falling apart' of the subject – aggravates with the realization that the fearsome may eventually *fail* to victimize us (Aristotle 1941, 1383 a 6-8; Heidegger 1962, 180). In imminence, the very fallibility of the fearsome – its being less than almighty and hence escapable, its possibly misfiring when coming upon us – actually *enhances* its fearsome potential. Most remarkably, the usually available possibilities of coping with it get eclipsed not by impossibility but by uncertainty: the possible as such is experienced as intrinsically deficient, as *only* possible and hence not worth assuming. To Bauman, fear and uncertainty are interchangeable (Bauman 2006, 2). Uncertainty, the very texture of the possible, can coalesce into an obstinate resistance to the actualization of possibilities vulnerable only to an even greater uncertainty.

But uncertainty also enhances the desirability of the object of desire: the more one fears for its loss, the more desirable it becomes. Fear and motivation are not as dichotomous as usually assumed in pedagogy. The two might even be dialectically bound together if fear could be shown to gratify a desire of sabotaging the whole social game based on surfing uncertainty. In this sense, despair represents the end of the game rolling back into the arena in an attempt to crush the uncertainty fostered there; it finds unbearable the fact that

some thrive on risk-taking and usher into the present a future rife with question marks. If hysteria feigns an inexistent desire, despair displays with a suspect assuredness the inexistence thereof. The more uncertain this inexistence, the more desperate one feels; unable to kill off and make disappear a resilient desire, despair plays at dead desire. If we think of its *always* being socially mediated, desire is never quite ascertainably dead but only being excessively, redundantly and more or less theatrically killed *with the consent of one's meaningful others*.

Next to despair at the heart of demotivation, “boredom is one of the ways we break our habit of believing in the future,” whereas “fear is one of the ways we keep the future going,” according to Phillips (1995, 54). The early Heidegger ascribed the same role of habit-breaker to anxiety and deep boredom before moving away from them. But how important is it to keep the future going, to inculcate one's reliance on it prior to considering a break with it? And, if a break is necessary, what exactly might be, developmentally speaking, the right time to stop servicing “the habit of believing in the future”? Heidegger's Dasein is notorious for coming up on the stage fully developed, with all its ontological structures ‘in place,’ starting with the fundamental one, care [*Sorge*]; a history of its development from infancy is patently missing and all the more needed the less care appears to be innate and inexpugnable.

Education presupposes the transmission of a belief in a certain future defined by the core values of the society sponsoring it. To educate is to inculcate the pursuit of a more or less well-defined version of the future that fear is instrumental in maintaining within certain limits. Phillips assumes that, by doing away with our bondage to a certain future, other versions of it will have sufficient force to replace the therapeutically discarded one: “the bored child is waiting, unconsciously, for an experience of anticipation” (Phillips 1993, 69) which can also be said of the desperate child if not of everyone else. How could, in principle, an unconscious waiting be distinguished from no waiting at all, from sheer waste of time understood as disability to receive the given, to possibilize? Phillips' affirmation is thus tantamount to ‘there are always possibilities underneath the

apparent lack thereof – a declaration of faith in the continuity and homogeneousness of the possible. Could it actually be an unacknowledged fear of humans' monstrous indifference and temptation to waste their given that pushes Phillips to posit this *ex machina* cornucopia of the possible as a theoretical rampart against the scary alternative?

As usual when talking about the unconscious, Phillips' optimistic presupposition is foisted upon a factually unfathomable dark spot. The possibility thus overlooked is that the other imaginable futures could also fall under the dull blades of habitual boredom and anxiety – socially accommodated, even politically protected versions thereof rather than just fleeting moods. One cannot accurately estimate the depth of these states' severing power, to wit, whether or not they would spare the putative ontological structures of human existence that ideology posits as ultimate. About this non-interventionism in the sphere in individuality Salecl writes: "Linked to this ideology of the subject's self-creation is the perception that there is in the subject a truth, which only needs to be rediscovered for the subject to become him- or herself." (Salecl 2004, 129) Such a mystique of authenticity subtends Phillips' argument for letting the break with the future occur. Relevant to my inquiry is that, based on the same strong version of the dichotomy desired/undesired, the current educational ideology absolutizes the power of motivation at the expense of fear.

The crucial point here is that, as habit-breakers, boredom and anxiety threaten to become themselves habits of *disbelieving* in the future and of severing it off from a drastically shrunk sphere of relevance. Their capacity to interrupt could affect the link between past, present and future in what should properly be called a-chronic rather than chronic apathy. It could break that fundamental circularity of social exchanges that *intersubjectivity* is essentially made of. Not assuming the possibilities one has, not finding the possible worth exploring because of its uncertainty is an attitude that can be cultivated and perfected into a mode of being – existential fad? – from which urgency and the existential threat behind it have been irresponsibly extricated. Thus the

overprotective nature of the environment gets tested and repeatedly reconfirmed, but at the same time *the value of this reconfirmation gets diminished in proportion to its frequency*.

Defying the world's seduction by forfeiting with a sluggish blink its efforts to please has its own dubious voluptuousness and dangerous temptations, as in fact any form of inertia does. Insensitivity becomes an understandably tempting form of rebellion in a social game that takes the latency of desire for granted and plays exclusively, relentlessly at arousing it through the mediation of objects (absolutizes the power of motivation at the expense of fear). Referring to the vertigo induced by a systematic refusal to enjoy, Baudrillard warns: "no one knows to what destructive depth this provocation can reach, or what almightiness might be its own." (Baudrillard 1979, 32, translation mine) If students' boredom and anxiety bespeak a fear of being seduced by the world and getting involved in it, worth pondering over is that this refusal can provide gratification in proportion to the seducer's zeal. The exploration of its limits pertains to power games in which those tempted by it could in principle benefit from all the rights granted to minorities. In any event, playing at dead desire provides a logical escape from the omnipresent injunction 'you should desire more.'

7. Mapping Fears in School

Dropped from education, social control through engineered fears devolves upon other institutions and media less transparent, accountable and clearly situated than schools. Conversely, reclaiming a place for education at the drawing table of scares – not only mapping out reality in terms of the major dangers looming upon a generation but also giving those scares a specific human face with which actual negotiations can be conducted – might have the advantage of offering an application point to any further efforts of enhancing the map's adequacy to reality.

But what would it mean to 'map out reality' if we keep in mind that the marks on such a map are real fears, not just signs thereof? Granted it is the job of analysts to pinpoint their

analysands' deepest fears, schools offer the possibility of staging a public tragicomedy of fear, a workshop for gauging one's apprehension by immersion in and comparison to that of peers. For, although often forgotten, fear can also become a mere caricature of itself (Furedi 2007, vii) when put in the right context. While remaining essentially a subjective experience, it tends to be strongly conditioned by the reactions of others present: this social context can amplify it into panic or reduce it to laughable degrees, just as it can raise courage from the level of a diminutive silent dissent all the way to self-sacrificial heroism.

When it comes to dealing with individual fears, schools have the advantage of offering a social context of peers to the experience, which analysts' practices cannot. In this regard they resemble the early Christian congregations where confession was public: by being shared with others, the fear of demonic temptation dominant at the time got somewhat alleviated. The suspicion toward silence of these early congregations (Tasinato 1989) acquires a new meaning and justification nowadays. Unlike these communities, the analyst's practice confers upon the fears disclosed in it a certain hyperbolic aura of seriousness through its solemnly guarded privacy and professionally specialized status. To compensate for this, efforts are subsequently made to trivialize the experience and encourage youth to reveal their problems in 'it's-OK-to-talk-about-it'-type of programs (Mental Health Foundation 2012).

As an alternative, schools could provide the setting for not only talking about fears but also assuming various roles other than victim in the drama (e.g. inducer, transmitter, confessor, or mocker of fear). Unlike for the spectators of horror movies, the cathartic effect of this enactment depends, among others, on the degree of involvement in the play and on the capacity to publicize one's fear as opposed to privatizing it. As Bourke pointed out (2005, 191) this privatization represents an appropriation of fear-management by the specialized therapist, which is not necessarily the best thing for the fearful:

“Whereas in the past the frightened individual might turn to the community of a religious institution for advice and comfort (...) as the twentieth century progressed, the emotion became increasingly individualized, appropriated by the therapist or, in the most isolated fashion, the contemporary ‘self-help’ movement. The modern construction of the unique self as residing ‘within’ the body and accessible to psychotherapeutic confession prioritizes the language of anxiety.”

Restoring the public management of ‘individual’ fears hinges on the possibility of ascribing an object to the diffuse experience of anxiety and of convincing an audience of its fearsomeness.

Fear takes its measure partly from the fears of others, which does not automatically make it objective: “as the brave man *is* with regards to what is terrible,” notes Aristotle, “so the rash man wishes to *appear*; and so he imitates him in situations where he can” (Aristotle 1941, 1115 b 31). Starting from innate differences, this mimesis founds the distinction between bravery and cowardice, thus allowing for the experience of courage to be shared within certain limits. Aristotle concedes that confidence is often due to experience, although this is not the pure version of courage that he most praises. Yet the purity of courage is, to him, a matter of degree and confidence of any kind better, after all, than no confidence; it is this confidence-building experience of *publicly* negotiating one’s fear with an addressable object thereof that students could be led to make in schools. At least on the battlefield, what starts as coercion to confront the enemy gets gradually internalized as self-discipline before settling to the ground of one’s lived experience into that stabilizing sediment of routine reactions called experience.

For teachers, impersonating the fearsome has the disadvantage of most likely passing for a bout of bad temper or even sadism instead of a necessary, methodologically chosen step in helping students manage their fears. Granted it can be both, such a heroic gesture fringing on madness – playing the scapegoat of the student group – exposes its author beyond conventional limits. The commercial pressure on schools to maximize students’ pleasure would rather have the unpleasant eliminated ‘magically’ than just painstakingly mastered,

especially since the metaphysical sleight-of-hand of such a maneuver has few chances of being denounced by its would-be beneficiaries. A more indirect and prudent approach for teachers is to disclose objects of fear *other than* themselves – as already mentioned, failure, delinquency, addiction, discrimination, ignorance, exposure, losing face, boredom and waste of resources usually top the lists. But the problem is that this disinvolved gesture tends to enshrine the fearsome in its objectivity, in its alleged independence of one's subjective perception and social context.

The messenger's bureaucratic disinvolvement substantially contributes to the privatization of one's experience of fear in the sense that, in its would-be imperviousness to social mediation, the danger appears additionally threatening. *The privacy of one's encounter of danger is a social construct that obscures the more original withdrawal of some other, intersubjective possibilities intrinsic in human mediation.* Human beings can never be just objective messengers of the fearsome, not without previously desisting from the intersubjectivity of human experience in general. When claiming to be just objective, purely instrumental, bureaucratically correct, the messenger refuses to assume her inevitable mediation of the threat, which can range from a supportive preparation of the fearful to a defeatist defection to a downright destructive alliance with the fearsome.

Message is the medium, which in its turn is whatever intersubjectivity makes of it; the way a threat is conveyed can push fear close to despair, alleviate it to the point of making a confrontation of it possible, or downgrade it further to laughable levels. By disclosing the fearsome to someone else we are already involved and have sealed a (tacit) pact with it, insofar as we have spoken in its name and have given it our face – indifferent or concerned, calm or devastated, cringed or resourceful, tragic or comic, etc. *These theatrics found the confrontability of any danger starting with death;* regularly adopted by teachers, bureaucratic neutrality is but the cheapest mask in the paraphernalia (because most commonly used). Bauman aptly calls it “a contraption serving the task of *ethical deskilling*” (Bauman 2007, 87).

Unlike psychoanalysis, schooling could be not so much about the mapping of already existing – consciously or unconsciously – and recurring fears but rather about their social *genesis* (to which schools cannot help contributing anyway). Banning fear is just a naively wishful mode of assuming this position, one in which the ‘solution’ becomes part of the problem. The map of one’s fears *is* reality through and through, factuality spinning the yarn of its very texture through repetitions that displace the meaning of what is repeated. When these repetitions become rehearsals their object turns into performance.

More than just a tracing of signs, the disclosing of fears is rather a molding and being molded by a living reality in which *the molding hand can appear together with what it molds*. It may lack the domination-related scruples of the analyst but also the ideological deception (pretense of domination-free objectivity) that other institutions introduce. Instead of an object to use, the ‘map’ gets internalized into a repertoire of theatric performances to join in – social games that coerce the actors to play and to exchange roles while also granting them some freedom to improvise.

8. Conclusion

The threatened threatens in its turn to sink into irrelevance the world responsible for its discomfort. By recourse to a self-induced state of apathy one can effectively test the limits of the social logic of desire presently absolutized in education at the expense of fear. Granting someone the freedom to withdraw indefinitely from the circuit of social exchanges suspends the social bond itself in a most resilient uncertainty. How long, after all, can one wait to experience a mobilizing anticipation of gratification without thwarting the existing anticipations of one’s meaningful others? This export of uncertainty from the subject to others may be defensive in nature and essentially desperate but this does not diminish its destructiveness.

It may well be that, as Baudrillard suggests, coercion was the only possible social response to the feigned or genuine

incapacity of some to be seduced by the promises of action – a handicap that, if allowed to spread, casts a large shadow of doubt on the desirability of the world in general. Just like suicide, playing dead as expression of apathy seems able to create a social vortex, a growing void both amplified by and amplifying subjective uncertainties.

The legend has it that, after failing to allure Odysseus' crewmen into the abyss, the Sirens jumped to their death—perhaps a warning that, allowing irresponsiveness to crush enchantment, we exit the zone within which the world's promises together with their attending dangers can still lay claim on us. But how liveable this unpromising absence of the dangerous Sirens is for us, who triumphantly outlived them, the old story does not mention. No stranger to those distant, inspiring voices inaudible to most of us, Kafka conjectured: “the Sirens have a still more fatal weapon than their song, namely their silence.” (Kafka 1995, 431) It might be what, in their despondency, the victims of America's “silent epidemic” unawares hark back to.

NOTES

¹ For an excellent historical survey of the western tradition's understanding of fear, see Chrétien 1990, 225-258.

² A leading theorist of anxiety, Heidegger seems not to have seriously questioned the authenticity of anxiety itself, which he credits with the power to sever off inauthentic involvements in the world toward a more authentic re-involvement. In his view, it need not come in just fleeting bouts but can last whole years (Heidegger 1992, §33) which makes it capable of seriously affecting one's development. Perhaps more interested in the everyday reality of social interactions than in ontological speculations, in *Fear and trembling* Kierkegaard drew our attention to the fact that the one who despairs all the time does not quite despair. It could well be that here the distinctions real/simulated, authentic/inauthentic, or fundamental/derived meet the limits of their applicability. For the theory of human development, the question is whether this defensive rampart of what I would call *improvised* despair has better chances to be taken apart by real fear or by the absence thereof.

³ Bauman traces the ban on fear in America to F. D. Roosevelt's *Inaugural Address* of 1933 later reiterated at the end of WWII (Bauman 2007, 157). One wonders how much of this momentous move is pep talk and how much philosophical substance. Undoubtedly justified in the specific circumstances that assisted its birth, this discourse might carry somewhat too far the self-

assurance and understandable elation of a military victor: triumph *over human nature* might be very unlike the victory one can claim on the battlefield.

⁴ To Arendt the nature of this transformation is threefold – through labor, work and action—where only the third item is genuinely and uniquely human (Arendt 1958, 9). Significantly, in her theory the relationship between individual action and the plurality of social life is articulated essentially in terms of an expectation: “The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable.” (Arendt 1958, 177-8) Limiting this both terrifying and salutary ability “to perform what is infinitely improbable” in accordance with the interests of the others would seem to interfere with the idea of freedom and pertain to ideology. Yet expecting the unexpected configures the space of its reception and thus prepares its advent. Unguarded by the fear of losing its orientation, the freedom *for* action is susceptible of surreptitiously morphing into a freedom *from* action, since it is of the essence of freedom to shake off any qualifier. Wedding without further ado the infinitely improbable with individual action can too easily induce in this action a radical disorientation in the form of deafness to others. Delivered *directly* to the wildest improbable, i.e. without the mediating fear of excessive freedom with its statistically probable efficacy, action seems to me to be rendered unnecessarily dangerous. Granted that in a crisis the greatest danger is the price to pay for getting the most valuable solution, cultivating such a risky style of bargaining in general through education needs justification.

⁵ In fact, Sartre is quite aware that the ego makes most of this “monstrous freedom” invisible to itself: “Maybe its [the ego’s] essential role is to conceal [*masquer*] from consciousness its own spontaneity.” (Sartre 1996, 82) In the footnote that follows this remark he specifically identifies this concealment with bad faith, which my notion of self-induced disability tries to preserve.

⁶ The coherence Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of flux (2000) implies need not be searched *beyond* anxiety and boredom, as he suggests, but *within* them, by smoothing out the whimsical interruptions they introduce in the course of action and deconstructing their foundational pretenses. In other words, no resistance has a priori ultimacy but appears to be built upon an essentially plurivocal stream of lived experience [*Lebenström*].

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