

“Immanence: A Life...”: An Educational Formula?

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Shortly before his death, Gilles Deleuze penned the rather enigmatic essay titled “Immanence: A Life...,” which became a kind of philosophical riddle. One of the most compelling attempts to come to terms with this riddle can be found in Giorgio Agamben’s essay titled “Absolute Immanence,”¹ in which Agamben compares and contrasts Deleuze’s work with Michel Foucault’s “Life: Experience and Science.” Key to Agamben’s reading of these two texts is the philosophically provocative use of punctuation, and, in particular, the colon and the ellipsis. Indeed, Agamben immediately draws the reader’s attention to the peculiar use of punctuation in Deleuze’s title as the key to the riddle of life that both Deleuze and Foucault (in their unique ways) confronted before their respective deaths. Extending and in some sense intensifying the central claims about the relationship between life and immanence found in the concluding gestures of the two quintessential French theorists of the twentieth century, Agamben creates a rich ontology of the punctuation mark as a dislocating move in the history of thought — what might be referred to as a “punctology.”

It is our contention that the formula “Immanence: A Life...” is not simply an ontological thesis. It can also be read as an educational formula. In the rest of this essay, we will take up the space shared by Deleuze and Agamben and unfold what we believe to be a startling original understanding of education — one focused on immanence rather than transcendence.² To unfold the dimension of education folded within the formula, we will first review the highlights of Agamben’s reading of punctuation in Deleuze’s essay. This will in turn allow us to place new emphasis on a particular kind of educational relationship: studying between friends.

Reflections on the relation between punctuation, immanence, and education are perhaps now more pressing than ever before. In his book, *The Beautiful Risk of Education*, Gert Biesta makes the claim that teaching needs to be reunited with the notion of transcendence. Here, Biesta draws an important distinction between “learning from” and “being taught by.”³ The former is identified by Biesta as a kind of constructivist paradigm that shifts education away from questions of teaching toward questions of facilitating or scaffolding student learning. For the learner, education is *immanent*, thus constructivists seem to have “given up on the idea that teachers have something to teach and that students have something to learn from their teachers.”⁴ In an attempt to return to the question of the teacher and of teaching, Biesta argues for a new concept of educational transcendence. The teacher is transcendent in the sense that he or she “comes from the outside and *adds*”⁵ something rather than merely confirms what is already within the immanent powers of the learner. To be taught

by someone is therefore to experience what is beyond or outside of one's thinking, one's capabilities, one's interests.

Although we find Biesta's description of "learning from" and "being taught by" useful and instructive for returning to the distinct work of the teacher, we also find that his conflation of immanence and constructivism perhaps moves too quickly. Indeed, in his analysis, there is neither a deep conceptualization of immanence nor is there a possibility for rethinking educational relationships of immanence beyond constructivism. Here, we think that Agamben's reading of Deleuze's punctology is helpful in defining a form of educational immanence that is not reducible to constructivist learning or the transcendence of the teacher. Through a careful analysis of Agamben's interpretation of immanence, we wish to *punctuate* immanence as a form of study between friends who are apprentices to a sign held in common. As we will describe below, the sign offers a virtual field while the friends who work beside it are immanent to one another. As such, the formula of immanence provides a way of conceptualizing a new modality of education. In this sense, thinking seriously about immanence allows us to diversify or multiply educational logics, adding to Biesta's distinction between "learning from" and "being taught by" with "studying between."

PUNCTOLOGY: FORMULATING IMMANENCE

For Agamben, a biopolitical theory of life begins with a meditation on the precise formulation of the title "Immanence: A Life..." and, thus, the function of the colon and the ellipsis. Agamben writes that the title is deceptive for "despite its vague and almost suspended appearance," it "must have been carefully considered."⁶ Instead of joining the terms "immanence" and "a life" with the conjunction "and," Deleuze instead opts for an "absolutely nonsyntactical articulation" (*Potentialities*, 221) that is atactic rather than hypotactic or paratactic. The conspicuous replacement of the Deleuzian "and" with the colon draws our attention to the mark as having a heightened importance in this context. While Agamben is right that Deleuze had, on occasion, pointed toward the philosophical implications of punctuation in his previous work, these are but traces that give little assistance in understanding the role of the colon and ellipsis in this particular title. As a matter of fact, as Agamben points out, there are almost no "elements for a philosophy of punctuation," generally speaking.⁷ Agamben, thus, is left to forge ahead and construct his own, highly idiosyncratic, punctology where the punctuation mark gains a certain privilege not simply as an articulation of concepts but as a concept of articulation in its own right.

To begin, Agamben turns toward the colon. Juxtaposing the equals sign, the hyphen, and the colon, Agamben argues, "In the series that goes from the equals sign (identity of meaning) to the hyphen (the dialectic of unity and separation), the colon thus occupies an intermediary function" (*Potentialities*, 222). The colon is therefore "neither a simple identity nor a simple logical connection." (*Potentialities*, 223). If the equals sign collapses difference into identity (sameness) and the hyphen maintains difference only in relation to identity (contradiction), then the colon offers a third path somewhere between these two. The colon maintains a relation of difference without collapsing into identity or dialectical contradiction. Whereas the equals sign

suggests a certain binding to itself ($A = A$) and the dialectical contradiction suggests an unbinding of A to itself ($A = \text{not } A$), then the colon suggests an unbound binding, a *queer intimacy* wherein the alterity of immanence comes into contact with itself. Agamben argues as much when he observes that the colon is a “relation derived from nonrelation” (*Potentialities*, 223).

Visually, we might think here of the famous “duck rabbit” illusion, which we will explore as an analogy in order to better grasp the work of the colon and ellipsis. This is the most queer form of intimacy: they form one being (a singular material form) that is nevertheless composed of two singular entities (a duck and a rabbit). It would in this sense be wrong to articulate this relation as duck = rabbit or duck-rabbit. The former conflates the difference into a mere identity of sameness and the latter suggests that through dialectical becoming, a synthesis of duck and rabbit will result in a new, more holistic mode of being that transcends either particular. Yet the duck and rabbit are in a relation that is a nonrelation, neither collapsing into one another nor completely separate either: they are absolutely singular yet absolutely immanent to one another. We would then suggest that Agamben, following Deleuze’s lead, would more properly articulate the relation as duck:rabbit. This punctuation of the “duck rabbit” illusion corresponds to Agamben’s reading of the colon as a mark or trace of immanence.

But what is immanence? First off, we should not confuse it with emanation. Emanation is the appearance of something from a source, but the rabbit doesn’t come from the duck. Although one appears when the other disappears, the duck and the rabbit *are*, simultaneously. Immanation, we can assume, is the appearance of that which does not appear. Here, we can think of Agamben’s analysis of tautology to better define the formula of the duck:rabbit. When viewing the duck:rabbit, one does not ask the question whether the image is of a duck or a rabbit. The truth of the image is that it is both. If it appears as a rabbit, then the duck exists as a potentiality, and if it appears as a duck, then the rabbit is a potentiality. For Agamben, “a being that can both be and not be is said to be contingent” (*Potentialities*, 261). Such contingency is captured in the tautological structure “it-will-be-a-duck-or-it-will-be-a-rabbit” *as a whole*. The tautology of the duck:rabbit holds within itself (folded into its graphic structure) both duck and rabbit as equal potentialities without one emanating from the other. To actualize the rabbit rather than the duck is not to negate the duck (as in a dialectical movement) but rather to maintain the duck in a suspended form between appearance and nonappearance, as a potentiality that exists within the whole of duck:rabbit. Immanation is then a movement that is nevertheless a suspension of movement (*Potentialities*, 223). Thus, the spatial outside of the rabbit is found in an interior alterity, in the potentiality of the duck to be other than what it is. To see the duck is to see the rabbit *in potential*.

However, the way we have formulated the movement that is not a movement at stake in the duck:rabbit reflects neither the absolute immanence of both entities nor the fact that they are simultaneously potential. After duck and before rabbit, the colon could easily be taken as a mark of emanation instead of immanation: as if the

duck were first, the founding element, origin of the rabbit. There must, therefore, be a supplement to the work of the colon that problematizes the notion of origin. Here, we can turn at last to Agamben's analysis of the ellipsis.

Ellipsis dots, writes Agamben, "close (and at the same time leave open)" (*Potentialities*, 223). But this opening that quietly prefers not to close or end is not a kind of deconstructive suspension of meaning. Rather, its function is to "transform the very status of the word 'life'" (*Potentialities*, 223). Here, Agamben wants to highlight the difference between deferral of meaning (à la deconstruction) and indefinition (à la de-creation). Indefinition returns life to its virtuality — not virtuality in the sense of not-existing but in the sense of (re)potentializing being for new becomings.⁸ On our reading, virtuality is a field of potentiality that makes possible multiple kinds of actualizations without necessitating any. With the duck:rabbit, what becomes clear is that the virtuality of the figure does not transform the duck into the rabbit but rather that the duck and the rabbit exist simultaneously as virtual potentialities within the duck:rabbit, and, conversely, the duck:rabbit is a virtual presence existing simultaneously with the appearance of the duck or the rabbit. In other words, the duck:rabbit as a figure is a kind of virtual machine. Thus, we can once again rewrite "duck:rabbit" as "*duck:rabbit...*" The function of the ellipsis dots is that of guaranteeing the virtuality of the whole, preventing virtuality from ever completely actualizing itself in terms of an origin or completion. With the colon only, we have, whether we like it or not, a determinate beginning, an origin (duck, if we write "duck:rabbit" and rabbit, if we write "rabbit:duck") but the ellipsis dots neutralize the origin — they cancel the existence of a "first" term. Any notion of an original term has to be expelled if contingency is to be preserved.

The colon and ellipsis work together in a way similar to Agamben's analysis of the barrier (*/*).⁹ The usual way we consider the barrier in modern semiotics is as separating S (signifier) from s (signified), introducing a difference between an "oblique," "hidden," or "latent" meaning behind some sort of manifest content. Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory consists precisely in working back from the manifest to the latent. According to such a reading, the duck is "hidden" in the figure of the rabbit. But this is not at all the most primordial dimension of language, which, for Agamben, is precisely the barrier itself. "The algorithm, S/s," argues Agamben, "must, therefore, reduce itself to simply the barrier (*/*), but in this barrier we should not see merely the trace of a difference, but the topological game of putting things together and articulating (*synapseis*)."¹⁰ On Agamben's reading, the barrier is a fold: it is not something we put between two different things but rather the way everything comes to presence within a field of contingent potentiality. It is as if S and s were *folded* into the barrier ("a putting together of impossible things"¹¹) instead of lying at each side of the barrier (this is the gesture of the symbolic). From this standpoint, the barrier works like the articulation of the colon and ellipsis. The potentiality of the rabbit does not lie behind the duck but rather on its surface, immanent to the duck, folded into the duck yet without becoming an identity. The barrier is this fold that creates an impossible synthesis of the duck:rabbit..., which is only present in its potentiality (that is, in its absence, it becomes a presence).

To summarize, punctology enables Agamben to unfold the immanent and virtual dimensions folded into Deleuze's formula "Immanence: A Life..." In this sense, the punctuation marks are not simply syntactical indicators but are ontological marks or traces. But if this is the case, then how do we get from "Immanence: A Life..." to the central concern of education? At first, this would seem counterintuitive. "Immanence: A Life..." is a kind of passage without movement, a potentiality that only actualizes itself in a creative act of decompletion. Since education implies a change, a movement, a definite formation against which progress or regress can be measured or evaluated (as in standardized approaches to learning), it would seem that the formula has little to do with education. What we commonly refer to as learning concerns itself with thrusting ahead into the future in order to actualize latent potentialities. The potentiality of the student can already be routed toward a definitive outcome because the potential always contains a specified endpoint that can be fully realized. Hence, the goal of learning is to "realize one's full potentiality." It seems that learning, which is a movement toward a state of actualization, contradicts the beatitude (joy) of the movement of absolute immanence, which does not sacrifice potentiality. Or if immanence is taken into account in education, as in Biesta's argument cited above, then it is reduced to a kind of repetition of what the student already knows (there is never any true gift of otherness when one "learns from"). As such, immanence appears to be a suspicious educational concept.

STUDYING: APPRENTICESHIP...

What we would like to propose is that immanence is a viable educational concept, helping us to understand and conceptualize a distinct kind of educational relationship: studying between friends who are in mutual apprenticeship to a sign. As has been argued elsewhere,¹² studying between friends is an important philosophical theme in educational philosophy that cannot be adequately conceptualized with reference to either contemporary theories of "learning from" or "being taught by."

On Agamben's reading, a friend is not someone (or something for that matter) who has a certain set of defined predicates that are seen as "valued" qualities. Simply stated, if we were to enumerate all the qualities that make a certain individual a friend, this list would never reach the heart of the matter for the essence of a friend cannot be represented. The friend is never someone who is simply an amalgam of particular qualities added together and then recognized as "desirable traits." "Friends," warns Agamben, "do not share *something* (birth, law, place, taste)."¹³ More primordially, a friend is someone with whom we share *sharing*. In other words, it is a relationship through which sharing is shared in common. For Agamben, this means that friendship "is the con-division that precedes every division, since what has to be shared is the very fact of existence, life itself."¹⁴ In this sense, friends are always with (con-) and yet separate (division). Like the duck and the rabbit, they are immanent yet singular, held together by a kind of virtual field of potentiality. Further, friends do not emanate from one another. One friend does not "originate" the other friend. Rather, they become what they are through the very nature of friendship as a kind of *between* or barrier which divides and binds equally.

A friendship is educational when it is studious. Briefly summarized, studying for Agamben is an “interminable” and “rhythmic” activity that not only loses a sense of its own end but, more importantly, “does not even desire one.”¹⁵ In this sense, it is a kind of pure means, or a kind of education divorced from the instrumentality that can often characterize learning (wherein all potentiality only gains importance as a means to an end).¹⁶ Friends share studying because neither has a position beyond the immanence of the friendship. At the same time, friends do not merely “facilitate” or “scaffold” each other’s education either. Rather, the friends are both “stupefied,”¹⁷ as Agamben would argue, by the studying that defines their friendship. The barrier that separates and joins them is precisely a mood of stupefaction caused by the violence of a sign held in common.

Friends who study together are perpetually stupefied by a common sign. The sign contains within itself a potentiality to be and not to be this or that. Like the virtual field of the duck:rabbit..., the sign holds the friends together in an impossible synthesis that suspends any preconceived notion of an endpoint. The sign is able to hold the tautology together precisely because the friends who study are in an apprenticeship to it. Here, we would like to propose a clarification of an important term found in Deleuze’s work. The word often translated by “learning” is “*apprendre*” or what we will refer to as “apprenticing.” Deleuze writes: “Learning [Apprenticeship] is essentially concerned with *signs*. Signs are the object of a temporal apprenticeship, not of an abstract knowledge... One becomes a carpenter only by becoming sensitive to the signs of a wood, a physician sensitive to the signs of disease.”¹⁸ Importantly, apprenticeship is not “the intermediary between non-knowledge and knowledge, the living passage from one to the other”; it is not a “preparatory movement which nevertheless disappear in the result,”¹⁹ that is, knowledge. Apprenticeship is *temporal*; it is a movement. But it is a recursive, folding movement wherein what has come before is not left behind or simply disappears in the result. The movement is not from ignorance to knowledge, but from one shape to another, from one body to another in relation to signs. In this sense, Deleuze’s theory of apprenticeship is very different from teleological versions we might have wherein the apprentice submits him or herself in order to eventually become a master (someone who has knowledge, expertise). Imagine an apprentice carpenter who has to become “sensitive to the signs of the wood.”²⁰ What does this mean? Of course, he or she can read up on the “woody” signs in a technical book, but, at some point, the carpenter will have to let the wood tear the body apart in order to reply to these signs and make something out of the wood.

In French, *faire (un) signe* (literally “to do” or “to make a sign”) is to gesture or wave to someone. You do not choose the signs and then decide to become an “apprentice to them”; only when the world, or a part of the world, gestures or waves to someone (and this someone takes the hit) does education take place. Nobody can foretell which signs will force an encounter nor when it will take place, but, also, nobody can foretell how or when the apprentice will reply to the sign. The apprentice can even prefer not to respond since he or she is necessarily stupid: “For if thought thinks only when constrained or forced to do so, it remains stupid so long as nothing

forces it to think.”²¹ The apprentice is always someone who has been hit, whose unified body has exploded, whose understanding has been stupefied. Apprenticeship is an intimate relation that exists between a demanding sign and a stupid apprentice.

In this sense, apprenticeship to the sign is akin to the work of the ellipsis in that both (re)potentiate a virtual field. Signs prevent study from ending or becoming an end. The sign sets in motion a movement that is not a movement, meaning it divorces itself from predetermined ends and success conditions. In short, we can now return to the formula, “Immanence: A Life...” and rewrite it as an educational formula study: apprenticeship.... In this formulation, study punctuates the immanence of friends and apprenticeship punctuates the signs that always return this studious friendship to the field of virtuality without end (even forgetting an end). It is curious to note that Deleuze refers to his own work as an apprenticeship to philosophy.²² All his early books are works of apprenticeship where he submitted himself to the signs of philosophy (Immanuel Kant, Baruch Spinoza, and so forth) in order to transform the composition of his body as well as his thinking. But, at a certain point, he sought out a friend (Felix Guattari) to share in his stupidity. Thus, “Immanence: A Life...” concerns Deleuze’s philosophical life as an apprentice (to signs) and as a friend (to Guattari).

THE TRACES OF STUDIOUS FRIENDS

To make this point more concrete, we will conclude with a reflection on the process of writing this essay, which is a kind of trace or fragment of our own studious friendship. This work has been done *between* friends who patiently have apprenticed themselves to the work of Agamben and Deleuze as signs. We have talked for hours, fallen in silence, reached conclusions only to be thrown back into stupidity when we return to common signs. One says something, the other listens and then interrupts, or starts to speak. One goes home, thinks separately, writes separately, and, then, sends to the other a written proposal, idea, or provocation. All the time, the signs of Agamben and Deleuze function like the ellipsis to keep open the space and time of study. The signs return us to the contingency of our positions, ideas, and conclusions (things could always be otherwise). Slowly, a text emerges as a kind of studious travel log of a mutual journey that never seems to go anywhere beyond its own potentiality to be a “project.” One writes, the other reads, writes over, removes parts, or replaces them. The movement back and forth is a kind of nonmovement or suspended movement in that sense that an end never comes, leading only to more notes and more digressions, more rhythmic circling the signs in common. Indeed, the resulting text-as-remnant is but a mere pause in a larger movement that carries itself back to the signs. Thus, preferring not to end only heightens the mark of the virtual that is always already present in the sign — a virtuality to which the friends are apprenticed. As friends, “we” are neither a psychological unity nor a kind of dialectical process where one negates the other. We are immanent singularities, and our study is punctuated with the violence of signs that circulate between us, repotentiating the friendship through ongoing stupidity. And, in turn, our studious relationship makes sure that such violent ripping apart is something that rhythmically oscillates between the two of us (not unlike the oscillation between duck and rabbit).

This scene of stupidity, immanence, and virtuality is a land full of tautologies that are to be explored by four hands, two brains, and indefinite ideas that incessantly converge and diverge.

We could formulate our studious friendship as follows: Signs prompt F and T to study, to think, rethink, think differently, to hold this and that together not as mutually exclusive but as present in the apprenticeship itself. F has something clear, and T makes F rethink (come back to potentiality), and the same about F’s influence in T’s thought. But, also, the other way round: sometimes, while dwelling in the virtuality of the sign, T says something that pushes F to start to think and so on. Thus, study and apprenticeship are two necessary moments of an educational logic that resists falling into either constructivism or transcendence. F does not emanate from T or T from F. Rather, they are entangled singularities folding in and out of a common virtual field of signs. It is this kind of relationship between immanence, study/apprenticeship, and friends that is denied educational relevance in the current landscape of “learning from” or “being taught by.” Indeed, such friendships are seemingly interminable, and, in a sense, immeasurable as well (F:T):Signs.... And so, in the end, the contemporary scene of education (as either transcendence or banal constructivism) with which we began this essay must return to one of the most ancient of philosophical questions: What does it mean to think in common?

1. Giorgio Agamben, “Absolute Immanence,” in *Potentialities* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 220–242.

2. Erinn Cunniff Gilson likewise focuses on the zone of indistinction that both separates and unites Deleuze and Agamben. Our essay is similar in some respects but moves in a decisively educational direction. See “Zones of indiscernibility.” *Philosophy Today* 51, SPEP Supplement, (2007): 98–106.

3. Gert Biesta, *The Beautiful Risk of Education* (Boulder: Paradigm Press, 2014), 44.

4. *Ibid.*, 46.

5. *Ibid.*, 48.

6. Agamben, *Potentialities* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 221. This work will be cited as *Potentialities* in the text for all subsequent references.

7. Besides Theodor W. Adorno’s essay “Satzzeichen,” which Agamben refers to, Ann Van Sevenant’s *Importer en Philosophie* (Paris: Paris-Méditerranée, 1999) provides an insightful analysis of the function of brackets, quotation marks and italics in philosophical writing.

8. In this sense, we agree with Casare Casarino who, in a dialogue with Antonio Negri, argues that Deleuze and Agamben need to be thought together in order to understand the relation between virtuality and actuality. See Casare Casarino and Antonio Negri, *In Praise of the Common: A Conversation on Philosophy and Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 159.

9. Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

10. *Ibid.*, 156.

11. *Ibid.*, 159.

12. See Tyson E. Lewis, *On Study: Giorgio Agamben and Educational Potentiality* (New York: Routledge, 2013) and also Walter Omar Kohan, *Philosophy and Childhood: Critical Perspectives and Affirmative Practices* (New York: Palgrave, 2014).

13. Giorgio Agamben, *What is an Apparatus?* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 36.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Giorgio Agamben, *Idea of Prose* (New York: State University of New York, 1995), 64.
16. See Lewis, *On Study*.
17. Agamben, *Idea of Prose*, 64.
18. Gilles Deleuze, *Proust and Signs* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 4.
19. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 166.
20. Deleuze, *Proust*, 4.
21. Deleuze, *Difference*, 275.
22. See Michael Hardt, *Deleuze: Apprenticeship in Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).