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The Experience of Childhood and the Learning Society: Allowing the Child to be Philosophical and Philosophy to be Childish

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INTRODUCTION

It is noteworthy that even though the notion of the child has a ubiquitous presence in our everyday language, it is nevertheless rarely present within the field of philosophy of education.¹ If theories of learning are dependent upon a conceptualisation of the child or of childhood, one might wonder why the notion of the child is so seldom explicitly conceptualised, whether it is taken as an empirical or a conceptual reality. One line of reasoning that might explain this absence is obvious. We are no longer in need of the outdated reference to children and adults in today's dynamic and ever-changing information society, because 'to learn or not to learn' has become the number one creed. This is, at least, what the analysis of the current educational reality offered by Jan Masschelein, Maarten Simons, Ulrich Bröckling and Ludwig Pongratz shows. They argue that, today, a 'discourse of the learning society' is in effect and that this particular way of thinking and speaking leaves little choice in the way in which we relate to ourselves as actors in the educational sphere.² The 'discourse of the learning society' objectifies and problematises educational reality in terms of 'learning' and defines its members primarily as permanent learners. This discourse 'increasingly expresses the way in which we "read" our experiences, relationships and attitudes. It increasingly determines the way in which we understand and organize ourselves' (Masschelein, 2001, p. 2). More specifically, we are permanently asked to see ourselves as learners (and as nothing else), i.e. as subjects that are exclusively concerned with accumulating competences in order to safeguard and strengthen our position in life: what is 'learned' is only meaningful in

relation to this ongoing struggle to position and reposition ourselves. This demands that distinctions that traditionally shaped the educational reality, viz. between teacher and pupil or professor and student, between the already-initiated generation and the as-yet-to-be-initiated generation, become more and more meaningless. Thus, no longer bifurcating society in terms of newcomers that stand in need to be taught and the older generation that sees it as one of its most important tasks to lead these newcomers to adulthood, today we *all* relate to ourselves as ‘learners’ and we do so throughout our lives, from cradle to grave. Consequently, childhood, understood in its usual, diachronic sense, i.e. as the period of life spent in preparation for an adult life, appears as an anachronism. Similarly, Nancy Vansieleghem (2009, p. 103) remarks that, when reviewing literature on education and educational research, institutions such as the school and the family no longer help to frame ‘what can be thought of as normal and abnormal behavior [or show] what circumstances require intervention’ (p. 112). The familiar distinction between children and adults has become problematic and is being contested. Nevertheless, this distinction is still present in our language; we keep talking about young people, quarter-lifers, and so on. But these words seem to refer to nothing other than target groups, and survive due to the functionality they have vis-à-vis the discourse of lifelong learning. Therefore the ‘traditional’ distinction between child and adult no longer carries meaning and, therefore, the concept of the child seems to us to be primarily an issue to be questioned rather than a well-defined referent in current educational discourse. We believe that this situation offers possibilities for thinking of ‘an experience of childhood’ that stands for something entirely different. This would consist more precisely in conceiving childhood not in diachronic terms, or in terms of a quarantine or a preparation for a public adult life—that is what this term traditionally (before the learning society came into existence) stood for—but instead in terms of an antidote to the downsides of the learning society.³ It will become clear then that this alternative way of thinking about the child makes it possible to fathom the intersection between the experience of childhood and a critical practice of philosophy. At the end of the article we will elaborate more precisely this experience of childhood as relating to criticism and claim that it is exactly this notion of criticism that is at stake today both in education and in philosophical practice. Before setting out these rather strong claims, however, we will first provide a further analysis of the discourse of the learning society and its downsides, and then elaborate extensively this ‘experience of childhood’.

THE DISCOURSE OF THE LEARNING SOCIETY AND THE LOGIC OF BARE LIFE

Inspired by the distinction that Arendt (1951/1973; 1958) draws between *zoé* and *bios*, between ‘bare life’ and life as a human form, Masschelein has, in

his early work on the discourse of the learning society,⁴ shown *bios* to be both an effect and an instrument of the reign of the *animal laborans*. This refers to the labouring animal that in modern Western society has become the victorious figure in the struggle between the interest in survival and the longing for a significant life, which dates back as early as the ancient Greek world. *Zoe* refers to the simple fact of life (bare or naked life): it is therefore detached from all particular forms of life. A life that has a singular shape, meaning, and destiny, on the contrary, would for the Greeks have to be called *bios*. It is very important to stress here that both notions only have meaning in relation to one another. *Bios* should be defined as the true, meaningful life of those people (the free citizens) that have the opportunity to not be continuously preoccupied with survival, while *zoe* refers to the (deplorable) condition of those (women, foreigners, slaves) who are excluded from the possibility of a significant life. So, in contradistinction to the meaningful existence of singular individuals who have succeeded in lifting themselves out of the sphere of survival, *zoe* 'refers to the natural and "biological" processes of the organism, to the essential properties of organized beings that evolve from birth to death by fulfilling functions that are common to them' (Masschelein, 2001, p. 6). Now, the main characteristic of modern society is, according to Arendt, that it is a society whose most important and perhaps exclusive preoccupation is *labour*, i.e. the activity that is necessary to sustain life. To live is in this sense a continuous process of appropriating the necessary energy to satisfy our needs. The victory of the *animal laborans* therefore constitutes the one-dimensional implementation of a logic of productivity: *the logic of bare life*.

In order to understand better the distinction between 'bare life' (*zoe*) and 'human life as a form of life' (*bios*), it might be helpful to elaborate upon the difference between the concepts *environment* and *world*, which are the respective correlates of these two modes of living. In an environment (which is thus connected to 'bare life'), all that surrounds us (objects, persons, knowledge, technical skill, etc.) is considered either as a possible resource to benefit from and is seen as a functioning for survival, or it is assessed as something that stands in the way of benefit and survival. In contradistinction to an environment, a *world* is, according to Arendt, a space in which human action is understood to have *meaning*. It forms as such 'the public space between human beings who appear to each other as unique and who act and speak together' (p. 6). A world is thus supposed to hold in itself the possibility of the appearance of something other and of something new.

The logic of bare life presupposes a solely functional notion of existence, i.e. life as preoccupied with survival, fecundity, and fertility, and only allows for life to take place in an environment. This logic turns life into a cyclical event that has neither a beginning nor an end, and that is 'characterized by an eternal return insofar as the life of each member of a species essentially constitutes the repetition of that of all the other

members' (ibid.). The actions people undertake are 'evaluated as a function of the promotion and preservation of the process of life' (ibid.).

The discourse of the leaning society operates, according to Masschelein, on the basis of the very same logic, in the sense that the process of learning mirrors this anonymously biological life process of continuous and cyclical appropriation. In this sense, the predominance of learning means that we are permanently encapsulated in learning environments. So, a first reason why the predominance of learning might be criticised is that this notion presupposes a conception of life that merely expresses a struggle for survival and, as such, 'does not create a common world existing between human beings, but only guarantees participation in a common process' (p. 15). Second, given that the educational sphere is to be understood as the space where 'the new' can arise, the learning society implies that 'newness itself has been made functional and productive for the given order' (p. 16) in the sense that what is 'new' or 'other' is immediately made operative as an asset to be used.⁵ As such the willingness to allow newness does not have a chance of appearing as anything other than a competence to be acquired. Newness is no longer a challenge for thinking, or a nuisance vis-à-vis the identities and positions that we have acquired (but to which we care to stick to in spite of their contingent nature).

The overall presence of learning, and the regime of bare life that is supported by it, consequently installs 'a soft totalitarianism which constricts the imagination and inhibits our longing for something totally different than the given' (p. 3). This 'soft totalitarianism' is evident in the fact that it seems absurd to question our identity as learners or to question the benefits of lifelong learning. The logic of bare life therefore seems to be an almost inescapable aspect of the current educational reality.

THE EXPERIENCE OF THE LIFELONG LEARNER AS AN EXPERIENCE OF OMNIPOTENTIALITY

To clarify, living in the learning society can be described in terms of a specific experience that we believe to be typical for the inhabitants of this environment, and that we would like to call the experience of omnipotentiality. As life-long learners we are supposed to have a life-long capacity for gaining *assets*, and to be unceasingly interested in putting them to use.⁶ We are thus all supposed to appropriate an endlessly diversified set of *competences*, which, once attained, is supposed to form a unique cluster specific to each individual. As a result we believe ourselves to be unique *because* we possess a host of competences that we specifically need and through which we realise ourselves (as truly our *selves* and distinct from any other). Nevertheless, this quest never reaches a definitive end. The interest in becoming (uniquely) competent implies a never-ending process of acquisition of better and new competences, and of

mobilising these in order to strengthen one's position in relation to the position of others (who are also involved in a similar, continuous, and ruthless competitive battle to be more competent). It is this that gives rise to what we will call 'the experience of omnipotentiality'.⁷ The experience of omnipotentiality is to be found in the desire to make the most of our possibilities by translating them into competences that are employable. Through this translation the experience of omnipotentiality holds within itself the desire to be maximally competent and as such the promise of success.

The experience of omnipotentiality is, however, precisely something that narrows down the possibility for education to take place. As we said, what the analysis of current society as a learning society has revealed, is that all of us are encapsulated in learning environments. In spite of the predominance of this regime, however, experiences are possible that are properly educational and that might allow something other than a mere turning back to the old idea of schooling and teaching (constituting a preparation for an adult life and thus being based on a teleological view of history). Since we are all permanently living in learning environments, education cannot be conceived exclusively as a preparation for the world. What is at stake in education, then, is perhaps not a notion of preparation (for the world), but rather those moments that suspend this traditional aim and render inoperative the existing learning regime. Educational moments, then, take place when newness and otherness is allowed to appear—and here of course the figure of 'the child' comes to the fore. We should recall here, however, that newness under present conditions is immediately made functional to the existing (learning) society (that owes its continuation to the translation of potential into competence). If we are encapsulated in learning environments, then, where could this 'world' be found? The question remains how to allow or to make space for real newness to appear. This is not a question of how this newness itself can appear, for this will always remain an unanswered question. The point is rather that we cannot anticipate the new, for then it would be known in advance, and thus it would not be 'new'. So, the two questions with which we will occupy ourselves in what follows are: First, how can we conceive of a 'world' where this newness can take place? And, second, how are we to allow for such a newness to come into being?

THE EXPERIENCE OF CHILDHOOD AS AN EXPERIENCE OF TOTIPOTENTIALITY

The appearance of that which is new can be understood as the coming into being of that which is *other* to the logic of bare life and which can never be made subservient to an all-encompassing learning environment.

According to Masschelein, this newness concerns the possibility of imagining an 'appeal' to what is given, or to the current state of affairs; and 'to imagine the possibility of such an appeal requires us to recover our sense of the experience of childhood' (p. 1). Childhood, as Masschelein conceives it, should be defined as 'the appearance of the possibility of a radical questioning and thus also of a radical change of the given order' (p. 16). Therefore, the educational sphere is the place where such a radical change or radical questioning of the current discourse can occur. It is then exactly in this place that one should be able to ask whether we should subject ourselves to a logic of lifelong learning and continual strengthening of positions. Interestingly, when searching for an alternative and an antidote to the downsides of the learning society, the notion of childhood comes back to the fore. It seems then that the notion of the child bears a different meaning. To elaborate this notion of the experience of childhood, and thus the notion of newness, and their place in education, we will turn our attention to a short passage by the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben (1995, pp. 95–98).

A leitmotiv in Agamben's continuously growing oeuvre, is his elaboration of the Heideggerian thesis that what characterises (wo)man, is that we are creatures of possibility. Agamben's work can be read as several entrances to and ways of discussing the issue of human potentiality, namely that we are beings that are capable of saying of ourselves: 'I can speak, I can act' (Agamben, 1999, p. 177). Interestingly, Agamben does not link this to an experience of omnipotentiality (which would correlate with the subject that is an inhabitant of the learning society), but to an experience of impotence (pp. 181–184). He tries to show that the expression 'I can' when it is taken in its deepest sense—as *such*—is only to be understood as the experience of an absence of the concrete possibility (to speak). And here he brings in the notion of childhood, against the background that etymologically speaking the child, the in-fant, literally means the one who 'does not as yet possess the potential of speech'. So, instead of expelling the impossibility of speaking to the outskirts of the experience of being human, Agamben places it at its very centre—thus conceptualising our lack of speech, our silence, and even the empty space within letters and words as an experience that is highly significant and even the most characteristic of human action (Agamben, 1993, p. 4). It should be added that this emptiness, this lack of speech or of competence, is a dimension that has no place whatsoever in the discourse of the learning society: as far as it carries a meaning in this discourse, it appears solely as something negative, i.e. as a problem to be overcome. For the learning society this emptiness is a lack and a temporary condition to be worked upon, and a situation that calls for certain competences to be acquired. Nevertheless, Agamben sees exactly this impotence, this im-possibility, as a form of affirmation in the deepest sense of this word.

A short passage from Agamben's *The Idea of Prose*, in which he elaborates 'the idea of infancy', might be instructive here to explain why the experience of childhood may count as a genuinely 'potentialising' experience that is, paradoxically, connected to an affirmation of impotence. Here, Agamben reminds his readers of the discovery of a peculiar albino salamander, named the axolotl, which has until now perplexed biologists and zoologists. This is because the salamander maintains, throughout its entire life, characteristics typical of the larval stage of the amphibian. It spends its entire life in water, without ever losing its gills or going to live on shore, as other amphibians would do when they reach maturity. Yet, it has the capacity for reproduction. Biologists cannot but classify this strange creature as a larva, albeit a larva with the capacity of reproduction; premature, yet mature. It manifests thus a 'stubborn infantilism' (Agamben, 1995, p. 96). This peculiarity, which in biological jargon is also called 'neoteny',⁸ is now considered by evolutionary theorists to be an important key to the understanding of human evolution and '[it] is now supposed that man did not evolve from individual adults but from the young of a primate which, like the axolotl, had prematurely acquired the capacity for reproduction' (ibid.).⁹ Even though human evolution is supposed to be better understood by relating it to this peculiar manifestation of neoteny, it challenges the way in which biologists are used to categorising life and their understanding of reproduction on the basis of the distinction immature versus mature. It challenges even the very distinction immature versus mature itself.

Agamben is, however, not particularly interested in explaining or mapping human evolution. Rather, he takes neoteny as the starting point for a reflection on what is proper to (wo)man. Keeping in mind that '[c]haracteristics which in primates are transitory became final in man' (ibid.), Agamben develops the idea that this gave rise, in some way, 'to a kind of eternal child' (ibid.). This hypothesis (as he calls it) then makes it possible for him to undertake 'a new approach to language and to the entire sphere of the exosomatic tradition which, more than any genetic imprint, characterizes *homo sapiens*' (ibid.). Otherwise stated: the concept of neoteny allows us to conceive of human action as a kind of eternal immaturity, a stubborn infantilism. It is in the elaboration of this argument that Agamben offers interesting insights as to what the 'experience of childhood' might mean and how the appearance of newness forms an antidote to the logic of bare life that currently is operative. We would like to read Agamben's invitation to imagine such an infant as the educational challenge we are facing today in the light of the former critiques on the learning society.

More concretely, Agamben invites his readers to imagine an infant that 'rejects any specific destiny and any determined environment in order to hold onto its immaturity and helplessness' (ibid.). If one is stuck in a determined environment one only develops 'the infinitely repeatable

possibilities fixed in the genetic code' and thus pays attention only 'to what is written' (ibid.). What Agamben refers to as the 'infinite repeatability that is fixed in the genetic code' is read as an instantiation of the logic of bare life (and its eternal return). The 'infinite repeatability' refers to the experience of omnipotentiality, i.e. the experience of a subject that can only pay attention to 'what is written' in the sense that it presupposes a continuous confirmation of the possibilities that are inherent in the 'genetic code'. The logic of bare life presupposes this 'infinite repeatability' in the sense that one's inherent self-understanding confirms a continuous obsession and need for investment as well as an orientation to the continuous acquisition of competences. The experience of omnipotentiality is therefore a form of self-affirmation, in the sense that we realise competences that satisfy our own (individual) needs—and this in turn results in a reinforcement of the inherent regime of thinking in terms of functionality. As omnipotent beings that inhabit the learning society we are continuously occupied with the realisation of 'what is written' through the endless appropriation of our own competences. Therefore the logic of bare life gets continuously promoted and preserved, and there is no room for helplessness. Indeed, everything is accounted for, except helplessness itself.

The neotenic infant, in contradistinction to the subject of the learning environment, 'would find himself [*sic*] in the condition of being able to pay attention precisely to what has not been written' (ibid.). This attention to what has not been written might also be called 'infantile totipotency' and the neotenic infant would, in its infantile totipotency, 'be ecstatically overwhelmed, cast out himself, not like other living beings into a specific adventure or environment, but for the first time into a world' (ibid.). We can thus oppose the *omnipotential* and functional relating to an environment, to a *totipotential* existence in a world. The use of this last phraseology is clearly provocative and might sound a bit misleading, as totipotency refers to an experience of utter impossibility: this is because the neotenic in-fant is no longer interested in realising what he or she potentially might become as a life-long learner, interested in gaining a strong(er) position in life. On the contrary, leaving this interest behind, a space of radical possibility is opened, i.e. the coming of a future that is not determined by what is actually possible, but that leaves room for the unforeseeable, i.e. what counts *now* as impossible. So, the neotenic infant, while 'paying attention to what has not been written', grants the possibility of the new, i.e. of the impossible, to become reality, because it does not appropriate it, because it does not turn it towards what is immediately functional for what is given, but allows it instead to become an experience of what is given. As totipotential beings, we do not know who we are and what we are supposed to do. We do not merely leave, or easily stroll out of the determination of the environment, but we are 'cast out into a world' (ibid.). This is only realised when we abandon any determination and any

specific destiny, which is a state of holding onto 'immaturity and [a state] of helplessness' (ibid.). This abandonment and rejection then means that the neotenic child is 'entrusted to oblivion' and can as such 'truly listen' (ibid.). Indeed, in order to *truly* listen one must be silent, one must have *a lack of words*. The possibility of having an experience in which we see, hear something 'for the first time', is something the learning society immunises us against.

Elaborating the metaphor a bit further, it should be said that within the discourse of the learning society we can only hear a predefined set of sounds, i.e. that which has no place in the given register is simply unheard (of). As such, imagining other sounds is simply conceived as impossible. Assuming that the register of possible human action is already fixed, this discourse conveniently places every particular possibility within that register and is deaf to whatever falls outside of it. The only way of being able to hear what falls outside of it, and thus to 'truly listen' is to abandon the register that is given, and as such become helpless, without destination. Thus in rejecting the determination of what we as omnipotential beings might become (i.e. maximally competent learners), we might experience, negatively put, a kind of impotency, but that is simultaneously, put positively, the opening of a radical, unspecified, and open future. This concerns *not* the possibility of realising already fixed capabilities, but rather the possibility of living without determination or any destiny whatsoever (Agamben, 1999, pp. 232–238). 'Totipotency' thus relates to possibility taken *as such* (p. 249); not the superficial kind of possibility that is defined in terms of a position (of being a learner) we currently occupy, but rather 'pure' possibility (pp. 177–184). Not knowing what to do or who we are, we are exposed, 'thrown into a world' and have nothing else to do but pay attention and 'truly listen'.¹⁰

This world we are exposed to is, then, not to be understood as the sphere where human beings appear to each other as unique and that allows them to act and speak together, or the sphere where a more authentic experience of human action might occur (presupposing the possibility of a 'true human form of life' to arise). If this last were the case, the inhabitants of this world would be interested in a more genuine way of life. Instead we understand this being thrown into a world as a *desubjectifying* experience. We argue, with Agamben, for the significance and subsequently the allowing-to-be, of an experience that renders meaningless all desire to stick to a defined position or identity in life and which, for precisely that reason, opens a future in which the impossible might become possible. This is an experience in which the unforeseen is actually new, and not immediately recuperated as a part of the functional spectrum of the learning society. Through the openness that is created by this desubjectifying experience, an appeal to, and a radical change of, the given becomes possible. What is at stake in education today then is exactly the preservation of the neotenic infant, of the openness, of the allowing to be of an appeal to what is given.

What is at stake then is being helpless. This is clearly to be distinguished from and opposed to an existence that is lived from the perspective of omnipotentiality, which implies that the scope of life is made functional and that narrows life down to functional competences.

Childhood—taken in a critical sense, i.e. as an antidote to current societal developments—relates then to an experience that renders it impossible to remain who one is or is supposed to be. In that way, the future is set radically free, which is to say without destination. ‘Childhood’, as it is conceived by Agamben, is thus obviously not referring to the usual meaning of this word, i.e. the first part of a diachronic development that ends in adulthood. The experience of childhood is to be understood apart from this distinction. Childhood is not the negation of adulthood (i.e. not yet being grown up), nor is it to be conceived in relation to an adulthood that it lacks. It should rather be taken *as such*, i.e. as the indeterminate openness that characterises or correlates with a world. The ‘soft totalitarianism’ of the discourse of the learning society can then be interpreted precisely as a way of closing down the neotenic openness, by singling out omnipotency as the exclusive way to experience our ‘dwelling in being’, and as such not allowing for an experience of totipotency to take place. We could say, then, that taking the Agambenian experience of childhood seriously, the learning society and its logic of bare life should be criticised because they immunise us against the possibility of living through an experience of totipotency. The full experience of potentiality is undermined by the fact that within the learning society the very possibility of rejecting our destiny has become unintelligible. Rejecting one’s destiny as a lifelong learner would mean that one desires to become incompetent, and thus become a totally useless individual that has decided to exclude itself from the struggle for survival and of gaining assets. Lacking these assets, this struggle would be resolved pretty fast. Otherwise stated, the discourse of the learning society, in turning all actions into useful learning activities, not only reflects the logic of bare life, but in doing so, moreover, denies ‘indeterminate openness’. So, the discourse of the learning society walls in the neotenic openness, and shrouds the in-fant with its competence-orientated cloak. It is then only through oblivion, forgetfulness, and helplessness that an unforeseeable alternative to the encapsulating logic of bare life would become possible, and that another way of living remains principally possible.

NEOTENY FOR BEGINNERS?

‘Somewhere inside of us, the neotenic child continues its royal game,’ Agamben says (1995, p. 98). Beautiful and promising as these words are, we still have to consider how we are to allow this eternal child to emerge

from beneath the rubble of the learning society. Should we remind ourselves to be silent or should we tell ourselves that we don't have to be competent? Or, should we *learn* in some way or other how to truly listen? Even though these suggestions might seem interesting, the answer to these questions cannot be positive: this is because the very asking of *these* questions seems contradictory to the idea of totipotentiality. Denying the destiny of the life-long learner, the experience of totipotentiality *grants* a moment of *suspension* of the logic of bare life.¹¹ It is as a result of thinking in accordance with the figure of the *animal laborans* that we are continuously inclined to ask how to translate the remarks of Agamben into concrete pedagogical practices and didactic instruments, and that we desire to possess a manual that would give concrete guidelines and make us competent, omnipotential beings. The very occurrence of suspension can never be the result of the application of a trick that can be taught or learned, and can thus never be the object of method. Offering a 'manual of suspension' would consist in explaining how we should begin anew, but the only manual for beginning anew is a perfectly empty book that offers potentiality itself, in its emptiness, in its lack of destiny.¹² Nevertheless going through these moments of suspension might be the most truthfully educational experience that remains in a time of an all-encompassing learning society. The moments that are the most educational for the authors of this text are not characterised by a reassuring confirmation of our roles as lifelong learners, or even as (anachronistic) teachers, nor by the heart-warming knowledge that we have been at the right place at the right time to account for a so-called educational problem. Rather, what is educational comes in those moments at which we have 'lost ourselves' and undergone a desubjectivation of some sort, became immature and helpless, and experienced as such a suspension of the logic that seemed to determine us so strongly, and which made it possible to be exposed to a world 'for the first time'. At these moments we were neotenic infants, entrusted to oblivion. To be 'useless', instead of feeling ourselves obliged to account for the thoughtlessness and indeterminate openness of the world by identifying ourselves on the basis of omnipotentiality, is thus the challenge that we—educators, philosophers, and neotenic children alike—are facing today. This challenge is to be taken on through an endless search, by adopting attitudes that do not allow the immunisation against experiences that is totipotency to take place.

WHEN PHILOSOPHY BECOMES CHILDISH (AGAIN)

We have so far left the notion of philosophy out of our discussion, yet its presence has been, up to now, a *silent* presence. Some remarks concerning philosophical practice will have to suffice here in order to expand upon the promised cross-section between philosophy and the child.

We must, of course, confront the question of defining philosophical practice. Dealing with the same question in their book, straightforwardly titled, *What is philosophy?* Deleuze and Guattari define philosophy as the art of creating concepts (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994, p. 2). Concepts of course form a part of our everyday lives, where they are used to simplify communication, to make decisions and to form opinions. Yet this is not, according to Deleuze and Guattari, what is so interesting about concepts. Each philosopher, and, we should add, each reader of philosophy, creates her own concepts and practices this art of creation. A concept is not the same as an idea, a notion, or a function. What is distinctive about a concept is that it has a consistency defined by its internal components and thus has no reference to any external determination or presupposition concerning its coherence, which is the case for scientific functions or logical propositions.¹³ In this sense concepts have no referent at all, but are intensive and express the virtual existence of an event in thought (p. 21). A concept, then, has no necessary reference to truth, for this would make the creation of the concept subject to an external determination and as such put it at the service of a dogmatic image of thought, of how one should think. A concept is then not to be seen as true or false, but instead as affective and active and should therefore be understood as a form or a force (p. 144). Concepts, taken as forms or forces, are means by which we are able to experience something anew, and are able to think of new possibilities (Parr, 2005, p. 50). The creation of concepts originates in a denial of being at the service of existing images of thought, and in its expression of an event in thought, the active means by which we can 'think anew'. Admittedly, we don't need this kind of concept in order to be able to think, as we can very well think according to current ideas and notions, following existing thoughts. Yet in order to be able to think anew, we have to engage in the philosophical practice of creating concepts. Philosophy is exactly that practice that makes the experience of the new possible through the creation of concepts.

Considering concepts to be the *material* of the philosopher Deleuze and Guattari immediately encounter rivals that lay claim to the creation of concepts. Most notably, in recent times 'the most shameful moment came when computer science, marketing, design and advertising, all the disciplines of communication, seized hold of the word concept itself and said: "This is our concern, we are the creative ones, we are the ideas men!"' (1994, p. 10). Dealing with concepts in this way becomes thinking of new ways to make concepts marketable, therefore restricting the concept's powers and making it subservient to a regime of thought. When turning the creation of concepts into the *engineering* of concepts, concepts are no longer means by which we answer an event in thought and through which we can think anew, but become instead mere functional instruments.

So, it might be argued that the art of creating concepts has today become subject to what we have been calling the logic of bare life. The engineering and development of concepts is yet another competence to be acquired. Rendering the creation of concepts subservient to the logic of bare life, makes dealing with concepts a question of functionality (e.g. Is this concept efficiently developed? Is this concept useful for our purpose?). The transformative power of concepts is denied, as they are turned into instruments. Yet the problem is not only that the philosopher's material is being turned into instruments, but concerns above all the functionalisation of the art of creating concepts, by making it subservient to external determinations in the name of the logic of bare life—'an absolute disaster for thought, whatever its benefits may be' (p. 12).

Yet Deleuze and Guattari's criticism is not to be conflated with the cliché that philosophy should be without functionality or use. Saying that 'the greatness of philosophy' is to be found in its uselessness 'is a frivolous answer that not even young people find amusing any more' (p. 6). In earlier work, Deleuze had already confronted this question of philosophy's uselessness: 'When someone asks "what's the use of philosophy?" the reply must be aggressive, since the question tries to be ironic and caustic. Philosophy does not serve the State nor the Church, who have other concerns. It serves no established power. The use of philosophy is to sadden. A philosophy that saddens no one, that annoys no one, is not a philosophy Philosophy is at its most positive as a critique, as an enterprise of demystification' (Deleuze, 1983, p. 106).

Philosophical practice, as the art of creating concepts and as a critical occupation, is not, of course, of no use whatsoever. Yet *this* use is not to be understood functionally: *its use is not to be found in its not having any use, but its uselessness is its relevance*. Its specific relevance today might be understood in the fact that it should be totally useless vis-à-vis the logic of bare life. Deleuze and Guattari write that '[t]he philosopher is the concept's friend; he is potentiality of the concept' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994, p. 5). This quote resonates with what we have said about potentiality. The figure through which we try to understand philosophical practice should not only be *the friend*, but also and perhaps more importantly *the neotenic infant*.

In order to be able to create concepts as a philosophical activity, one needs to suspend any established order. It is precisely here that the cross-section between the child and the philosopher is to be found. Philosophical practice could be seen as a practice that cannot of itself be reconciled with the logic of bare life, precisely because it arises from the neotenic openness, i.e. helplessness and rejection of any destiny. It is here that philosophy becomes childish. The question of philosophy's use, however, is no longer an ironic one under the conditions we find ourselves in today. As a rule, philosophers now are increasingly asked to account for what they are doing:

they have continually to explain why a particular philosophical investigation is useful, whereby usefulness is to be understood in terms of an external justification that mirrors the logic of bare life, manifested in an endless appropriation of publications and methodological expertise. The currently hard-felt need to define philosophical activity as a useful activity—in its content, its methods, or its objectives—jeopardises the very *potentiality* that characterises philosophy. Shouldn't we, we might ask, just because we are philosophers and educators be sharing the problematisation of our usefulness? In this sense the experience of childhood is what is at stake today; and this, then, is first of all to be understood as allowing the experience of childhood to occur so that we can 'think anew'.

We will end by saying that it is the 'allowing' that is particularly relevant where philosophy enters the school curriculum. Of course it seems convenient, if not practically inevitable, to define philosophy (for/with children) as a set of practices, competences, methods, and skills that have a specific content and deliver specific goals, as is clearly seen in the Philosophy for Children program.¹⁴ Yet this definition of philosophical practice, as the cultivation of critical thinking skills, turns these skills into competences to acquire, and thereby seems to undermine neotenic openness and to make it subservient to a regime of thought that is not its own creation. Now, we believe that philosophical practice is revealed here in an all too straightforward way, and that the experience of childhood is also a potential *threat* to any established societal and pedagogical order. This might explain why it is convenient to rely on the (anachronistic) immature/mature distinction and to conceive (anachronistically) children in such a manner that we simply cannot leave them in this state of helplessness, since they are in need of the support of an adult generation. This is to say that philosophy for/with children is therefore rendered subservient to the existing regime, i.e. as an interesting addition to the set of competences provided by the existing curriculum. Yet, as we have argued, it is exactly this experience of childhood as a suspension of the logic of bare life that can be shared amongst the participants of philosophy for/with children, making of every participant a neotenic infant. We can only hope that philosophy for/with children as a practice gives birth to experiences of childhood, and that the contributions in this Special Issue that discuss more practical applications offer occasions to do so. If, however, the reader finds that these contributions render both the notions of philosophy and of the child subservient to a discourse that breathes the spirit of the learning society and its logic of bare life, we hope that a little frown may be aimed at the dark side of the educator's heartfelt intention, which, it must be acknowledged, we share. It is, after all, for philosophers, for children, and for educators one of the harshest, if not the most difficult and contradictory thing to aspire to, to be oblivious, to be forgetful, to be helpless: to believe, then, that less can indeed be more.

NOTES

1. Looking for places where childhood forms an important object of study, one finally arrives at areas such as developmental psychology, sociology of childhood, or history of childhood. In educational sciences itself this interest is rather limited. In fields such as philosophy for/with children, the concept of the child is mostly unquestioned, and the publications in this field more often than not prefer to emphasise practical applications. Notable exceptions are the work of David Kennedy (2006) and Andrew Stables (2008).
2. See Masschelein, 2000, 2001; Simons, 2000a, 2000b; Simons and Masschelein, 2008a, 2008b; Masschelein, Simons, Bröckling and Pongratz, 2006.
3. Lyotard has also used the concept of 'enfance' in his work in relation to a notion of questioning or resistance. See for instance *Lectures d'enfance* (1991) and Masschelein and Smeyers, 2000. Of course, there is a long history of thought in which the concept of the child refers to something more, or other, than a diachronic referent, in which the semantic connection of the figure of the child to innocence, purity, creativity, beginning anew, etc. can be traced throughout areas such as the arts or religion (e.g. Kennedy, 2006).
4. In his early work on the discourse of the learning society, Jan Masschelein (2001) drew mainly on Hannah Arendt's analysis of the present, whereas in later work he has abandoned the normative position Arendt takes for a more a-normative Foucauldian perspective.
5. This immediate 'translation' of what is new and other into competences and assets, is also seen in the widespread conviction that the solution for economic crises is to be found in the promotion of a knowledge society in which we continuously have to be creative and innovative. We should all put our creative resources to work, more than we already do, to help to safeguard the continuation of the existing, productivity-based economy.
6. This supposedly inexhaustible learning capacity is defined in terms of a rationality in view of which learning is considered to be a process of reflexive problem solving (e.g. Masschelein, 2001, p. 12). In later work Simons and Masschelein have shown the subject of the learning society to have an entrepreneurial relation to the self. This entrepreneurial attitude is evident in the interlacing of 'learning', 'living', and 'investment' (Simons, 2006, p. 532). Also see Masschelein and Simons, 2002 and Vlieghe, 2010 who elaborates a similar point of view from the standpoint of human embodiment in relation to the recent work of Judith Butler.
7. The concept of omnipotentiality is taken from a short passage in Agamben's *Idea of Prose* (where he comments on the idea of power (Agamben, 1995, p. 71)). The concept is here not necessarily used completely in line with Agamben's own idea.
8. Neoteny is a specific form of what biologists call 'pedomorphism', which occurs in both fauna and flora. Neoteny, as the acquisition of adult features (such as the capacity for reproduction) whilst remaining in juvenile form (such as the larval stage), is of particular interest here because it is in this notion that maturity and infancy are no longer in opposition to each other, and thus no longer seem to derive meaning from one another. Pedomorphism, then, challenges the distinctions that biologists or zoologists classically make between immaturity and maturity. Other forms of pedomorphism are, for instance, a delayed maturation (postdisplacement), or a halt of maturation itself (progenesis).
9. See Desmond Morris' *Naked Ape* (1967) or Gould's *Ontogeny and Phylogeny* (1977) for a short list of neotenic traits.
10. In this respect Masschelein has argued for a 'poor pedagogy' where the focus lies on 'e-ducatng the gaze'. He argues for a distinction between education and e-ducation, where the first stands for 'leading in' (learning) and the second for 'leading out'. In this view of a poor pedagogy, '[e]-ducatng the gaze is not about arriving at a liberated or critical view, but about liberating or displacing our view. It is not about becoming conscious or aware, but about becoming attentive, about paying attention.' Such a view on e-ducation is 'not dependent on method, but relies on discipline; it does not require a rich methodology, but asks for a poor pedagogy, i.e. for practices which allow us to expose ourselves, practices which bring us into the streets, displace us' (Masschelein, 2010, p. 44).

11. As we stated earlier, the Greek notions of *bios* and *zoe'* derive their meaning *only in relation to one another*. The Agambian suspension is then not only a suspension of the logic of bare life, but also a suspension of the oppositional structure of *form of life* and *bare life*, without which the logic of bare life would not work.
12. Cf. Agamben, 1995, pp. 31–34.
13. Deleuze and Guattari go to great lengths to make this point, and to differentiate philosophy from science and the arts. See Deleuze and Guattari, 1994, pp. 117–200.
14. See e.g. Lipman, Sharp and Oscanyan, 1980.

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