Confronting the historical millstone of negative theorisation: Lifelong education and learning as a disabled vehicle for spiritual learning in a secular age.

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Introduction
This paper looks at the potential of lifelong education and learning to serve as an educational framework in developing the spiritual underpinnings of individual well-being. Its justification for so doing lies in the straightforwardly important role of lifelong education and learning in contributing to the development of well-being and in the importance of spirituality to individual well-being.

The concern here with spirituality itself comes to attention through recent work, such as that drawn together by George Levine (2011), and in the work of Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Kelly (2011), in which there are examples of the nature of, and the problems arising from the secular nihilism and spiritual emptiness pervading contemporary Western society, and the secular opportunities presented to counter that emptiness. Those opportunities call for lifelong education and learning intervention to facilitate their more general realization.

Spirituality and Well-being
In my use of ‘spirituality’ here I am following a well-trodden path in identifying the extent to which one’s life is meaningful (Myers, 1997). Meaningfulness in this context is the sense that one belongs to (fits into; is a part of) an ordered universe (Taylor, 1989). It involves not only knowing about the universe and one’s place within it, but also accepting and celebrating those realities. Knowing about or of the universe involves knowledge of what is taken to be true, good, right, beautiful and admirable, and of one’s place in the scheme of things (Webster, 2002). Knowledge about what is taken to be true involves knowledge of both the (metaphysical) foundations of reality and its empirical nature and functioning (propositional or descriptive knowledge). Knowledge about what it is good to be and right to do involves ethical (or normative) knowledge, including that of the self, in qualities such as dignity. (Aesthetic) knowledge of what is beautiful, well formed or
well designed and what is admirable or awe-inspiring involves also the capacity to be overwhelmed by the recognition – in nature, as in human action or artefact – of realities presenting those qualities. (Existential) knowledge, including mindfulness, of one’s individual, social and cultural being and presence or place in the scheme of things involves one in understanding who one is and where one stands as a being in relation to those other epistemic realities (metaphysical, propositional, ethical, and aesthetic), including, of course, those that are cultural or social in nature. Accepting those realities involves an acceptance of the order of things, of one’s-self, and of one’s place in the universe (Tillich, 1980). This aspect of spirituality may, thus, like the knowledge of one’s being and one’s place in the scheme of things, be seen as existential in nature. Celebrating those realities involves a sense of joy in what is and one’s place in it: an appreciation of those epistemic realities regardless of their empirical manifestations (Taylor, 2007). Again, this aspect of spirituality may be seen, from an epistemological perspective, as being existential in nature.

‘Well-being’ (or ‘wellbeing’) in the present context may be understood as a sense satisfaction with one’s life situation and being. In other words, it is a personal evaluative assessment of the extent to which one is satisfied, not only with one’s life circumstances (opportunities, endowments, threats, treatment by others and the world at large, and so on) and with oneself as a person (physically, mentally, emotionally, and socially), but also with how one has responded to contingent events throughout life, and what one has become as a person (Field, 2009). Happiness is sometimes taken as being a measure of well-being, although it is at best only a partial and unreliably variable such measure. Well-being is commonly taken to be underpinned by, or to be a function of, a number of states-of-affairs, particularly (Nussbaum, 2000): bodily and mental health; material sufficiency, in the sense of food, shelter, clothing, discretionary opportunities, and other culturally grounded material needs; the quality of relationships with others; a self-perceived absence of threat to one’s welfare or that of one’s significant others, such as family members, from violence, theft, other wrongdoing, or discrimination; one’s spirituality; and the extent to which one is able to act constructively on the basis of one’s spirituality. Acting constructively on the basis of one’s spirituality involves constructive – satisfying and meaningful – relationships with and contributions to one’s social,
physical, cultural, and spiritual context (Gough & McGregor, 2007). These relationships involve both the skills and expertise of instrumental manipulative engagement – for example, in craft and in taking pride in one’s work of whatever sort, and the contribution to human knowledge and understanding in any of the epistemic realms (metaphysical, propositional, existential, aesthetic, or ethical). They involve also one in acting ethically and sensitively in one’s social relationships with others and, more broadly, in all of one’s actions that impact on the welfare and well-being of others (Nussbaum, 2000). And they involve satisfying and meaningful relationships with other persons, and with cultural organisations and institutions (White, 2008). Acting constructively on the basis of one’s spirituality also involves contributing to the qualities of one’s cultural universe that make it true, good, right, beautiful, or admirable, through, for example, serving as a model of ethical action, creating beautiful artefacts, and achieving good outcomes in one’s work (White, 2008).

**The Role of the Gods**

Gods have traditionally been invoked – or understood as giving – spiritual meaning to the contingencies of human existence through providing it with: moral and spiritual purpose; the hope of ever-lasting life after bodily death; beauty in the creation of earthly life in all its diversity, joy and wonder in the contemplative presence of such beauty; diversity and its underlying order; gratitude in the gift of the opportunity to be involved in this life; transcendental explanations for natural phenomena; reasons for suffering or loss (in the form of punishments for oversights or misdemeanors); and the possibility of reward for good thoughts and rights actions (Dreyfus & Kelly, 2011). That spiritual meaning has been the existential heart of religious belief systems, through which the intentions, purposes, wishes and directives of the Gods have been articulated, communicated and imposed. Spirituality, has thus come to be associated, very largely, with specific frameworks of religious belief and God(s) identified in each (Ardell, 1996). The God(s) made the world an enchanted place. They made it a place of ‘all things shining’ in the overwhelming sense of wonder at, and gratitude for, life’s events that the enchantment provided (Dreyfus & Kelly, 2011). However, the modern rise of scientific rational empiricism has disenchanted the world of the Gods, through undermining the explanatory power of religious traditions,
challenging evidence for the existence of the Gods, and questioning the theistic teleology in which spiritual meaning has been grounded (Weber, 1989).

**The Contemporary Secular Nihilism**
That epistemic undermining of the persuasive power and authority of religious belief systems is commonly seen as having left contemporary Western society bereft of the spiritual meaning that has traditionally been provided by religious frameworks of belief (Taylor, 2007). In the absence of transcendental or supernatural standards, and the failure of scientific inquiry to identify objectively true standards of value, value (including moral value) tends to be relativized to (arbitrary) individual or collective choice: nihilism becomes pervasive; the world and individual existence lose their meaning and purpose; wonder and gratitude are drained away; and individualism and despair become general (Lesser, 1999). Our contemporary secular nihilism confronts us with an unrelenting array of value choices, for which we lack a shared notion of meaning through which we could ground our choices, giving us a sense of harmonious attainment in the world.

From a secular perspective, what is seen as missing in this secular nihilism is a (pervasive) secular spirituality that would take the place of the lost religious spirituality in providing grounds for a sense of wonder, gratitude and purpose beyond the egoistically individualistic: a secular humanism sufficiently rich and robust in spirituality to sustain a just, purposeful and meaningful existence; a re-enchantment of the disenchanted world (Taylor, 2011).

**Opportunities for Spirituality in the Secular Context**
An important body of contemporary scholarship is devoted to articulating aspects of this quest for a sustaining secular spirituality. A significant program in that work is the attempt to identify, understand and articulate secular spirituality in those persons who seem to evidence it. The focus in such work is on the myriad forms of human involvement in a demanding realm of human engagement, including crafts, sports, and intellectual, creative, performing, and civil society engagements. That pluriformity points to the intrinsic nature of a sense of secular spirituality – drawing on the nature of the engagements, achievements and contributions – which need not, in other words, be extrinsically or transcendentally located.
Significantly, such sacred or enchanted engagements all involve highly developed skill and understanding of their subject matter, in the course of which, mastery of the engagement is developed. And they involve a highly developed critical awareness of what one is doing (Webster, 2002).

**The Imperative for Lifelong Education and Learning**

The imperative, here, for lifelong education and learning is that of creating educational opportunities for the development of secular spirituality in its myriad of potentially different forms. Such opportunities must be responsive, not only to that diversity, but also to the requirements for immersion in the engagement, learner life-cycle and cultural differences, and the progressive development of skill, sensitivity and understanding particular to each. Since lifelong education and learning theory has become widely recognized as the organizing framework for post-compulsory education policy and practice, it is imperative for the theory to recognize the importance to human well-being of education of the type articulated here. To the extent that the theory fails to gain purchase on this imperative, there is a serious failing in the theory.

**The Educational Potential of Lifelong Education and Learning Theory**

**Lifelong Learning Theory as Conceptually Homogenising**

Contemporary lifelong education and lifelong learning theory may be understood as a reaction against a diverse array of counter-emancipatory value emphases and conceptual distinctions characterising prevailing educational provision at the time its foundational formulation, during the 1960s and 1970s (Bagnall, 2012). The formative response to that array of counter-emancipatory qualities was, essentially, to construct a theory by conceptualising their ideal counter-factuals. However, in the revolutionary mood of the 1960s and 1970s, conceptual distinctions were popularly constructed as problems in themselves: as barriers to an unfettered freedom out of which good things would, ipso facto, grow. This encouraged the popular, if irrational, denial of the value and moral legitimacy of all such distinctions: a denial which carried over strongly into the articulation of lifelong education and learning theory. The unfortunate institutionalisation of this conceptual homogenisation into lifelong education and learning theory has been most comprehensively argued for and
articulated by Kenneth Wain, initially in his foundational attempt to identify a philosophy for lifelong education (Wain, 1987) and, more recently, in his reflections on the wisdom and success of that venture (Wain, 2004). Wain, in these works, drew from informing lifelong education and learning theory to argue that the program of reform that is driven by the theory is grounded in the denial of such otherwise crucial distinctions as those between learning and education, between desirable and actual learning outcomes, between what is educationally normative and empirically evident, between engagements that are more educationally valuable and productive than others, and between educational and other lived activities (Bagnall, 2012). He sharpened and clarified a selection of earlier lifelong learning arguments for all life’s events to be regarded as educational and for education to be recognised as a criterionless and standardless celebration of learning in all of its magnificently joyous diversity. Education, as learning, thus should be, and simultaneously is, life-long and life-wide. Education should be, and is, thus totally inclusive. No longer is it academically elitist, discriminatory, or pre-occupied with scholarly standards of attainment and with educational achievements painstakingly argued to be of cultural value. All learning that anyone regards as being valuable is, by that fact, of equal value to all other learning and is, ipso facto, educational in virtue of that fact. It is this conceptual homogenisation that both renders lifelong learning so beguilingly appealing and defines the limits of its capacity to inform reforms in educational policy, provision and engagement, and to serve as a framework for the sort of educational provision indicated by the need to develop a pervasive secular spirituality.

Lifelong Learning Theory as Transformative

Another important appeal of lifelong education and learning theory – arguably its major appeal – has been its transformative nature. In spite of its conceptual homogenisation, lifelong education and learning theory and advocacy seeks to change education into a force for radical social change in addressing individual developmental and social needs, empowering disadvantaged individuals and groups, and responding to technological change (Faure, 1972). These transformative dimensions have been argued in previous work to be best understood as having been driven over the last three decades by three clearly recognisable but interrelated informing progressive sentiments: the individual, the democratic and the adaptive
(Bagnall, 2012). Each of these progressive sentiments identifies a distinctive stream, current or strand of commitment to cultural reform. Together, they make a powerful foundation for lifelong education and learning theory to serve as vehicle for transformatively educational change.

The transformative nature of lifelong education and learning theory and policy that flows from the influence of these three progressive sentiments may be seen as the essence of the theory and the quality which gives it purchase as a framework for the sort of educational provision indicated by the need to develop a pervasive secular spirituality.

**Lifelong Learning Policy as Domesticating**

However, the one singular evaluative theme of the considerable body of critique of lifelong learning policy and practice over the last 20 years has been the failure of lifelong learning policy and practice to capture and realise the transformatively educational thrust of the theory. The three sentiments identified above are seen as having been transmogrified into lifelong learning policy and programs that are essentially domesticating (Bagnall, 2012).

**Lifelong Education and Learning as a Vehicle for Spiritual Change**

Here, then, is the dilemma. The educational development of opportunities for spiritual development in the contemporary cultural context of secular nihilism calls for transformative education of the sort that, although captured through the progressive sentiments of lifelong education and learning theory, is not realised significantly in lifelong education and learning policy and practice. As a vehicle for the development of spirituality, lifelong education and learning is thus largely ineffective. While the theorization of lifelong education and learning has focused strongly on its transformatively educational dimensions, lifelong education and learning policy and practice have focused strongly on instrumentally accommodating individuals to the demands of immediate cultural contingencies.

The point that I want to make here is that this failure of lifelong education and learning theory to serve as a framework for transformatively educational change is precisely because of the homogenizing features of the theory. In denying the
educational value of distinctions that differentiate between different types of learning engagements, outcomes and intentions – in placing a potentially equal value on all types of learning engagements, outcomes and intentions – policy and practice that are informed by the theory will tend inevitably to concentrate on learning that is more straightforwardly, immediately and self-evidently justifiable. It will concentrate, in other words, on achieving learning outcomes that are more transparently of immediate practical value, and which are grounded in learning intentions that are most simply and economically achievable, using interventions that are already known to most efficiently and effectively lead to the desired outcomes. In this way, lifelong education and learning policy and practice will inevitably be characterized as outcomes-driven, concentrating conservatively and instrumentally on learning that is clearly, superficially of immediate practical value and achievable with maximum efficiency. More complex, profound, ineffable, creative, difficult, challenging, creative and longer-term intentions, outcomes and interventions will inevitably either be of lower effective priority and marginalized, or reduced to selected trivial tasks that are individually manageable; which is, indeed, just what has become evident through critical reviews of lifelong education and learning policy and practice over the last two decades. Education for spiritual development falls solidly into that sector of lifelong education and learning that is marginalized in this process. It is crowded out precisely because of its irreducibility, ineffability, complexity, uncertainty, profundity, difficulty, longer-term, challenging and creative nature.

The homogenizing features of the theory, though, are historically contingent. They are not logically essential to the progressive sentiments that drive the transformatively educational features of the theory. A solution to the dilemma posed above would therefore seem to be the re-construction or re-conceptualisation of lifelong education and learning theory to remove its conceptually homogenizing features, replacing them with educational concepts, distinctions and inter-relationships that allow for and inform the development of transformatively educational policy and practice.

Re-conceptualising lifelong education and learning theory in this way would require, not only the rejection of the conceptual homogenisation that characterizes contemporary lifelong education and learning theory, but also the (re-) construction of a substantive theoretical framework that captures the values and priorities important to the contemporary human condition. Such a re-conceptualisation would
do this, however, while clearly articulating the educational concepts important to pursuing that condition in such a way as to encourage the generation of experiential knowledge of interrelationships between and among those concepts, in the diversity of cultural and situational contexts that characterize the contemporary human experience. In doing so, we need to go back to the question of what makes us human – of the common qualities that mark us out as such. We need to generate public and scholarly discourse about those qualities and what lifelong education and learning theory should like in order for it to serve as a framework for their promotion across the lifespan in its rich situational and cultural diversity. And we need use those qualities in all their richness to capture what lifelong education and learning policy and practice should be paying attention to. Such qualities may be expected to focus strongly on our spirituality, our bodily and mental health, our material sufficiency, our relationships with others, on limiting threats to our welfare, and on our ability and opportunity to act constructively on the basis of our spirituality: in other words, on the qualities that contribute significantly to our well-being. Only then may lifelong education and learning theory be in a position to meet the challenge presented by the pervasive contemporary secular nihilism.

**Conclusion**

Focusing here on the educational imperative to contribute to the development of a robust secular spirituality to address the limitations to well-being deriving from the contemporary pervasive secular nihilism and spiritual emptiness, there is one major conclusion from the foregoing analysis: that contemporary lifelong education and learning theory is not up to the task. By its nature, lifelong education and learning theory may be expected to ensure that this educational imperative is either marginalised in favour of more immediately manageable engagements, or so reduced to selected trivial contributing tasks that it becomes unattainable. For the contemporary development of spirituality, this is a grim conclusion, since lifelong education and learning theory is gaining considerable purchase internationally in policy and practice as an organising framework for adult education, especially in the European Union. Its dominance does not just leave a conceptual void in which spiritual development is denied, it means also that lifelong education and learning theory denies that space to alternative theorisations that may better contribute to the task. The pragmatic suggestion being made in this paper to address
that situation is that we are left, then, with an urgency to get on with the task of re-conceptualising lifelong education and learning theory so that it does provide an adequate framework for the development of policy and practice supportive of spiritual development.

References


