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COVID-19 and Remote Learning: The Home and the School

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One area that is almost certain to be of some concern in the coming wave of COVID-related publications is the question of home versus school as "learning environments" – as specifiable sets of conditions for facilitating and shaping the ongoing learning process. "Learning," in turn, is conventionally understood as a neurological and cognitive process that occurs all the time, with institutional learning environments cultivating more formal and regulated learning, but hardly erasing its original, "natural" characteristics. Home and school, however, are much more than just different cognitive environments; they represent heterogeneous, even mutually exclusive social and cultural systems, spheres, or worlds. Each is characterized by its own roles, relations, habits, and experiences. Given that this article appears in a philosophical forum, it takes as its focus an original philosophical treatment of the question of the domestic and scholastic spheres: Hegel's previously untranslated remarks from an 1811 graduation address to a school in Nuremberg. Besides introducing a "new" Hegel text to English-language readers, the overview that follows also sheds light on a particular way of contrasting school and family life.

In June 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic was described by the UN Secretary General António Guterres as nothing short of an "education catastrophe." Around the same time, it was estimated that no fewer than 1.6 billion children and youth were out of school globally (UNESCO, 2020). As I write this in November 2021, it would be fair to say that schooling has not been the same since, with face-to-face instruction still occurring under a variety of constraints, and millions of students around the world having "disappeared" from schools altogether (UNESCO, 2020). Emergency remote learning has meanwhile meant that some children and youth have undertaken a full year of school activities at home, in a setting and using equipment and infrastructure certainly not intended for such work. The result is perhaps predictable: "learning loss" from the closure of schools just during the spring of 2020 has been estimated to be the equivalent of anywhere from a couple of months to a full year, regardless of whether or how remote learning was implemented. It also is estimated that socioeconomic achievement gaps already existing between students have widened by as much as 50% (Engzell, Frey & Verhagen, 2021, p. 1). One notable instance where student performance – particularly of "low-performing" students – actually improved in remote learning was in the context of curriculum-based, adaptive, game-like "rehearsal software," specifically for second language and elementary mathematics learning (Hammerstein, et al., 2021, pp. 8–9).

Impacts of public health measures on education are characterized by "lagging indicators," meaning that some costs of school closures and remote learning will not be known for months, and others not for years (Alphonso, 2021). Even current indicators are "only just emerging in the literature" (Hammerstein, et al., 2021, p. 2). However, research into the effects of similar disruptions (for example, summer breaks, local disasters) predict a learning loss at around 45% after about half a year of schooling after a moderate break (Kuhfeld, et al., 2020). If such interruptions are experienced in the early grades, gaps of this kind are prone to widen further, even under "normal" conditions (Kaffenberger, 2021). Additional and arguably unnecessary school closures, such as those that took place in the winter of 2021

in the UK and Germany, and in the spring of 2021 in Ontario, occur at inestimable cost – both in terms of the development of human capital and (present and future) quality of life.

Digital technologies and "online learning" were meanwhile declared a "panacea in the time of [the] COVID-19 crisis" (Dhawan, 2020). But in rapidly adopting emergency remote learning, schools did not turn to the kinds of "online learning" that had long been prioritized in distance education (DE) and educational technology (EdTech) – the two relevant education subfields. Whereas DE and EdTech have long focused on text-based, interactive, personalized, and immersive learning technologies, schools readily found in Zoom and other (typically business-oriented) video-conferencing technologies a workable if flawed substitute for the conventional classroom. The relatively widespread and unforeseen adaptation of video technologies for this purpose caught both DE and EdTech unprepared.

The crisis represented by the pandemic offers vast opportunities for research and in relation to the widest range of educational questions. One area that is almost certain to be of some concern in the coming wave of COVID-related research and publication is the question of home versus school as "learning environments" for children and youth – as specifiable sets of conditions for facilitating and shaping the ongoing learning process. "Learning," in turn, is conventionally understood as a neurological and cognitive process that occurs all the time. Institutional environments merely cultivate more formal and regulated forms of this activity, but hardly erase its original, "natural" characteristics (e.g., Bransford, et al., 2010, pp. 210, 219). Home and school, however, are much more than just different cognitive *environments*; they represent heterogeneous, even mutually exclusive social and cultural systems, spheres or *worlds* (e.g., Friesen, 2011, pp. 51–63). Each is characterized by its own roles, relations, habits, and experiences – and arguably its own forms of value and desire.

Given the scope of these differences, this article takes as its focus an original and integrated philosophical treatment of the question of the domestic and scholastic spheres: Hegel's previously untranslated remarks from an 1811 graduation address to a school in Nuremburg (as well as some of Hegel's observations in his 1820 *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*). Besides introducing a "new" Hegel text to English-language readers, the overview that follows also sheds light on a particular way of contrasting school and family life. It also offers an alternative perspective on the implications of the COVID pandemic for education, and on general educational questions as well.

Home versus School, Particularity versus Generality

Typically a publicly funded and governed institution, the school brings with it curricula, evaluation, and roles that are highly standardized across national, state/provincial, and local jurisdictions. Home and family, on the other hand, can vary widely from one person and personal history to another; indeed, the domestic sphere is characterized by Hegel precisely in terms of "the self-subsistence of the particular" (1820/2008, §181, p. 180):

> *Family life*, which precedes school life, is a personal relationship, a relationship of feeling, of love, of natural faith and trust; it is not the bond of a thing, but the natural bond of blood; the child is valid here because he is the child; he experiences the love of his parents without merit, just as he has to bear their wrath without having a right against it. (1811/2021, p. 3; emphasis in original)

Hegel is writing during the original flowering of the bourgeois family – specifically as a social unit that was intact, nuclear, and private to a degree perhaps difficult to appreciate today (e.g., see Habermas, 1991). Regardless, you are who you are at home not because of any social merit, but instead because of events and contingencies that in a significant sense cannot be undone, either in fact or in imagination: you are a child of *your* parents, you are a brother or sister to *your* siblings, and a father or mother to *your* own children. Role and personality are fused in family relations, rendering each family member unique and profoundly irreplaceable:

> Particularity by itself is given free rein in every direction to satisfy its [i.e., particularities' own] needs, accidental caprices, and subjective desires … [representing a] crude type of knowing and willing, i.e. immediacy and individuality, in which spirit [mind; *Geist*] is absorbed. (Hegel, 1820/2008, §185, p. 182; §187, p. 185)

Your favourite foods are in the refrigerator or freezer, just as your favourite viewing (or reading) is only a click away; your children's (or your own) desires readily predominate. In a similar way, the particularities of your own upbringing inescapably serve as a model, for better or for worse, for your own children. The physical objects and arrangements of the home reflect this "free rein" of the particular, the immediate, and the subjective. Only *it* offers both bed (a non-interchangeable location satisfying the need for sleep) and kitchen (for gratifying hunger). The home today typically also provides a room with one or more media systems for leisure, as well as other places, such as the garage, for specific pursuits defined by family members' personal interests and abilities. Gratification is immediate not only in the Hegelian sense of being dialectically "non-mediated," but also in being instantaneous. And it is this logic that, in the pandemic, is urgently juxtaposed with the very different dynamics of the school.

Hegel and his commentators have noted that school brings with it its own "principles and modes" of both action and reflection – its own "inherent … dignity" and "logic" (Brinkmann, 2021, pp. 257–259). School is ultimately neither a set of completely public, transparent processes, nor comparable to a business that works only to maximize its inputs and outputs. "It is a sphere," as Hegel says, "which has its own substance and object, its own law, its punishments and rewards, and indeed a sphere which constitutes an essential stage in the formation of the whole … character" of the person (1811/2021, p. 2). It is one in which the leisure and immediate satisfactions of the home are (gradually) replaced with activities and rewards that are more explicitly purpose-driven and rule-bound:

> In school, the child's activity begins to take on a serious and essential meaning, so that it is no longer subject to arbitrariness and chance, to the desire and inclination of the moment; [the child] learns to determine his actions according to a purpose and according to rules; he ceases to be considered for the sake of his immediate person and begins to be considered according to what he achieves to earn merit. (ibid., p. 3)

Education and upbringing for Hegel have "the *negative* aim of raising children out of the natural immediacy in which they originally find themselves" (1820/2008, §175; p. 174; emphasis in original). Education is "negative" not in being adverse or punitive, but in making children into something *not* identical with, something *other* than, what they originally were. They are no longer a self that is defined through parental love or family bonds: "Taught in the community of many," children learn to orient themselves in school "to others, to acquire trust in other people, who are at first strangers … In school [we have] to behave in the sense of duty and law, and for the sake of a general, merely formal order" (Hegel 2021, p. 3).

If the domestic sphere follows the logic of the individual and the present, the school is oriented to collectivity and to the *future*. This orientation is clearly expressed through the activities and rituals generally limited precisely to this institution – but which appear as largely incidental to processes of student "learning." Consider how the day is begun in the classroom by singing a national anthem or school song, by collectively greeting the teacher or just answering "present!" in a roll call. Together with rules regarding entry into and exit from a class that is in session, these rituals and regulations mark both the classroom and teaching practices as special spaces and activities with their own bounded spatial and temporal order.[1] The order of the classroom is thus one that points toward the generality of the nation, of the school, or of the classroom community itself. It is one that underscores the responsibility and authority embodied in the role of the teacher. In greeting or saying "present," the individual's voice is

[1] I owe this insight to Dr. Karsten Kenklies, Strathclyde University, Glasgow, Scotland. See also Kenklies, K. (2012). Bildung und Kultur: Ästhetische Grundlagen einer vergleichenden Pädagogik. In *Bildung und Kultur: Relationen* (pp. 55–81). IKS Garamond.

not simply their own, but is commanded and coordinated with that of others – and in singing, this coordination can extend down to the level of one's breath and even heartbeat. Through these ceremonies and activities, moreover, the school day is inaugurated as a time separate from that either of the home or of the outside world. In the intimacy and individuality of the home, there are few if any such focused moments of inauguration or integration.

Significantly, the practice, rules, and roles of the school transcend any one student or teacher. Unlike in the family, roles, functions, and personalities are decoupled in the school: individual students come and go in a student cohort, as do teachers and principals in the school; general scholastic functions and processes continue nonetheless. In this sense, the school brings the child and young person from the particularity and individuality of the family into the greater generality, even universality, that marks the social order more broadly. Hegel refers to this as the "real world": "The school is the middle sphere which leads the human being from the family circle into the world, from the natural relationship of feeling and inclination into the element of matter" (2021, p. 3). He continues:

> The school [thus] has *a relationship to the real world*, and its business is to prepare the youth for it. The real world is a fixed, coherent whole of laws and institutions aiming at the general; individuals are valid only in so far as they act and behave according to this general[ity], and it does not care about their special purposes, opinions and senses. (ibid., pp. 3, 4)

This understanding of the school as positioned between family and society, as following a logic of collective and "preliminary exercise and preparation" (Vorübung und Vorbereitung) for the future, is distinctly echoed by a range of 20th and 21st century theorists of education, from Hannah Arendt (1954) to Michael Oakeshott (1989), to Niklas Luhmann (see Moeller, 2006), to Gert Biesta (2022). It is also aligned with a "continental" way of thinking of education that defines pedagogy neither as an instructional approach nor a political program (e.g., in terms of a pedagogy of the oppressed), but that sees it much more broadly in terms of the influence of one person (or group) on another (e.g., as a parent or teacher on a child).[2] It also runs contrary to John Dewey's widely accepted account of the school and education as a natural "process of living and not a preparation for future living" (1897, p. 7).[3] Learning about the generalities of law, grammar, mathematics, and science, for Hegel, as for subsequent continental pedagogy, is an *artificial* process, one that gradually progresses toward a kind of social and epistemic universality. "Education in general" in the disciplines, Hegel says,

> has the effect on the mind [*Geist*] of separating it from itself, of lifting it out of its immediate natural existence, out of the unfree sphere of feeling and instinct, and placing it in thought, whereby it acquires a consciousness above the otherwise only necessary, instinctual reaction to external impressions, and through this liberation becomes the power over immediate ideas and sensations – a liberation that constitutes the formal basis of moral conduct in general. (2021, p. 2)

Education – both as knowledge acquisition and as personal formation – occurs through processes of distantiation and alienation from the "natural" familial order dominated by particularity, immediacy, and desire.

Conclusion: COVID, the Scholastic, and the Domestic

The mutually exclusive nature of the "logics" of the school and the home have broad implications for understanding remote learning during the COVID pandemic, and also for understanding school and

[2] For more on this perspective on pedagogy, see Friesen & Kenklies (under review).
[3] Arendt makes this opposition explicit in her critique of progressivism. See Arendt, 1954, pp. 183, 195–196.

education more broadly. Hegel shows how education is a matter of "denaturing" or "artificializing" aspects of the experience of the child rather than a question of affirming and extending natural processes already in existence. It is a process that gradually orients the child or young person away from the present, from individuality, immediacy, particularity, and *necessity*, and toward the future, toward collectivity, generality, "mediation," and *freedom*. For this gradual process to take place, the time, space, and characteristics of education – particularly the logic of formal education – must be clearly demarcated from those places, times, and practices that exist outside.

Attempts to recreate the logic of the school, to reconstruct the time and space of the classroom at home, fail not only because of parental inability or absence, but precisely because of the fundamentally opposed purposes and dynamics of the scholastic and domestic realms. The technological environments typically on offer in emergency remote learning face a similar fate in the domestic world: they are simply not able to instantiate the structure and order embodied by the classroom walls or reconcile the rules, habits, and rituals that are relevant only within it to those of the home. The fledgling literature on emergency remote learning already suggests that it is only adaptive, game-like "rehearsal software" – specifically in areas like mathematics and language learning – that is able to maintain or even improve student learning in emergency remote settings (e.g., Hammerstein, et al., 2021, pp. 8–9). One could hypothesize that it is only such explicitly individualized, artificial, self-contained, and game-like technical environments that are able to achieve the reconciliation just mentioned, to simultaneously be accommodated and differentiated in relation to the home and family. Perhaps like the ludic "magic circle" initially described by Huizinga (1955), such environments can be seen to create a time and space affirmative of individuality, while simultaneously still overcoming the arbitrary particularity and subjectivity that is otherwise dominant at home. These and other conclusions about emergency remote learning, however, certainly require further investigation and theorization. But such possibilities only come to our attention when we no longer view education simply as a facilitation of ongoing learning processes or wish it to appear as the "process of living" rather than a sometimes-alienating preparation for an uncertain future.

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