# Rearranging Educational Deck Chairs on the Titanic

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The world is going to hell in a handbasket. It is hard to argue with this initial premise of Fran Schrag's "Education for the Twenty-Second Century."[1] In many parts of the world, the future is now. As Schrag puts it, "millions of children … *already* live in a 'worst-case' world" of violence and 'natural' disasters.[2] For those of us insulated by privilege and geographical luck, it is our children's children who will inherit this Hobbesian universe of traumatic weather cataclysms, forced dislocation and scarcity, erosion of the rule of law, violence, authoritarianism, and more. Schrag secures this premise with the classic "spectro-fenestral" argument: look out the damn window. His second premise is also compelling. Schrag posits that the best education is that which prepares the young—to whatever degree possible—to lead flourishing lives not in the current world, and certainly not in some ideal world, but in the future world that they will inhabit. While Schrag is not offering a full account of human flourishing, he does advance one ethical proposition (his third premise), that living well requires the ability to cope with the unpredictable and the calamitous. Even in our relatively cushy world, Schrag observes, anxiety and loss can be crippling. In the Hobbesian world the great ethical challenge will be to maintain one's moral center, to remain human, in conditions where one is constantly tempted to become, in Epictetus' colorful formulation, a "wolf, snake, or hornet."[3]

In these three sensible steps, Schrag sets the stage for his provocative thesis: an education for the twenty-second century should be modeled on the ancient form of soul therapy known as Stoicism. For the Stoics, the best life was the virtuous life, one spent pursuing the good in light of rational evaluations of what matters and what is possible, reading ourselves and our situations with perceptual and moral clarity. To achieve this in a world of suffering, they argued, required a program of spiritual exercises to help us free ourselves from the tyranny of "irrational, out of control emotions, notably fear, anger, and sadness" so that we could learn to distinguish between what is under our control and what is not, what matters and what is ultimately inconsequential.[4]


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To secure this conclusion, Schrag defends it against four likely objections. First, is it not implausible that Hellenistic philosophy would be the right foundation for an education keyed to the twenty-second century? Schrag counters that, centuries aside, the world we are crashing into is not unlike the one that spawned Stoicism. Like ours, theirs was a time of political and existential instability. Schrag also points to the fact that one of the leading forms of contemporary psychotherapy, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), is basically stoicism in modern form. Second, is it not inappropriate to ask schools, built for academic instruction, to provide soul therapy? To this, Schrag replies that he is not concerned with schooling, but education in a world lacking the stable political communities that sponsor schooling. Third, is there not something cult-like in this idea of "initiates" and "re-educators?"[5] Here, Schrag returns to the example of CBT as proof of concept that one does not have to subscribe to a Stoic comprehensive conception in order to benefit from Stoic therapy. Fourth, is philosophy not absurdly impractical in a Hobbesian world where presumably what matters is survival skills? Schrag meets this objection with a Stoic counter-question: Have you really survived if you have lost your humanity?

After this rapid-fire round of *quaestiones disputatae*, Schrag considers a more serious objection at greater length, namely that the Stoics have mistaken floundering for flourishing. The Stoic sage seems wrapped up in his own virtue and cut off from his emotions; and he seems likely to treat the *vita activa* as one big "indifferent." Schrag denies this last charge, that Stoicism entails quietism. For the Stoics, the aim is to live according to our nature and this anthropology includes not only reason but prosociality; taking care of your loved ones and your political community is a part of a rational and virtuous life. To the other charges, he pleads no contest, admitting that the Stoic—prone to "self-absorption," "limiting the emotional investment in … other people," and inured to spontaneity and surprise—may strike us as emotionally stunted.[6] Nonetheless, Schrag argues, this sort of emotional distance is just what is needed in the coming maelstrom.

In responding to this argument, I would like to offer an observation, a distinction, and a criticism. The observation concerns the seeming iconoclasm

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of Schrag's essay, which challenges us to stop tinkering with the common school and start thinking about how to educate for the coming destruction of the commons. Schrag means to provoke thought, and he does. Nonetheless, this is not a dramatic departure from educational philosophy's canonical concerns. *Emile* is a neo-Stoic work and, like Schrag, Rousseau appeals to us to arm the young against the inevitable slings and arrows: "Do you not see that in working to form him exclusively for one station, you are making him useless for any other, and that if fortune pleases, you will have worked only to make him unhappy?"[7] Rather than snakes and hornets, Rousseau warns that those unprepared for turbulence will devolve into "public rascal[s]" and "crawling valet[s]."[8] Schrag's provocation is reminiscent of one of the *Emile's* most dramatic passages:

> You trust in the present order of society without thinking that this order is subject to inevitable revolutions, and it is impossible for you to foresee or prevent the one which may affect your children. The noble become commoners, the rich become poor, the monarch becomes subject. Are the blows of fate so rare that you can count on being exempted from them? We are approaching a state of crisis and the age of revolutions. Who can answer for what will become of you then? All that men have made, men can destroy .... Happy is the man who knows how to leave the station which leaves him and to remain a man in spite of fate![9]

This passage raises a crucial interpretive question: Who is the recipient of this Stoic intervention? Ostensibly, both Rousseau and Schrag are describing an education for the young. Attune them to their humanity; help them learn to discern what is in and what out of their control; wean them from concern over station and honor: only then will they be prepared to endure the outrageousness of Fortune. Alternatively, we can read this as an education enacted rather than one described. This second reading stresses the passage's direct address. It is our trust that is being questioned, our conduct toward our children, our fantasy that we are immune to fate. Note that this second reading actually makes more sense in a Stoic framework. As Martha Nussbaum explains, responsiveness to the

particular case is a core tenet of Hellenistic ethics. "Just as a good doctor heals case by case," she explains, "so good [ethical therapy] responds to the pupil's concrete situation and needs."[10] Schrag does a fine job of helping us imagine the *general* situation we will confront as seas rise and democracies collapse, but Stoicism demands a finer responsiveness: Who is your pupil and what do they need? What is going on in their inner and outer life?

Absent a time machine, novels may be our best way to approximate this sort of situational discernment. Consider Cormac McCarthy's harrowing exploration of hope and humanity on life support in the Hobbesian world. As *The Road* makes clear, the only way to learn how to survive as a physical and moral being in such a world will be, to put it euphemistically, experientially.[11] McCarthy makes a mockery of the idea that educators might prepare for collapse: it is the road itself that educates in this post-apocalyptic world. And the lesson learned is decidedly un-Stoic. It turns out that the love of a parent for a child is the core survival skill, that our privative affective bonds are the stuff of which a public world might be rebuilt. McCarthy writes of the father character: "He knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke."[12] McCarthy makes a compelling case that the Hobbesian world is no place for loosening attachments, for "limiting the emotional investment you make in other people."[13]

Perhaps Schrag is on more solid ground if we read this not as an essay about a prophylactic education for future pupils but rather as the enactment of a re-education for us. Without denying the importance of the intervention he does make—provoking us to ask if we are simply rearranging educational deck chairs on the titanic—I want to close by highlighting the intervention that Schrag does not make. He takes it as a given that our children's children will inhabit the nightmare world. And maybe he is right. But note that David Wallace-Wells, the source anchoring Schrag's first premise, is himself agnostic about what level of collapse can be expected, what degree of calamity can still be averted. Wallace-Wells is writing not to convert the outright climate-change deniers but to interrupt the soft denialism of the rest of us, the everyday disavowal of "not me" and "not yet."[14] It is striking that Schrag addresses us as

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preparers of a future generation, not as current co-conspirators of the next great extinction. Is this not the need that the discerning Stoic would seek to address? Here again, though, a Stoic cure might be worse than the disease. Given that we are paralyzed by the feeling that climate change is too big for us to do anything about, that this is something out of our control, this is not the time for even a nuanced form of Stoic *apatheia*.

Even while grateful for this generative provocation, I have raised questions about its method and conclusions. Stoicism is not a body of settled doctrine but a praxis for unsettling the sort of beliefs that hamper us from living well.[15] Thus, to avoid a performative contradiction, Schrag's essay must either offer a prescription for our children's children or enact a treatment for us. However, in working up either patient—in line with the Stoic injunction to situational responsiveness—we are led to the conclusion that indifference, even the philosophically sophisticated form extolled by the Stoics, is very far from the right medicine.

REFERENCES

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12 McCarthy, *The Road*, 4.

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14 David Wallace-Wells, *The Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Warming* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2019), 149-150.

15 A number of authors have demonstrated that Hellenistic philosophy was not understood as theory building but rather as a form of transformative education. In addition to Martha Nussbaum's recovery of this therapeutic model of ethics, compare Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995) and Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self: Volume 3 of The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley, (New York: Vintage, 1988).

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