

Comprehension, Morality, and the Demands of Incompleteness

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When I first accepted the offer to respond to Joseph Cunningham's "The Word Ongoing: Franz Kafka, Walter Benjamin, and the Spirit of Perpetual Becoming," I was looking forward to reading about two important twentieth-century writers who are rarely discussed in the Philosophy of Education Society. And while I must admit to being initially more familiar with Kafka, I am pleased to have had the opportunity to learn more about both authors by engaging with Cunningham's clear and interesting essay.

He opens it by claiming that reading Kafka and Benjamin can generate "motifs of incompleteness." He then develops this argument by referring to specific written pieces and projects and analyzing their "fragmentary" and "unfinished" qualities. I believe that Cunningham's key point is that the pedagogical worth of reading such works is primarily in how they reveal the "perpetual state of becoming" of a human life. More specifically, while associating "completion" with "closure, a shutting off of new experiences and possibilities," Cunningham argues that we have a lot to learn from Kafka's and Benjamin's "unfinished quests toward self-realization."

I am sympathetic to Cunningham's approach and argument here. In a world rife with conflict, often fuelled by mistaken and dogmatic beliefs, it is vital that education should better attend to what Cunningham calls "The Pedagogy of the Incomplete." However, I would like to offer two points in response, one epistemological and the other moral, that I hope will nudge the pedagogical conversation further along.

First, my epistemological concern is that one of the dangers of extolling the virtues of writing that is fragmentary or unfinished is that the bounds of intelligibility can become so strained that the reader becomes too disoriented and then abandons the effort of reading further. Consider that the first chapter of Clayton Koelb's *Kafka: A Guide for the Perplexed* is entitled "Why You might Be Perplexed," and he quotes an Amazon.com reviewer who had this to say about the experience of reading Kafka's *Complete Stories*:

In the interest of full disclosure I did not finish the whole book. To be honest I couldn't bear to read another page of it ... I just didn't enjoy a single moment that I spent with my nose in this book. The stories I read were boring and full of uninteresting characters, subject-matter and plot-less storylines that tended to meander everywhere and go nowhere.¹

While it might be tempting to dismiss such a review as lacking literary understanding, Koelb insists that this sort of everyday response to reading Kafka represents a "perfectly legitimate point of view," one not due to some failing on the reader's part since the simple reality, he bluntly continues, is that such readers "understand it perfectly well and hate it."²

For Benjamin this issue of intelligibility would impact his relationship with two other leading German intellectuals and, ultimately, even affect his career prospects.

From the biographical details of his life we know that he had ongoing conversations with the playwright Bertolt Brecht, and one of the co-founders of the Institute for Social Research, Theodor Adorno. Brecht and Adorno were equally committed to producing work that was rigorous and demanding, but Brecht felt that the committed artist should produce writing that, once performed onstage, could inspire people to take action for social change, while Adorno believed that patient and thorough philosophical critique was the best way to work through writing toward a more just society. Apparently they were both a little dismayed at the prose that their friend Benjamin produced. His habilitation thesis, for example, which was basically a second dissertation that was required for him to teach in the German university system, was judged by four different professors, including Max Horkheimer, another co-founder of what would later become known as the Frankfurt School, to be largely incomprehensible.³ Benjamin was finally forced to withdraw his thesis from consideration and he struggled financially throughout the rest of his life to secure adequate funding to continue his writing.

The second point I would like to offer is a moral one and has to do with the very idea of “becoming” itself. Cunningham pretty much sees this from the standpoint of the individual in the desirable sense of “realization,” and as contrastive to what he calls “stagnation.” Yet it is important to take into account that sometimes dramatic change can be dangerous. One of Kafka’s most famous and often-cited short stories, *The Metamorphosis*, opens with the startling line “As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect.”⁴ Clearly poor Samsa had undergone a profound change overnight, and the rest of the story details how his family reacts to this development. Suffice to say it does not end well for him.

The description with which Cunningham closes his essay, “seeds spraying outwards from the branches of some great tree,” is indeed a lovely image that captures a sense of change as fundamentally positive. Of course there are other images to consider with very different overtones. At the most threatening and sinister, imagine a nuclear mushroom cloud spreading deadly radiation in all directions. Or consider the effects of the near collapse of the global financial system after the mortgage scandal in 2008 spread so insidiously throughout so many countries. Profound movement or change, personal or political, can indeed have serious consequences.

One thinker who was deeply concerned about the problem of balancing openness to change with ethical restraint was Paulo Freire. In his last book *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage*, there is a section entitled “Awareness of Our Unfinishedness.” Here, Freire claims that “unfinishedness is essential to our human condition” since “what makes men and women ethical is their capacity to ‘spiritualize’ the world, to make it either beautiful or ugly.”⁵ Earlier in the book Freire foregrounds this discussion by establishing “a universal human ethic”⁶ and by claiming that “Insofar as I am a conscious presence in the world, I cannot hope to escape my ethical responsibility for my action in the world.”⁷ When he then makes the distinction that “we know ourselves to be *conditioned* but not

determined,”⁸ I read him as trying to recognize the social contexts and pressures that impinge upon people, while also insisting that in most situations there are still better and worse alternatives that people must often struggle to identify and then live by.

I am left wondering, then, how Cunningham’s “Pedagogy of the Incomplete” might be developed further, in particular from the point of the view of the educator. What pedagogical moves are open to the teacher helping students to keep reading when they feel confused and want to stop? What qualities of character does such a teacher need? And while encouraging students to follow through on their experiments with self-creation, how can teachers also instill a respect for not just wise limits but also the ethical demands that make some possibilities morally doubtful or even indefensible?

I want to conclude by repeating how I feel Cunningham has latched on to something important here, and will of course resist the temptation to neatly sum anything up. There must be a rule somewhere that a response to an essay that prizes incompleteness must stay open and flexible throughout. To respect the spirit in which I assume Cunningham conceived and wrote this essay, I should also like to end with a suggestive tree image that will also rightly give Kafka the last word. It is a self contained fragment simply called “The Trees” that in its own way captures the heart of my response about the difficulties of transcending the boundaries of comprehension and morality and will hopefully keep the “word” moving right along:

For we are like tree trunks in the snow. In appearance they lie sleekly and a little push should be enough to set them rolling. No, it can’t be done, for they are firmly wedded to the ground. But see, even that is only appearance.⁹

1. Clayton Koelb, *Kafka: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Continuum, 2010), 2.

2. *Ibid.*

3. See David Ferris, *The Cambridge Introduction to Walter Benjamin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

4. Franz Kafka, “The Metamorphosis,” in *The Complete Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer, trans. Willa Muir and Edwin Muir (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 89.

5. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), 52–53.

6. *Ibid.*, 22.

7. *Ibid.*, 26.

8. *Ibid.*, emphasis in the original.

9. Kafka, “The Trees,” in *The Complete Stories*, 382.