

Being written: Thinking the normative in the EdD

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Abstract

In this paper, I give various reasons why the doctorate in education (EdD) programme helpfully heightens our normative senses. The writing of a thesis in time, and hence the realization that the same time – that window of opportunity – to do other things and enjoy other experiences is traded off, comports the student in a manner that heightens his or her sense of his or her own temporality and invites reflexive consideration of what it is that truly matters. Thus, embarking on a graduate programme and writing an EdD is an invitation to theorize, no doubt – we are invited to read, think, reason, discuss and write down our thoughts. But at the end of the day, it is the EdD that writes us. Amid our scholarly striving, it shapes us and graces us with the keen sense of what it is that ultimately matters. Such a grasp of what truly matters ought then to inform our own reform of our scholarly and professional discourses in our field.

Keywords: doctorate; temporality; ethics; Heidegger; Finnis

The business of education is quite often normative. Yet there are at least two different senses of the normative, of what ought to be (done). First, there is the normative in the sense of what one should do in order to achieve a certain goal. For instance, when one says that, in order to start the engine of the car, one ought to insert the key and give it a good twist. When thinking and acting thus, one is indeed thinking about what one ought to do, and when executing the prescription, doing what one ought to do. Yet the normativity in such thinking and doing is in fact very *thin*: at the end of the day, it is really a technical rationality at work. Another example: a mathematician who works out that the shortest distance between two locations is the straight path that connects them, and advises you to walk on that path if you wish to get from one place to the other efficiently: 'you ought to walk that straight path!' In both these examples, the kind of normative thinking or prescription is really a result of theoretical or speculative thinking.

This kind of thin normative thinking is distinguishable from the much more robustly normative *qua* the ethical. At least, it is not the kind of thinking that considers the good and the bad, the just and the unjust. Someone who errs in this kind of thin normative thinking – say the car technician who gives the wrong advice about how one ought to start the engine, or the mathematician who gives the wrong advice about how one ought to walk most efficiently – would not be criticised for being immoral or unjust, or evil. He may be accused of stupidity (if we must be so unkind as to accuse him of that); still, his stupidity is in no sense an ethical or moral fault.

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As was said earlier, educational work is typically normative. However, research has suggested that, in some contexts, the lived experience of a teacher – the life-world of a teacher at work – could well be pruned of the opportunity to think the robustly normative, meaning that the normative thinking that operates in these situations would be predominantly the thinly normative, or what is really merely a kind of technical, speculative thinking. Stephen J. Ball's (2003) well-known piece on the terrors of performativity in UK schools, and its effects on the teacher's agency, comes to mind. There, one is caught up in the sheer business of the everyday running of the school, in the speculative-technical thinking about how to achieve one's (given) goals: to think the 'why' is either a luxury or self-consciously repressed. In worst-case scenarios, one can imagine such technical rationality becoming dominant to the point of fully displacing the robustly normative when the pressure to placate the terrors of performativity is strong. Here one's mind is, as it were, given over to the ventriloquism that parrots official discourses and too eagerly adopts prescribed ends without critical assimilation, and one's energy is spent performing to these ends (see Chua, 2009; also Ball, 2003; compare Labaree, 2003).

Writing, temporality and thinking the normative

Fortunately, such a life, which in its everydayness risks forgetting to think the robustly normative, can be fractured as one enters graduate school. At least, I hope in this piece to argue for the way in which one's immersion in a doctoral programme, such as a doctorate in education (EdD), can afford the thinking of the robustly normative.

My case is premised on the way in which, I would argue, thesis writing helpfully locates the candidate in that relevantly normative comportment or stance. My sense is that it foregrounds what I would like to call our **temporality** or finitude, which I think is helpful for encouraging one to think the robustly normative. By temporality, I mean the notion or belief that our own lives lack a kind of eternity and permanence – that life comes to an end in one way or another, as it might, for instance, in death. Because life inevitably comes to an end, what is available to us in life is not an unlimited resource, but truly a window of opportunity. Our grasp of our own temporality is hence this acute understanding that each of us exists within this limited or finite window of opportunity. My reader might discern a Heideggerian ring about this discussion. However, because there is such a variety of interpretations (see Dreyfus, 2017) of what Heidegger means by, and thinks is important about, temporality (the result, perhaps, of his very opaque style; see a ranting lamentation in Edwards, 1989), I hesitate to say that my thoughts are derived directly from Heidegger. Still, some of Heidegger's writings seem to resonate with what I have in mind here.

Perhaps by beginning with a real-life example, I could more easily convey what I mean to unpack. Recently, my colleague Dr Benjamin Wong passed on very suddenly. In Heidegger's *Being and Time*, there seems to be the suggestion that death is something we often fail to think about and confront, and that while we hear of other people's deaths, we still treat death as something distant (see Heidegger, 1962: 296–304): 'One knows about the certainty of death, and yet "is" not authentically certain of one's own' (ibid.: 302). Heidegger appears to think that this is unfortunate, and he wants us to take death more seriously, to think and realize that it is something that we have to confront ourselves. But Heidegger was not being morbid, I think. I read him as resonating with my point that our own confrontation with our own death casts light, ironically, on our present lives. The consciousness of our finitude (or temporality) positively reminds us to take our present existence seriously, and to treasure it more, and to value much more that finite time that we have. There is the similar Daoist and Zen Buddhist notion, captured in the Japanese

Bushido interest in cherry blossoms, that one ought really to focus on and cherish the present, when one can arrive at the appreciation of death, of the idea that what is present soon passes away. Some suggest these Asian sources inspired some of Heidegger's ideas (in particular, see Graham Parkes's (1996) discussions on the interaction between Heidegger and Tanabe). More recently, Richard Capobianco (2014: 38–49) has highlighted Heidegger's fascination with nature-*physis*, which is the coming and *passing away* of phenomena. Attentiveness to nature-*physis*, Heidegger seems to suggest, leads to the originary Greek experience, that wonder or awe in relation to the presencing of nature (ibid.: 44). And it is this 'coming-and-passing-away', this finitude of nature-*physis*, that is associated with what he calls the *enargeia* (ibid.: 15), the *gleaming* of nature, that Heidegger thinks the poet Hölderlin captured. The point here is: our unevasive attentiveness to temporality, to finitude, sharpens our grasp of the value of the present, as well as the value (or not) of things in the present.

I am less pessimistic than Heidegger about the degree to which other people's deaths inspire reflections on our own finitude. In any event, the death of a close colleague certainly facilitated serious thinking about the life that we still have. It is also certainly not just my experience; discussions with others about his passing focused not merely on his life, but also on our own, *of how precious life is while we have ours*. Hence, one grasps the way in which life is transient, and therefore merely a window of opportunity, which is indeed depressing, but also insightful. One could say that the reflexive re-evaluation of our own lives was an intuitive and very natural response. I think in general it invites serious evaluation of our present existence. But an evaluation of what is presently available as life also entails a (re-)evaluation of what one puts into it, of what is essential, and what is truly important – of what truly matters: Is this or that truly worth doing? What really ought I to fill my life with? Here we are in the realm of the robustly normative – the ethical.

Of course, such an anecdotal account of one person's experience is no basis for hasty generalization. Yet thinking through this and similar scenarios, as a thought experiment, strongly suggests it is unlikely that anyone who encounters death in one form or another fails to evaluate what it is that truly matters. Thus, imagine if you were in my shoes – what are some of the things that would come to mind? Are there really no questions that arise regarding what life ought to be about? It would be very unlikely, I suspect. Consider a related and relevant thought experiment developed by Robert Nozick and adapted by John Finnis, in which we are invited to consider plugging into an experience machine that delivers all kind of pleasures in the mind but leaves us floating for life in a tank of water (Finnis, 1980: 95–7). While this would not be death in the typical physical sense, the invitation to, and the approaching decision to, surrender and hence terminate our lives as we typically know them (that is, *not* merely floating in a tank of water) stimulates intuitions and invites questions about what it is that truly matters, and whether it is merely pleasure that we ought to seek. It also forces us to ask whether, if we do plug in, we are plugging into a life of futility, whether we are truly trading off the things that matter, and whether we ought not to plug into the machine. And I would underscore that what is interesting in this whole exercise – this foregrounding of our temporality and finitude – is not merely that it steers us in the direction of *asking about* the truly normative. More importantly, as with the experience machine thought experiment, are the answers it gives: values or goods are grasped through the exercise. The deliverances of that exercise of our consciousness of our temporality include some very concrete ideas about certain goods or states of affairs being choice-worthy and constitutive of our flourishing and fulfilment: the goods of knowledge, of friendship, of life, of aesthetic experience and so forth (see Finnis, 1980), meaning that, with attentiveness to our temporality, the choice-worthy goods gleam (*enargeia*) yet more brightly,

awe (*thaumazo*) us, and draw us to peer at them with that wonder that energizes (*energiea*) us to seek them, to borrow a pun from Aristotle (Allen, 2010: 60).

There are several ways, I think, that being in an EdD programme, and the writing of a thesis, foregrounds our temporality and affords such thinking about the robustly normative, and clears the way for the important things to gleam more vividly. First, there is the fact that one is *writing* an EdD thesis. For sure, people write EdD theses for a variety of reasons, and different persons have different motivations for writing an EdD. Still, there is something inescapably true about *writing* of EdDs. (I should add that the reflections below seem to me true not only of EdDs but of PhDs as well.) Already, the very act of putting something into a text is the making permanent of some set of ideas – ideas that want to be put down and made permanent because of their (counterfactual) impermanence were they not written down. So writing seeks in principle to get around our temporality – we write these things down, put them on record, in part because we are not going to be around forever to communicate them; the recorded text will do that in our stead.

Second, the writing of an EdD is a choice one makes involving some substantial sacrifice. There is, of course, the cost of the EdD, which one bears, and for the amount of money one puts into the programme one trades off other purchases, and hence opportunities in life, that one could consume. But more importantly than money, one also trades off time. One spends one's time on the EdD, and so gives up what else could have been done with that time. This keen sense that one trades things and other experiences off becomes very obvious when students who fail to complete the EdD lament not how much money they have spent, but the time they have spent on the programme – time that they could have spent doing something else. The very sense that there are *trade-offs* – that something else is *given up* for this – is intelligible only against the backdrop of an understanding of our own temporality. We know that we do not live forever, and so cannot indulge in the accumulation of *all* experiences, and therefore, while this window of opportunity is open, we need to make choices about what to put into it, before it shuts. We do not get the chance to postpone things, to do it later, to rearrange the order of these life experiences; rather, these are things that have to be given up altogether. Whenever one commits time to the writing of the thesis, one has to give up other experiences and things, as well as the time for these things. One *knows* these things are traded off, and one also grasps that one is making these choices in the context of one's temporality, of one's finitude, within the available window of opportunity. With that grasp of one's temporality, then the valuable goods, the things that truly matter, are grasped, as I have argued above.

I would add the qualification that the grasping of the important and valuable does not necessarily imply that the EdD is always a positive experience for everyone; it has to be acknowledged that the experience of the EdD could be different for different persons. However, the grasp of one's temporality and the attendant grasp of what truly matters, and the thinking about the robustly normative, I argue, is true for all persons – whether or not the experience of the EdD turns out to be positive.

It is also useful to note that this foregrounding of one's temporality, from which follows the showing of the robustly normative, is not the effect of some type of cost–benefit analysis. In cost–benefit analyses, one has some sense of a commensurate value in terms of which two options are weighed one against the other: one chooses *x-good* because *x-good* instantiates more of *z-value* in comparison with *y-good*. In and of itself cost–benefit analysis does not make visible the robustly normative – the robustly normative needs already to be assumed and visible in the form of the commensurate value, which is then used to compare options. Of course, when one contemplates trading one thing off for another, there could well be some cost–benefit

analysis. Still, such a cost–benefit analysis does not yield any new insight into what truly matters itself – it simply judges, given what one already thinks matters, which of these options instantiate that which one thinks matters. Yet at the same time, there is also the recognition of our finitude. And it is this grasp of our finitude, our temporality, that I would argue shows the robustly normative, as I argued earlier.

Being written: Theoria, the gaze of the gods and repentance

In this paper, I have suggested why the EdD is a good location for the heightening of our normative senses. The writing of a thesis in time, and hence the realization that the same time – that window of opportunity – to do other things and enjoy other experiences is traded off, comports the student in a manner that heightens his or her sense of his or her own temporality and invites reflexive consideration and a grasp of what it is that truly matters.

Heidegger was happy to call to our attention the etymology of ‘theory’. He pointed out how *theoria* derives from two Greek words, *théa*, which means the ‘goddess’, and *haraō*, which is her ‘gazing back’. For him, *theoria* was never the achievement of merely the human striving to know; unless the gods return one’s gaze, one remains unenlightened (Rojcewicz, 2006: 7–8). In his sense, our approach to the truth is less something of our initiative, and more the action of the gods. It is the gods, and only the gods, that save us. I suspect this consideration of *theoria* can be borrowed and applied in our case. Embarking on a graduate programme and writing an EdD is an invitation to theorize, no doubt – we are invited to read, think, reason, discuss and write down our thoughts. Yet at the end of the day, it is the EdD that writes us – it returns its gaze on us, amid our human scholarly striving. It shapes us and graces us with the keen sense of what it is that ultimately matters.

Such a display of the robustly normative can, of course, be greeted with initial enthusiasm but without sustained connection to our own scholarly pursuits. Yet, as John Finnis, arguing in a different field (law), has maintained, it should not be the case (see Finnis, 1980). Quite the contrary, the robustly normative ought to be the viewpoint based on which we rework the important senses of concepts in our field. In Finnis’s discussion, the concept of interest would be the concept of law. But as I have argued elsewhere, it would be just as true if we were to be thinking about what teaching is, or schooling, or professionalism, or related ideas in our own field, which is education (see Chua, 2013). It is this very viewpoint, informed by what truly matters, that helps us grasp what the senses or meanings of these terms that truly matter are, which we need to surface in debates and scholarly discussions (*ibid.*), and distinguish from other peripheral or corrupted senses (mis)shaped by undesirable cultures, economic climates or theoretical paradigms. In a sense, and to put it more poetically, having been gazed on by the gods, we need to revisit our own professional discourse to reform it, and where necessary, to repent from it.

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- Burnard, P., Dragovic, T., Ottewell, K. and Lim, W.M. (2018) 'Voicing the professional doctorate and the researching professional's identity: Theorizing the EdD's uniqueness'. *London Review of Education*, 16 (1), 40–55.
- Cunningham, B. (2018) 'Pensive professionalism: The role of "required reflection" on a professional doctorate'. *London Review of Education*, 16 (1), 63–74.
- Hawkes, D. and Yerrabati, S. (2018) 'A systematic review of research on professional doctorates'. *London Review of Education*, 16 (1), 10–27.
- Hawkes, D., Yerrabati, S. and Taylor, S. (2018) Editorial: 'The EdD at 20: Lessons learned from professional doctorates'. *London Review of Education*, 16 (1), 1–3.

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