

SOUL ACTION: THE SEARCH FOR INTEGRITY
IN GENERAL EDUCATION

I call this the “corruption” of consciousness; because consciousness permits itself to be bribed or corrupted in the discharge of its function, being distracted from a formidable task towards an easier one.

—R. G. Collingwood²

For when all combine in every way to make everything easier, there remains only one possible danger, namely, that the ease becomes so great that it becomes altogether too great; then there is only one want left, though it is not yet a felt want, when people will want difficulty.

—Johannes Climacus (Søren Kierkegaard)³

THE FORMIDABLE TASK OF FORMATION

Anyone who doubts the power of language to shape thought has never looked closely at the linguistic specimen known as the truism. The tricky part is catching one, since truisms are masters of disguise. Indeed, a good truism trap is a work of art. It takes artful reframing—I am thinking of works such as Gustave Flaubert’s “Dictionary of Received Ideas” and Jenny Holzer’s installation series *Truisms*—to reveal the unstable and uncanny mix of ideas hidden under each cloak of the commonplace. Truisms are miraculous suspensions of the most disparate and ordinarily reactive cognitive ingredients: truths and half-truths, hopes and fears, facts and fancies, conjectures and contradictions. Somehow the appealing and the objectionable, the obvious and the absurd, the unexplored and the well-trodden all combine to form a bland and soothing bromide.

Found everywhere, truisms are especially concentrated in spheres where recipe-following is preferred to question-posing, where doubt is discouraged and hope cheerfully mandated. Case in point: education. A powerful magnet for kitsch and cliché, few spheres are better than education at

rendering recipes, canning controversies, and serving up pieties. In the discussion that follows, I want to look at one particular educational bromide, the call to “educate the whole person.”⁴ This is virtuoso ventriloquism. What should arrest like the voice of the oracle announcing to you alone an enigmatic and difficult task sounds instead like someone reading the minutes of the Committee on Vaguely Appealing Ideas. When someone suggests educating the whole person, we nod assent. After all, who wants to argue for a fragmentary or lopsided education? What sort of educational scrooge would object to the aim of “well-roundedness”? To do so somehow just feels, well, unwholesome.

I am not suggesting that we abandon the holistic ideal, trading unthinking endorsement for easy dismissal. It is precisely the difficulty we want to recover: its force as a living idea, its fundamental and formidable challenge. But to do so we will need to topple it from its pedestal. This turns out to be rather easy since, to serve its function of making discourse safe from thought, a truism must pull off a delicate balancing act. Lean too far in one direction, and it collapses into an outright tautology; lean too far the other way, and the truism settles into a clearly controversial claim. Balance is achieved only by freezing dynamic thinking into fixed ideas.

Let’s give our holistic truism a nudge by posing a basic question: Is wholeness an aspiration or, as it were, a preexisting condition? What it means to educate the whole person changes dramatically depending on our answer. Many holistic educators hold that wholeness is a given feature of our nature. But they tend to downplay the implications of this claim. If the various parts of us are inevitably interconnected, then we are always educating the whole person whether we know it or not. Even a lesson designed with the narrow aim of transmitting specific information will, for better or worse, inevitably ramify along other lines of intellectual development (reasoning, understanding, self-knowledge, and so on) and into our capacities for perceiving and imagining, feeling and relating, valuing and judging, willing and doing. Here’s the rub: if all education is whole-person education, then our truism collapses into a tautology. Remove the redundancy, and the call to educate the whole person becomes simply a call to educate. More charitably, it is a call for greater awareness of the inevitable, indirect effects of educational interventions. Thus, we might become more curious about the hidden civics curriculum of the pep rally or more troubled by the anesthetic quality of so many literature courses. Though this is a worthy

reminder, it lends little substance to the slogan to educate the whole person. It says, in effect, “educate well.”

Nor does it take much to push the truism in the other direction, revealing not an empty or underdeveloped proposition but a frightening one. For critics of mass compulsory schooling, the narrowness of the enterprise may be its only saving grace—it is when the schools begin to target the whole person that you really need to worry. For testimonial evidence on this point, we have innumerable rock songs, from the classic countercultural—

We don't need no education
 We don't need no thought control
 No dark sarcasm in the classroom
 Teacher, leave them kids alone⁵

—to the punk counter-countercultural:

Your kids will meditate in school [twice]
 California Über Alles [twice]
 Über Alles California [twice]
 Zen fascists will control you
 Hundred percent natural
 You will jog for the master race
 And always wear the happy face . . .
 Mellow out or you will pay [twice]⁶

In one of these sonic dystopias, schooling serves establishment culture; in the other, it serves an ascendant counterculture. Whether it is the old-school repression of the stiff upper lip or the repressive desublimation of Jerry Brown's California, the “thought control” of the schoolmaster or the “zen fascism” of progressive education, the accusation remains the same.⁷ It is precisely as education forms the ambition to shape the whole person that it begins to take on a sinister cast. Holistic initiatives such as character education and authentic engagement are unmasked as cover stories for the real business of schooling: conformity and control.

Obviously, these are not educational treatises, but pop protests overstated for effect. However, they do succeed in opening imaginative space for genuine insights. Jello Biafra is on point with his spirited send-up of the mindlessness in mindfulness, and Roger Waters is right to object to the “dark sarcasm in the classroom.” Every school has its share—one is

more than enough—of teachers who, pushed around in the larger society, become petty dictators of their classroom worlds. This is not to bash teachers: every profession has its pathologies. Still, I don't think Waters overdramatizes the monstrosity of playing psychological games—manipulating tone, rationing recognition, currying favorites, cultivating insecurity—with a captive audience of young people placed in your care.

In this light, even Waters's famous refrain works as a statement of refusal. As an educational theory, however, "we don't need no education" leaves much to be desired. The *when*, *where*, *how*, and *why* of education are all debatable, but not the *whether*. For even shielding the young from influence amounts to guiding growth in light of a desired end. The idea that socialization itself is "thought control" rests on an untenably romantic, libertarian, and atomistic philosophical anthropology. To find our voices, we need to learn languages; to freely choose our different paths, we need practices that mark out fields of endeavor; to forge distinctive selves, we need interlocutors, models, and foils.⁸ As Richard Rorty puts it,

There is no such thing as human nature, in the deep sense. . . . Nor is there such a thing as alienation from one's essential humanity due to societal repression, in the deep sense made familiar by Rousseau and the Marxists. There is only the shaping of an animal into a human being by a process of socialization, followed (with luck) by the self-individualization and self-creation of that human being through his or her own later revolt against that very process.⁹

For Rorty, we are essentially essenceless. We are creatures possessing only the "second natures" of our historically, linguistically, and axiologically contingent cultures. However, it is not only songwriters who overstate their points for effect. In his effort to debunk essentialism and deflate the romantic notion of alienation, Rorty here elides an important point. Socialization and individualization are not distinct temporal phases, one passive and the other active. They are dialectically knotted from the start. Ironically, this is a point made by Hans-Georg Gadamer and Michael Oakeshott, the very thinkers Rorty invokes in his famous turn from epistemology to hermeneutics, from the quest for privileged representations to philosophy as edifying conversation.¹⁰ While both Gadamer and Oakeshott would endorse Rorty's critique of essentialism, they would balk at his implication that we are passively socialized into our *Lebensformen*.¹¹ "Education is self-education," Gadamer observes, not because we go it alone but for the same reason Oakeshott thinks that human beings have an inalienable kind

of freedom: namely that we inevitably play a role in the selection, interpretation, and synthesis of our “influences.”¹² There is agency in influence.¹³

This suggests a way to salvage the core insight of our sonic dystopias without endorsing their “Don’t tread on me!” theory of education. What I have in mind is brought out nicely by Robbie McClintock in his study of, simultaneously, Ortega y Gasset’s intellectual formation and formative ideas.¹⁴ “Ortega’s personal genius,” McClintock argues, was his “tremendous educability.”¹⁵ On the default view, in which agency and influence are contrasted, it sounds strange to compliment someone for their educability, like praising a sponge. However, like Gadamer and Oakeshott, Ortega challenged this default view, envisioning a dialectic of agency and influence, freedom and circumstance.¹⁶ To motivate this untimely idea, McClintock contrasts two views of education: the modern idea that we are products of our circumstances and the Platonic conception of education as an active quest impelled from within by *eros*, the longing fueled by our sense of incompleteness. The former has a scientific aura; the latter sounds antiquarian and mystical. However, it is the Platonic view that has the greater explanatory power, at least when it comes to one interesting feature of formative experience: the feeling that we have yet to find our true teacher. If we were mere products of our local influences, how would this feeling of mismatch ever arise? This suggests that we are not passive objects of conditioning but active subjects, agents of our own education. Education then becomes, as McClintock puts it, “the sustained, skeptical search for the unknown teacher who can set forth that which one intuits to be possible, but which one has yet to encounter.”¹⁷ McClintock’s claim is that all of us can recognize this impulse, not that all of us will complete such a search. Indeed, he stresses just how difficult it is to sustain one’s skepticism without fetishizing it:

Many youths, tired of their quest, stop looking too soon and accept as a prize that which happens to be at hand; and others, hardened to skeptical scoffing, pass by their true goal without responding.¹⁸

However, there remain the lucky “few who recognize their teacher” in a moment that exemplifies the interplay of agency and influence:

Without giving up their powers of criticism, they let their teacher immerse them in influence, for they know that the influence is wholesome and that in time they can organize, edit, and perfect their acquirements. Thus, learning begins in a restless search and culminates in a decisive commitment. What but love could direct such delicate maneuvers?¹⁹

With this, we are now ready to reformulate the objection to holistic education. It is true that conceiving of education as transmission of detachable knowledge and skills shows a remarkable lack of ambition. Such learning, John Dewey rightly observed, is superficial and short-lived compared to that which “is transmuted into character . . . [existing] with the depth of meaning that attaches to its coming within urgent daily interests.”²⁰ That is all very well and good, Waters and Biafra retort, but if you are going to try to shape me as a whole person, at least get to know me first. In other words, what is potentially sinister is not when education targets the whole person but when holistic education is grafted onto compulsory, one-size-fits-all, formalistic schooling. To say that whole-person education cannot be imposed from without is not to simply to call for “learner-centered education,” as least not as this phrase is ordinarily used. It is not enough to make a concession to individuality and choice within an essentially heteronomous program. This engagement, whether we call it “whole-person education,” formation, self-cultivation, or simply education, must be understood as the student’s own existential project.

Education, then, is not about shaping a thing but rather about fostering conditions for self-formation (in the double sense of self-driven and cultivating selfhood). Whereas (modern mass) schooling begins with compulsion, formative education begins by awakening agency and orienting the student to the task of formation.²¹ Whereas schooling must resort to batch processing, formative education offers a space for genuine exercise of agency, providing substantive alternatives through which students can pursue their individualizing quests. Whereas schooling tends toward the fragmented, arranging elements according to a logic of instruction (learn to add and subtract, then to multiply and divide; read Poe, then Hawthorne, then Melville, then Whitman, then Dickinson), formative education involves a logic of encounter, with phases of unsettling and reintegration.

Some might use the word “curriculum” expansively to name these facilitative conditions, but this courts an overemphasis on the narrowly academic and risks relocating agency to the teacher as curriculum designer. It may be more instructive simply to say that what is provided is a campus and a faculty. A campus, by which I mean not only an architecture but also the ethos embodied in that architecture, represents a standing effort to reunite living and learning and a standing invitation to take up the task of one’s formation. A faculty includes stewards of formative resources, veterans of

various practices of inquiry, and examples of individuals who pursue their formative tasks with integrity.

Let us review our progress so far. We set out to recover the dynamism and difficulty of the call to educate the whole person. Our hunch was that an enigmatic and formidable task lies hidden in our facile phrases and inert truisms. Whole-person education comes preapproved not because the ideal is so easy to understand and endorse, but because we are afraid to put any weight on it. The truism is too delicately balanced between tipping into the tautological or slipping into the sentimental. However, with this initial foray into the analysis of whole-person education, we have begun the dismount. We have reopened a basic question (Is wholeness a given of our nature, an aspiration, or perhaps somehow both?), recovered the crucial notion of the learner's agency, and recalibrated the role of the teacher (and facilitating environment) in formative education. But we have not yet stuck the landing, since we have only a vague sense of the key concept of wholeness. This is unsurprising, as holistic discourse suffers from a chronic case of fuzziness, stemming from a reluctance to make distinctions, as if it were a contradiction to articulate the dimensions and diremptions of wholeness. However, a well-drawn distinction enlarges thought, and it is a more capacious vision of the human we are after, not a blurry image.

Indeed, as soon as we sharpen our focus, it is clear that wholeness is not a simple but a compound concept, whose multiple meanings include both *completeness* and *undividedness*.²² If, for example, we lack the whole shopping list, it may be because we have forgotten to list certain items or because the list has been torn in two. This distinction immediately broadens our view, revealing that we have been conflating these two senses of the term and defaulting to the idea of wholeness as completeness. We were not wrong to see well-roundedness, the aim of cultivating all aspects of oneself, as central to holistic education. However, the idea of wholeness as undividedness suggests that we have overlooked a second task, that of integrating these various cultivars into a unified character or coherent outlook. Thus, in the call to educate the whole person, we find not one but two formidable tasks, well-roundedness and integration. Let us do some further work recovering the difficulty of the overly familiar concept of well-roundedness before turning to the equally difficult, less familiar, process of integration.

The concept of well-roundedness is itself well-rounded, too much so, like Nietzsche's famous blank-rubbed coin:

What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms—in short, a sum of human relations which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins.²³

Nietzsche vividly captures how our tentative figurations of the world harden into self-evident truths, how our expressive metaphors degenerate into blank linguistic tokens. All ideas begin as live insights (or missteps) in particular movements of thought. However, once formulated in handy phrases and passed from speaker to speaker, this dynamic quality begins to fade from view. The conversations in which the ideas appeared as rejoinders are effaced; the questions to which they were proposed as answers go begged. Well-roundedness is just such a token. Whatever live question it once proposed to answer is now replaced by the rhetorical question, Is it better to be well-rounded or over-specialized? The contingency, contentiousness, and dynamism—the jagged edges—of this idea have been rubbed smooth through overuse. The injunction to be well-rounded no longer enjoins. It simply asks us to whisper down the lane.

In order to defamiliarize this linguistic token and reconnect with its “sensuous power,” consider these questions to which well-roundedness might be the answer: What is the ideal shape of a soul? Is it better to have a symmetrical self? Does a bad character have rough edges? If these questions border on the nonsensical, it is not because it is incoherent to describe the mind in spatial terms. Mind is embodied: our knowings and feelings are closely related to our taking up and navigating three-dimensional space. Indeed, in one leading theory, consciousness emerged precisely as a way of mapping what is going on in the body.²⁴ Gut feelings, cluttered minds, deep experiences, shallow people: these are more than figures of speech. Insofar as they are metaphors, they are, in Lakoff and Johnson's phrase, “metaphors we live by.”²⁵ We not only *have* the idea of the self as interior space—a screening room for mental images, a sanctuary from intrusion, a room furnished with ideas, an arena for conflicts—we *live* it.²⁶ That said, we should find it stranger than we do that one

of our dominant spatial tropes in education has its roots in furniture-making. Before we spoke of well-rounded persons, we spoke of well-rounded or well-turned speech and writing, and before that, “well-turned” referred to material objects that had been “skillfully formed, shaped, or rounded, especially on a lathe.”²⁷ The idea seems to be that one’s self (mind, character, talents, interests) ought not be pitted or lopsided but evenly filled out and balanced. It is an odd metaphor, but not without interest. It suggests that we experience evenly developed characters as pleasing and overdeveloped capacities as jagged intrusions, that the evenly developed can handle the varied situations in life with greater balance, and so on. Still, it is a little hard to see why this particular metaphor became handy linguistic currency. In any case, the point is not to restore the image on the coin but to recover the conversations it ended and the questions it begs.

Luckily for us, the presumptuousness of the idea is not very well hidden. The ideal of well-roundedness is this: educate all of the parts of yourself. This sounds eminently reasonable. There is only one small problem. It requires that we know what we are made of, that we understand what it is in us that requires balanced cultivation. Perhaps we are trying to balance mind and body or to develop both reason and emotion. Perhaps the goal is to cultivate both self-knowledge and interpersonal awareness, or both worldly and spiritual vocation. What is it that we are trying to round evenly: our interests, talents, faculties, virtues, capabilities, sensitivities? Hidden inside the modest-sounding request to be well-rounded is a huge ask: know thyself! As Heraclitus (captured in a recent, playful translation), puts it, “Applicants for wisdom / do what I have done: / inquire within.”²⁸ Nor is this inquiry likely to be quick and tidy. Heraclitus, again, “You could not discover the limits of soul, even if you traveled every road to do so: such is the depth of its meaning.”²⁹

What makes this interior search challenging is the need to navigate between two extremes. We must assume neither that we are unique, and thus can safely ignore the findings of other soul-searchers, nor that we are generic, and thus possess some uniform thing called human nature. As Alasdair MacIntyre argues, our selves are narrative constructions, built from the contingent tales, tropes, and *teloi* we happen to find in the time and place in which we have landed.³⁰ Switching to a visual metaphor, Iris Murdoch puts it this way: a human being is “the kind of creature who makes pictures of himself and then comes to resemble the picture.”³¹ Nor is this some recent, “narrative turn” in

philosophical anthropology. At the dawn of Western philosophy, Heraclitus offered this epigram: “Soul is a self-proliferating account.”³²

In other words, if well-roundedness is to be more than a slogan, we need to engage in some serious soul-searching. What are my true talents and interests? What are the different dimensions of my nature? What are the fundamental human capabilities? Am I oblivious to certain aspects of the world or myself? As even this brief initial list makes clear, we must not only plumb the treacherous depths of individual self-knowledge (treacherous both because we lack distance and impartiality and because the “object of knowledge” changes through being understood) but also wade into the wider waters of philosophical anthropology, searching for insight into our nature, condition, and humanity. In order to develop the parts of the soul, we need an account of the soul, articulating its elements, mapping its precincts. We need a *logos* of the *psyche*. (Before “psychology” came to refer to a specific modern, empirical tradition within philosophical anthropology, it meant simply this: a reasoned account of the soul.)³³

This is not the only demand the ideal of well-roundedness presses upon us. As finite creatures we need not only self-knowledge but ethical judgment. However we parse ourselves, we will find more in us than we can do justice to. Depth in one area will necessitate leaving others less developed. Just as scarcity of social resources prompt questions of distributive justice, McClintock explains,

Problems of formative justice arise because persons . . . , always facing the future, find more possibilities and potentialities before them than they have the energy, time, ability, and wherewithal to fulfill. They must choose among these and in doing so they are struggling to form their unfolding lives.³⁴

When we slip into facile talk of educating the whole person, the implicit fantasy is that we have all the time in the world. We can pursue all of our potentials, develop all of our dimensions. As if! Our lives are “unfolding” in real time. The fantasy version of formation is like the fantasy version of architecture: time stops and we confront a blank page; what complete structure shall we design? Forming oneself is more like rehabbing a haphazardly designed kitchen on a shoestring budget.³⁵ Or perhaps a medical metaphor better captures the stakes: even as you commit to growing some aspects of yourself, others will die off. Triage is required. What MacIntyre says about conduct applies equally well to self-cultivation. Life hands us not contrived dilemmas with preferred solutions but “tragic situations”

involving multiple, authentic goods: “Whatever I do, I shall have left undone what I ought to have done.”³⁶

Thus, it is not enough to know what one is made of. What is required is not an impartial inventory but a normative reckoning: Which are my most valuable talents? What are my deepest, most satisfying interests? What is the core of my character? What makes me distinctive? In this way, the homely exhortation to well-roundedness opens onto fundamental ethical questions about leading a good life: To what should I devote my attention and efforts? What are the sources of meaning and growth? What is worthwhile to achieve and admirable to become? What is of highest value? What is human flourishing? Instead of calling for the cultivation of the whole person, we would do better to invert the injunction: Starve no *important* part of yourself! Stunt no *essential* dimension of your humanity! With this, we have begun to trade the facile phrase “well-rounded” for something stranger and more austere. To form ourselves as whole persons requires self-knowledge, ethical judgment, and existential triage.

As if wholeness-as-completeness were not challenging enough, holistic education confronts us with another equally challenging task: to integrate our various lines of development into a coherent character, unified outlook, and workable life-plan. To fully understand the necessity and difficulty of integration, we would need to commit to and explore a particular account of personhood and self-cultivation. We need an analysis of the soul before we can understand the compatibilities and tensions among its aspects. As we noted, well-roundedness may refer to a diversity of talents, a range of interests, a full complement of virtues. The aim may be to develop key faculties, essential capabilities, core domains of knowledge, major modes of responsiveness. The task of integration will vary accordingly. Our focus may be to reconcile freedom and circumstance, to mediate desire and conscience, or to reunite reason and emotion. Or we may focus in further on the conflicts internal to desire and emotion, the tensions among diverse interests, the pull of rival goods. The aim might be to unify mind, body, and spirit or to integrate self-knowledge, interpersonal intelligence, and attunement to nature. But it is not necessary to settle all debates in philosophical anthropology to make the case for integration, as many rival accounts agree on this point, that the soul is not only articulated but divided and discordant. To secure the claim that integration is necessary and difficult, we need only to canvas a few of the most famous geographies of the soul.

Let us look first at a famous moment in the Platonic dialogues, the chariot metaphor in the *Phaedrus*.³⁷ Here Plato's Socrates likens the psyche to a chariot piloted by a charioteer and pulled by two steeds, one noble and one ignoble. Each character represents a core human drive: truth-tracking (charioteer), honor-loving (noble steed), and pleasure-seeking (ignoble steed). The allegory's dramatic center is the pitched battle between reason and appetite, as the charioteer, forced to throw all of his weight into the wanton horse's bit, "bespatters his railing tongue and his jaws with blood, and forces him down on his legs and haunches."³⁸ Moments like this lead us toward the familiar conclusion that reason points us toward truth and goodness while the appetites drag us off course. However, if this were the moral of the story, Plato would have recommended simply cutting the intemperate steed loose from its tack. The interest in Plato's metaphor lies in its suggestion that the good life is not one of desire-free reason but one of reason-shaped desire. Left to its own devices, desire tends to reduce the good to simple pleasures; but the fact remains that it is desire that prods us into contact with the good. As Giovanni Ferrari puts it, it is because "the charioteer actually learns from the fractious creature" that his "efforts to curb the lustful horse merit the title of 'integration' rather than mere 'manipulation' or 'repression.'"³⁹ For Plato, human flourishing involves "concern for all voices in the soul," inflecting the "timbre" of each as they are integrated into a "polyphonic song."⁴⁰ Even while highlighting the difficulty of integration, Plato offers eloquent testimony on behalf of its necessity.

Rousseau's anthropology can be read as a modern departure from Plato's account of the soul. The difference is that Rousseau gives a starring role to the least important of the three characters in Plato's psychic drama, the good horse, whom Plato describes as "a passionate lover of honor, tempered by restraint and modesty."⁴¹ While Rousseau would not deny the importance of reason or appetite, it is this "spirited" part of the soul, oriented toward social esteem, that most interests and worries Rousseau. We could say that Rousseau zooms in on the honor-loving part of the soul, which he calls "*amour propre*," to reveal its own internal divisions. That the honor-loving part of the soul already involves integration is suggested in Plato's phrase, "tempered by restraint and modesty." The idea seems to be that, in an ideal polis, ideals of temperance will be woven into the fabric of social emotions such as pride and shame.⁴² By contrast, Rousseau's starting point is the pathologies of the soul that flourish in the actually

existing societies of eighteenth-century Europe. Here we find an inflamed and pernicious variant of *amour propre*. When we are well formed—and this is the point of the extended educational thought experiment that is *Emile*—then *amour propre* will be integrated with two other key components of the Rousseauian psyche, *pitie* and *amour de soi*.⁴³ *Pitie* is compassion for others. *Amour de soi* is the basic form of self-love that expresses itself in concern for and contentment in our independent existence in the world: it's good to be alive, to have this form, occupy this place, exercise these powers.⁴⁴ For Rousseau, individual and collective human flourishing hinges on how these parts of the soul grow together. *Amour de soi* may deepen as one discovers and actuates new dimensions of oneself through one's widening participation in social life. *Pitie* may likewise find wider expression as one's sense of humanity widens. The affirmative basis of personal existence—Hey, make room . . . I'm here! . . . I matter . . . Check out what I can do—may be harmonized with awareness of the predicament of others. And we could understand this harmony as the healthy form of *amour propre*, a desire to have a valued place in an equal network of recognition. However, if *amour propre* becomes inflamed and distorted, then self-love and concern for others may fuse in a manner that corrupts the individual's relation to both self and other. In the corrupt form of *amour propre*, self-affirmation becomes doubly alienated. I see my worth only in the eyes of others, and only as they see me comparing well to further others.⁴⁵ I become lost in the hall of mirrors that is social reputation. Meanwhile the innocent pleasure in being noticed degenerates into a more desperate demand (you must recognize me!). Gone is the ethos of *pitie*, replaced by an interest in others as tools of my own doomed effort to win a game of invidious comparisons (doomed, as thinkers such as G. W. F. Hegel and Jessica Benjamin have shown, because the imperious demand for recognition negates the locus of independent subjectivity and judgment that would lend that recognition meaning).⁴⁶

Despite these interesting differences between their accounts, both Plato and Rousseau testify to the importance and difficulty of this second formative task. What worries Plato is the divorce of reason and appetite; what concerns Rousseau is the disconnection of self-love and compassion. They agree that it is not enough to cultivate the parts of the soul in isolation. Living well for each depends on a second, delicate process of integration.

Indeed, most geographers of the soul have located key boundary lines and border disputes, and some see us as fundamentally defined by polarities

in our makeup and disconnects in our experience. Montaigne is one who took Heraclitus's advice to "inquire within." But his famous essays, his assayings of himself, lead to a surprising verdict: "Man is wholly and throughout but patchwork and motley."⁴⁷ Ultimately, Montaigne is so impressed by the "supple variations and contradictions so manifest in us" that he recommends against the "high and hazardous undertaking" of trying to "penetrate the very soul" to find its hidden unity.⁴⁸ Because generalizations so often lie—"Pope Boniface VIII, they say, entered office like a fox, behaved in it like a lion, and died like a dog"—Montaigne proudly declares that "'Distinguo' [I make a distinction] is the most universal member of my logic."⁴⁹ The unity of the self remains but a hypothesis; so far Montaigne has uncovered only heterogeneity:

If I speak of myself in different ways, that is because I look at myself in different ways. All contradictions may be found in me by some twist and in some fashion. Bashful, insolent; chaste, lascivious; talkative, taciturn; tough, delicate; clever, stupid; surly, affable; lying, truthful; learned, ignorant; liberal, miserly, and prodigal: all this I see in myself to some extent according to how I turn; and whoever studies himself really attentively finds in himself, yes, even in his judgment, this gyration and discord. I have nothing to say about myself absolutely, simply, and solidly without confusion and without mixture, or in a word.⁵⁰

Two later thinkers equally convinced of our essential contrariness but drawn nonetheless to the "high and hazardous" search for unity are Simone Weil and Sigmund Freud. Weil rejects the idea that we must choose between a unified and orderly soul or one ruled by discord and confusion. The order of the soul, Weil suggests, is found precisely in the dialectical pairing of our fundamental needs. We need, to choose three of her couplets, security *and* risk, order *and* liberty, equality *and* hierarchy.⁵¹ Confusion enters in when, unable to view ourselves with this "both-and" logic, we disavow one half or the other of these defining ambivalences. Freud goes one step further in seeing disavowal itself as a fundamental need of the soul. The psyche is not, as it were, a container that just happens to include conflicts: it developed as a way to contain conflicts (between needs and world, between desires and norms, between associative and consecutive logics, among the rival relational voices we internalize, and so on). Psychic structure is like an architectural ruin, Freud suggests, a historical record of conflictual damage, patchwork, and reconstruction.⁵² The coup de grace is our conflict over our

This is a section of [doi:10.7551/mitpress/15228.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/15228.001.0001)

Undeclared

A Philosophy of Formative Higher Education

By: Chris Higgins

Citation:

Undeclared: A Philosophy of Formative Higher Education

By: Chris Higgins

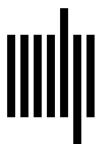
DOI: [10.7551/mitpress/15228.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/15228.001.0001)

ISBN (electronic): 9780262377607

Publisher: The MIT Press

Published: 2024

The open access edition of this book was made possible by generous funding and support from MIT Press Direct to Open



The MIT Press

© 2024 Massachusetts Institute of Technology

This work is subject to a Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-ND license.

This license applies only to the work in full and not to any components included with permission. Subject to such license, all rights are reserved. No part of this book may be used to train artificial intelligence systems without permission in writing from the MIT Press.



The MIT Press would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewers who provided comments on drafts of this book. The generous work of academic experts is essential for establishing the authority and quality of our publications. We acknowledge with gratitude the contributions of these otherwise uncredited readers.

This book was set in Bembo Book MT Pro by Westchester Publishing Services.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Higgins, Chris, 1967– author.

Title: Undeclared : a philosophy of formative higher education / Chris Higgins.

Description: Cambridge, Massachusetts : The MIT Press, 2024. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023028597 (print) | LCCN 2023028598 (ebook) |

ISBN 9780262547499 (paperback) | ISBN 9780262377614 (epub) |

ISBN 9780262377607 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Education, Higher—Aims and objectives.

Classification: LCC LB2322.2 .H487 2024 (print) | LCC LB2322.2 (ebook) |

DDC 378/.01—dc23/eng/20230814

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023028597>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023028598>