

The Practice of Autopoiesis as the Aim of Education

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Abstract: This paper invites your travel from the “deep me” of self to other with the knight’s hidden inwardness (Kierkegaard, 1990), to see what takes place in the dynamics of my self-referred living system Maturana calls autopoiesis and then, moving from self-transcendence to “absolute otherness.” Here ‘I’ is in the space between Master signifier ‘I’ and the significant other, where ‘I’ is never alone but always transpersonal. This unified existential and experiential space puts their unity together that gives them the potential to educe new meaning to life in a way that conserves what already is, and also prepares them for creative performances in which the contextual significance of education is manifest.

We are in the truth when we are true to ourselves.

Paul Ricoeur, 1981.

Only through others, says Gadamer (1977), do we gain true knowledge of ourselves.

Prefacing my domains in education: remaining true to myself

I am determined to remain true to myself. Sohaila Javed, 2004.

There is an intriguing quest embodied in this opening statement with three keywords here:

I am: what is its substance and meaning.

Remain: what is the main/ essence/ basic being of myself that is so sufficient that invites my truth and resolution.

Myself: is myself the finale to the act performed or is there more to it?

These opening words in no way mirror a narcissistic self-image. It is not that self is impervious to perception. Or like Narcissus blind. Rather, it is self’s creativeness in her/his story. This self’s identity is a metonym of ‘ing’ that is between no being and not being, and what transpires between two such moments is real living in the space of Autopoiesis. This metonym essentially is a meaningful gift, asking for a reflective and doing subject, who makes sense of it, and knows that real ‘me’ and/or representative ‘me’ as subject identity and subject construct is not a formation or a singular rational, autonomous elixir that has intoxicated western education for centuries. There have been other ways of knowing real ‘me’, inward orientations and directions that already make me *more* than a mere partial subject of rationality and autonomy.

This is “religious inwardness,” or what Kierkegaard calls the truly ethical point of view a “rebirth” (in Dooley, 2001) to actuality. It points to (e)motions and other fine susceptibilities as imagination, intelligence, desire, dreams, will and intentions, and spiritual sense that, without suspect or suspicion, form our internal consciousness, our essence, and are some-things we have and need sense to cultivate, nurture, blossom.

Education that is holistic and humanistic can provide and pique and enhance this *essence* and sense, and help its progression on nurturing sites so that subjects become fully human and capable of “exercising their individual and intentional agency” (Usher and Edwards, 1994) for individual and collective human development. Ignorance of this fundamental and higher potential, makes or mars us, is an open answer and challenge to who and what I am, and what I do in the educational domain of existence. All educational humanists, I expect will transgress the modern/postmodern boundaries and enter with me, into the warm and moist womb of humanity where we all begin the journey of our human becoming.

Education then, is another collaterally arranged social womb in which identity is forever processed and performed, made sense of, and for all time seen as an explicit purposeful mission. This narrative construct, compounded with love and compassion as essential gifts, not only perceives the meaning of self but also the significance of self. Selfhood, then as I see, is a social construct, a unity with its own organization, autonomous entity that begins as some-thing, and moves always already to some-thing afar. This some-thing is our essence, our spiritual presence, our identity as human that carries an essence of wisdom and goodness that is our authenticity, spent in living with Truth, what to Ricoeur is being-in-truth. This forms the foundation on which this social construct is to grow and blossom. This fundamental notion of the social and essential subject goes beyond the “modernist notion of the autonomous and essential subject that has been under attack for decades, by psychoanalysts such as Michel Foucault, by postcolonial theorists such as Edward Said and Homi Bhabha” (Claudia W. Ruitenber, June 2001). It cannot grow in isolation for then ‘Be yourself’ (that is authentic) and ‘Be who you want to be’ (that is autonomous), that were modern education’s prescribed learning outcomes may be a selfhood construct (Butler, in Ruitenber, 2001), but in essence, are an explicit selfish objective.

My notion of selfhood as construct, which has essence and sense embedded in it and a mission to use it for meaningful and significant humane purposes, is the subject in this paper. Entry, encounters and embraces as such are essential to our being and becoming, and I contend, more particularly with a touch of transcendence and inclusion in education are the necessary potential that could transform representative selves into a contingent production of meaning and significance. The transcending self, as I see it, with all its essential gifts remains as a nothing combine of ‘I and not I’. This self, with a “desubjectivized subjectivity” (Ricoeur, 1981) is not an abyss, the chaos of virtual nothingness, annihilating unbecoming feature of self. On the contrary, it is a self-conscious self-cremating depth, where self sees self on the edge, an abyss of

creative nothingness, opening up in the center of our soul, in full colors of spirit. And 'it' remains always within grasp to be recognized, remembered and lived always as a passionately concentrated human in communication and communion with humans. This being then, becomes the ultimate subject of education and its shepherds. This particular identity is understood to be the one that is connected internally to a specific content that is beyond gender, race, color or creed. Its structural feature defines all identities as sharing a constitutive humanness, the shared and equal condition of all identity-constitution, a veritable creation.

This difference is a shared human predicament and the perspective it opens is the immense difference that particular identity can make when combined with other such identities for performances of our subject positions without that "shaking our foundation" that is our essence, and that can be carried outside "conventional oppressive positions" (bell hooks,) in education. We are born to manifest this essence, but always remembering the underlying continuum of nothingness, of death, which threatens to make life meaningless, but can become our resource to reality. Our human becoming then, is the proposition for education. Postmodernism's exclusive claim for identity, gender and race issues is disregard for thought currents that have flowed continually with concern for 'self and other' in other historical constructs and contents. Both east and west have given themselves up to self-psychology, self-philosophy, self-ethology, pertinent to different world views that emerged at particular times. The reawakening in the west, now is an opportune event for seers from both east and west to *see each other* as a combine from a global perspective.

The self is an indispensable principle of being itself, and its integral, potential presence as "the locus of permanence" remains as self's own integral, potential presence, "the center of power" in self's center, (Shalom, 1984). This self as such has been, and will always be a worthy topic for serious cognizance. Its deep inlays take us to the Source of our formation and development, and bring us up along with it as "successive acts of appropriation," taking hold of us, sustaining us for as long as we grow and transcend in meaningful and coherent ways, that is by more knowing and "change from 'beginning' to 'end' " (Polkinghorne, 1998, in Sullivan, 1999). Only in the last three decades there has been a shift in western psychology back to the subject's consciousness of self. Beginning with Freud's *The Ego and the Id*, and onto Heinz Hartman, Jacobson, Maslow and Branden, the study of the nature and function of the self-system has now become the locus of attention. Quite interestingly, this charismatic subject has been the ruling passion of eastern and western mystics and saints, and before that, always of the locus of Necessity. It defines their essential belief-system and intellectual pursuits. Misappropriating it as side issue would be injustice to the open and liberating expanses of education. The self is chameleonic, and adopts different roles/ rules as the vehicle of development, growth, and transcendence. Its spiritual growth calls us to look within for insight that may be transformational. This is the base from which the vast task of human solidarity can begin.

A Unique Sublime Image of Self

A trapeze through Ted Aoki's seamless waltz, penned down for curricular eyes as Narrative and Narration in Curricular Spaces (1996), I came across Zizek's insight (1993): "The image of the rebels waving the national flag with the red star, ----- of national life, there was nothing but a hole in its center. Zizek continues:

It is difficult to imagine a more salient index of the 'open' character of a historical situation in its becoming-----of that intermediate phase when the former Master Signifier, although it has already lost the hegemonic power, has not yet been replaced by the new one..

The enthusiasm of the rebels in that sublime moment situates the open self in another moment, where tarrying with its negative at the center, it may perceive the centrist ethos of all. So welcome to another self tarrying with the negative in the singular moment with all in the center. This no-thing space as the identity of "deep me" (Homi Bhabha, 1994) identifies the pure subjectivity of all identifiers and the "groundless ground of ambiguity that marks the human condition" (Ted Aoki, 1990). Like my simple grounding of nothingness, it is a site of viable novelty for talking nothingness that is vociferous for new vibrant original activity, which carries sense of full engagement and enjoyment.

Borrowing Maturana's term "autopoiesis" (1980) for the autonomous organization of the "self-referential systems," I see self as "a self-referred system...that could only be characterized with reference to itself...is a living system without reference to a context." Agreeing with its self-referentiality, I take it beyond to the larger Context of which it is an integral part, the Self-referred System of the Cosmic Universe that is participant essential of the self, with the self living its diversity within its autonomous entity. That this system exists is an existential proof of the spontaneous way it arises. It lives in self as self lives it, naturally, directly, immediately. Maturana's autopoietic ambience makes it a context within itself...without notions of purpose, goal, and use or function... an autonomous entity... living naturally as a living system so that whatever takes place in this *space* as living system, takes place as necessarily and constitutively determined in relation *to* itself. Being defined as unity through self-reference is its manner of autonomy and the basic circularity of its components. On this fathomless space of intimate narration, purpose, use, function or goal emerges spontaneously out of its own organization as its eventual choice, where the united yet autonomous entity builds internets of relationships-webs coextensive, buoyed by its intrinsic, innate ever-living relationship with the Cosmos, that Maturana calls "the conditions in which different chemical processes can be concatenated to form topological unities that constitute relational networks in the autopoietic space" (1980).

This space has its urgency for the positive but never forgets the way it trapezes the negative – that is pure transparent nothingness- that is “the empty space of narration” between no being and not being. This is the natural condition of each component of the living system. It arises spontaneously and then, under the necessarily and constitutively determined system, the component’s chemical processes concatenate to form and live it’s unities with the Being and beings, and then die its own constituted life, while passing on its legacy to the ongoing components of the autopoietic system. And while living its own existence, this organism, even while “operative in the phenomenal domain,” steps back to see its operations, the object of the description. This combines creation and praxis as these are experienced in the living ex-change program of education, where they operate with self’s organizational unity.

Before entering this dynamic site, I invite your encounter with the really real of Maturana’s autopoiesis, characteristic of the organization and operation of the living systems in the physical space that appeared as ‘Biology of Cognition.’ In his search for a complete linguistic description that conveyed the “central feature of the organization of the living, which is autonomy,” in response to his first grave concern: what is the organization of the living? It at once invites bare attention to the structure of the organism that permits it to operate adequately in the medium in which it exists. His second concern: what takes place in the phenomenon of perception invites description of the observer as s/he is operative in the phenomenal domain and is the object of the description. Maturana, finding himself in a dilemma whether “to follow the *path of arms* (praxis, action) or the *path of letters* (poiesis, creation, production), and his eventual choice to attempt at poiesis, invented the word he needed: autopoiesis. This word directly explains what happens in the dynamics of the autonomy proper to living systems, and so his choice of the word.

From Maturana’s autopoietic space, the basic structure of this organism and its operation in the phenomenal space has the essence of alterity, and creativity and living creatively as a way of being, and compassionate communication as a mode of relation in the domain of doing organisms. We are all knowing and social (participating) beings by virtue of our unity, organization and structure, which it generates in its interactions with other unities. Does it serve my purpose that we interact through the simple interplay of our properties, our “natural sociability,” and through a living interconnection what Maturana calls “recurrent interactions,” we can initiate in each other a structural change and select in each other a structural change but “without loss of organization.” Understanding the “internal dynamics of states as composite unities” and interacting with them “as simple unities” in the environment in which we behold them, and respecting their autopoiesis, their autonomous entity, we can enter the dynamic space of interbeing and interrelationship that characterizes living in the human world, and achieve what Miskawayh (in Zurayk, 1968) calls “anthropine eudemonia” (human happiness).

With autopoietic understanding and its practice of “structural coupling” in “absolute otherness” (Hegel, in Maturana, 1980), we can live a natural social system in our own selected domain/discipline and see our self-referentiality becoming and engaging a powerful metapoiesis

en route our human referential world. Imagine the social wonder that can get created if the basic stable structure of the human component is realized and lived throughout its cultural relationing that it will, out of necessity of its organization as human component, naturally satisfy as social entity. Such human being in the social domain always happens through the fulfillment of the basic biological preferences (states of positive affirmation that bring love) and rejections (states of negative reprehensibility that breed cynical disregard and hate) that constitute this human's immediate existential domain. These actions, therefore, as natural, spontaneous expressions of preferences or rejections, constitutively affect the lives of other human beings "from having to remain within the world and yet hold fast to a guiding telos that is incommensurable with that of the universal," and have ethical effects. This is also in a way what Maturana suggests and Kierkegaard sees as a "rebirth" to actuality, with its manifestation in our living contemporaneously with our Cosmic Unity, expressed in the educational domain as a doing philosophy, something that has veritable roots in ancient traditions.

What moves the moved

The simple essential substance of the soul is endowment of another kind and therefore, is the only bestowal of life. Once within the capacity of the body, it becomes the center of power, is self-moved, and has intellectual cognition of itself. Because it is self-generating and therefore, self-existent, it is an integral substance of the human phenomenon. It has no opposite and therefore, does not perish or vanish. Because its essential being is substance, it knows that it essentially is the "locus of permanence" and the "center of power." And this centrality of power is the simple basis of every human's autopoiesis and autopoietic living. Self is what essentially it is. It knows this and therefore, is in charge and responsible of its self-referred system of holistic living. Miskawayh¹ wonders as to those who do not know their essential substance, their own centrality, and perhaps become causal to its unused full potentiality and their darkened existence and much civilizational darkness that they create. Another insight from him is enlightening:

He who does not know his soul while it resides in the body has no way of knowing it once it has departed from the body. Everything is concealed from one who does not ponder everything. He who knows not the source of evil cannot be saved from it." To know the soul is to know self and self-power and to what uses this permanent locus can be put to before its voluntary departure and our involuntary death.

This warrants us to awaken to this noble substance that is within us. If we do not, it counts to the "loss of sensibilia, and we are stricken with anxiety over death." And to Miskawayh, "Die voluntarily, for voluntary death is training in abandoning the sensibilia, and the corporeal pleasures, in discarding passions, and in comporting oneself according to the intellect and the intelligibilia" (1968). He then concludes:

This is wisdom derived from ancient revelations and the rest is self-revelatory. So pondering in solitude and devotion, removing our senses from affectations and becoming receptive for that for which we have readied ourselves. And so we may solve different problems, recite poetry, recollect, understand, and so on. If we turn in this way to a star, readying ourselves, we receive the form and influence as the star receives what it is ready to receive from the Creator.

This is preparation for the performance of tasks that self has chosen for itself and that have the seeds of its rebirth. And the simple basic state, which the human subject enters after being, and before any identity gets constructed (with all metaphysical essentials- intelligence, soul, nous, spirit-immaterial some-Thing), is of nothingness. It is a basic and unique perceptible characteristic of human existence and its uniqueness continues in her/his unknowing it. We know we are a body, but unlike others, a body with consciousness, with intellectual cognition and spiritual realization. This immediately entwines both body and mind in our self and engages metaphysical attention to what happens therein:

Privileging, as they are wont to do, seeing (theorin), thinking, consciousness, metaphysicians seek to determine exactly what it is that we are conscious of when we exist consciously. Is it ideas in our own mind? Or is it movements in our body? And how can we be certain that we are conscious of what we think we are conscious of, not merely oneirically imagining the whole thing?

Thus, Ricoeur (1981) extends his phenomenological gaze in Hermeneutics Of (Inter)Subjectivity to think of the human mind in the arena of consciousness where it lives in experiential domains that are linguistically expressed, “But is the human person, the self, the subject, am I, are you nothing but, nothing more than bundle of conditioned reflexes, a flow of neural impulses, a self-programming computer, a haphazard colony of selfish genes?” This is serious reflection on the consequential human condition of this intense neural activity that pervades human being today, and ironically brings the dehumanizing reduction of the self that it has inadvertently brought to itself. This was this human’s preferential choice and in a mood of arrogant preference and arresting the quality of choice, s/he calls it success. With this unconscious reductionist behavior, the human observer still remains in the center of things. This is the physical reality and shall remain so till human is.

A simple question then, arises: what is that we are not conscious of when we exist self-consciously? If we begin to think of this state as *nothingness*, and feel this no-thing as indeed it is, if substance is taken as the paradigm of being, before any formal identity gets constructed as

result of consciousness, and then, reflectively experience “consciousness as nothingness” (Ricoeur, 1981), as Sartre, for instance, did, and let that state continually coexist before our becoming, we may “make better sense of the fundamentally human question, which simply will not go away, of what it means to be a subject, a human person.” Perhaps, this nothingness is after all not-so-nothing a state as we deem it self-consciously, and we may turn out to be some-thing more than our overt “nothing,” some-thing more than “a bundle of conditioned reflexes.” Speaking Ricoeur’s language, if the “essence” of consciousness is not to be what it is and to be what it is not, does it downplay sense if the “essence” of consciousness remains nothingness as an experiential state throughout existence? If it already is that, as a result of intense neural activity, what else would it be? That is the quest of inward knowing, and as I read Ricoeur, it is the “essence” of metaphysics in terms of Nietzsche’s opposites, as he called them, such as appearance-reality, sensible-intelligible, material-immaterial, becoming-being, fact-essence, practice-theory and of course, matter and spirit.

Thinking metaphysically of human becoming in the above perspective, it is realized that we live in the body and select spiritual consciousness along with emotional awareness for our living practice. Using psychoanalyst Roy Schafer’s words, the self becomes “an experiential phenomenon, a set of more or less stable and emotionally felt ways of telling oneself about one’s being and one’s continuity through change” (in Shalom, 1984). So in the act of being nothing, self finds itself and ‘deep me’ only through this act. And remembrance of this act is causal to transformation that furthers activity from oneself to yourself and innumerable other selves. Self then becomes the act, the site of self’s practice, where with the hidden inwardness, self and others as narrative constructs as practitioners coexist in attunement. Their accouplement (Ricoeur) or Maturana’s structural coupling, or as Husserl called it, “the mutual confirmation of its communal being” is the vast ex-change program of metapoiesis, from mere being unto becoming is Desire’s desire of self-actualization, but also desiring each other’s desire as self-desire, and actively creating possibilities by being-in-truth so that we are just who we are, plain human.

This being cannot step out of this *coalescence*, as it the basis of the relational dynamics and structure of the human cosmos. Remoteness from this cosmic will be our ungrounding. In the event of relation, the human presence as embodied being becomes actual as words of deed actualize in the creative work of goodness that follows. In this context, Tusi seeks the recreation of the form which is represented, and says, “in the soul of the disciples that becomes identical to that which is represented in the instructor’s soul, and once the disciples know this and through the knowledge of their instructor, a deep primordial trust is formed.” Both in silent agreement at their arrival know that “there will be no differentiation and multiplicity between their souls; and once the veil is removed, they reach their instructor,” and are united with her/his oneness, knowing their identical arrival and return.

This is the base from which any kind of instruction can be done. This is the world view of education that can keep us grounded with our word and act, encountering and embracing all others besides self can give us the meaning of life, life's quest and inspire our becoming pursuits. This is nourishment as is breath for creativity. For Buber (1970), all actual life is encounter, and for self, encounter is the matrix of actual life, and it perceives that it is only in the direct, unmediated, intent gazing of the whole being in presence that encounter and relation exist; with actual life being lived with 'you and I' in the warm embrace of a living connection. The substantiating 'and' between 'you and I' forms the relation and reveals the transcending quality of the relation as I transcends I and you transcend you - both transforming while retaining their human individuality and moving toward humanity. So we experience the need to know that transcendence will touch us only through submission. This is a spiritual trial and only thus 'you and I' live in self's 'deep me', thus changing life as it has always moved self toward a spiritual engagement in education with the social constructs of 'you and I.'

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