**The educational meaning of tiredness**

**Agamben and Buytendijk on the experience of (im)potentiality**

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**Introduction**

More often than not tiredness is seen as an impediment for education to take place. After all, when we are tired, we lack the level of concentration and amount of will-power required for learning well and efficiently. Tiredness is mostly considered as the opposite of self-development, and it is only valued positively insofar it follows processes that lead to genuine education - i.e. when we have worked hard to develop ourselves, and tiredness is the inevitable consequence of our endeavours. Tiredness is then a sign or an indicator that we have given the best of ourselves. To this view, tiredness hasn't got any educational significance in and of itself. In an ideal scenario, we would learn and develop ourselves without ever getting tired.

In this article I defend the opposite view, and argue that educationalist should take tiredness more seriously. At first sight, my argument seems close to what Florelle D’Hoest and Tyson Lewis (2015) have written in connection with the educational meaning of exhaustion. They analyse exhaustion as a unique state which allows for a (momentary) interruption of the way in which we are governed today by a biocapitalist societal order. However, their argument is based on opposing exhaustion to tiredness. More than ever, tiredness has become our fate, our new human condition. In an age in which performativity has become the only value to guide our lives, we are chronically tired. Therefore, D’Hoest and Lewis go on arguing, this chronic state is not merely an unfortunate by-product of a biocapitalist society, it is constitutive of it: in order for the biocapitalist system to operate well, it is mandatory that we never escape fatigue. We are governed today through tiredness. It is at this point that exhaustion might play a decisive role: for D’Hoest and Lewis, exhaustion (being a qualitatively different state from tiredness) grants the possibility to jam the biocapitalist machine, because it comes down to the impossibility of being tired.

I agree with these authors that tiredness and exhaustion should be carefully distinguished. However, I would like to show that there is something particular to tiredness, which has educational relevance and which has also the force to interrupt the existing societal order. In order to see this we need to have a closer look at what it means *exactly* to find oneself in a state of tiredness. D'Hoest and Lewis claim in their article that 'there is a phenomenology of exhaustion that is very different from mere tiredness where one lies down and "sleeps it off" to emerge refreshed and ready to begin work again the next morning' (D'Hoest and Lewis 2015, p. 57). Next to their 'phenomenology of exhaustion', I elaborate in this presentation a more detailed *phenomenology of tiredness*, which doesn't invalidate their claims about exhaustion, but which brings to light a dimension of tiredness which they didn't take into account.

Therefore, the first section of this article consists of a phenomenological analysis of tiredness. More exactly, I turn to the work of Frederik Buytendijk (1961 and 1974) - a by now long forgotten Dutch phenomenologist, who was a protagonist of the once very famous and influential Utrecht School. He has left us with a very perceptive analysis of this phenomenon, which in my view deserves to be revisited. Buytendijk gives a precise definition of tiredness in terms of the impossibility to discern between lack of potential to act and lack of willpower. I connect this, in a second part, to the work of a more recent author, Giorgio Agamben, who has argued that, historically speaking, a nefarious and deplorable shift took place from defining ourselves as human beings in terms of potentiality towards a self-definition in terms of wilful self-control. In the third section I bring both perspectives together and show that tiredness, as described by Buytendijk, has the power to deactivate the present societal and educational order, which is precisely based on governing our lives through wilful self-control. More positively, tiredness can be seen as a state (or an experience) of what Agamben would call (im)potentiality (Agamben 1999). It is here that its educational significance is to be found.

Before doing this, I would like to add two more introductory remarks. First, the work I present here is part of a larger research interest in *the meaning of school practices* (Cf. Vlieghe 2013 and 2015). The reason why I focus on tiredness is because it seems to constitute, next to many other things, what school education is all about. This is to say that schooling, as opposed to other forms of education, has a particular and unique set of formal characteristics which define it (Masschelein and Simons 2013): when learning at school pupils are gathered as a collective of bodies (one can learn alone, but one cannot be schooled alone), they are subjected to a particular disciplinary regime of doing motor exercises, there is a high level of repetition and attention involved, textual devices (books) are preferred over immediately dealing with subject matters, there is a stress on the formalistic over the applicability of contents to the real-life world, etc. These arrangements are not merely accidental. Instead, they define what school *is*. In other words, my main interest is in understanding what singles out school practices from other learning and teaching activities, and to understand why these practices might be educationally important.

I am specifically interested in the fact that at school pupils and students practice and exercise things together, in a repetitive manner, but also in such a way that it wears them out. Exercising and practicing go together with tiredness. At other occasions (Vlieghe 2013 and 2014b) I have explored the collective body dimension of school practices, as well as their repetitive character. In this presentation I zoom in on the *fatiguing* aspect of what we do at school. Again, this implies that effort and tiredness are not merely secondary phenomena that inevitably come with schooling - collateral damage, so to speak, i.e. something we could make disappear one day, when we will have more enlightened pedagogical tools at our disposal. On the contrary, tiredness is essential to the educational value of school practicing.

Second, the argument I present in this article also serves a methodological purpose. It is based on the work of a classical *phenomenological* author and a philosopher whose arguments are largely based upon *genealogical* investigations in the style of Michel Foucault. This concerns two perspectives that are often regarded as incompatible. This is because, as Foucault himself has argued for, phenomenology is predicated upon a wrong-headed idea about subjectivity that is supposed to be immune for historical changes and to remain unaffected by the force of language and power technologies (Foucault 1991). If phenomenology is to be defined in these ontological terms, I fully underwrite Foucault's objections. However, I regard phenomenology more as a method, i.e. as the art of providing very precise and rich descriptions of what it is like to experience oneself and the world - by taking experience at face value and bracketing preconceived ideas (Cf. Van Manen 2014). In a sense, the argument I develop in this article is an exercise in finding out to what extent this linking of phenomenology and genealogy is possible and how the two perspectives actually may inform and supplement one another[[1]](#footnote-1).

**Buytendijk on tiredness**

As mentioned above, Buytendijk was one of the central figures in the so called Utrecht School, a Dutch pre- and post-Second War school of thought which was based on both German and French strands in phenomenology, and which has dealt, next to education, with a manifold of subjects, such as psychology, criminology, history, and even medicine (Levering and Van Manen 2002). The ambitious life-project of Buytendijk, himself a psychologist, was to develop what he called an 'anthropological physiology' (Buytendijk 1974). It is important to understand exactly what he means by this term, as the phenomenon of tiredness serves in his work the goal of showing what 'anthropological physiology' is all about.

At this point, a terminological clarification might be helpful. The meaning of physiology is, probably, evident, i.e. the study of bodily processes. The meaning of 'anthropology' however is not, especially not in Dutch. Here the term refers to a sub-branch of philosophy. In the same way that there is a philosophy of art, a philosophy of science, etc., there is also a philosophy of humankind, which would be called anthropology - i.e. the study of what it is to be human[[2]](#footnote-2). So, the first connotation is *not* what is understood under the term anthropology as taught at English speaking universities (i.e. the comparative study of human societies and cultures and their development). Moreover, the specification 'anthropological' in anthropological physiology is not merely meant to discern the physiology of plants or the physiology of insects from that of human creatures. Buytendijk's point (Ibid.) is that human physiology is qualitatively different form non-human physiology, and not reducible to the latter.

More exactly, in order to understand human physiology one has to take into account the way in which humans try to make their way in life in a meaningful way. As such, Buytendijk, takes one of the basics assumptions of phenomenology in a new direction. I refer here to Husserl's famous distinction between *Körper* and *Leib* - the body as it is externally approached by the eye of the scientist, as opposed to the body we experience from the inside (Husserl 1950). This is to say that one and the same body can appear in two diametrically opposed ways: the body seen as a machine versus the lived-through body. And, this opposition goes together with two mutually exclusive ways of knowledge about the body: systematic, objective and universally valid knowledge, as opposed to mere subjective feelings. What Buytendijk adds to this classical dichotomy is that in order to fully comprehend *Körperlichkeit* (physiology) we have to approach it through *Leiblichkeit* (through that what makes us *anthropos*). However, so Buytendijk argues, this is not to give up the idea that we can get solid ‘scientific’ insight in the body and its processes. On the contrary, he holds that it is *only* by carefully studying the subjective pole of bodily experience that a true human physiology - in the sense of a universally valid science - is possible. In order to clarify this point, consider the following example:

One is compelled to climb a high staircase and one - literally and figuratively - looks up against it. If one tries to perform the climbing with a minimum tension of the leg muscles, then this slight tension obtains the *meaning* of an impotence, a being-tired. This becomes clear if one does not strain the flexors more than is necessary to put the foot on the next step and if thereafter one stretches the leg, the body-weight is being carried. This way of going upstairs with a minimum tension, is in contrast to what one calls a buoyant (energetic) walk. This is *not* tiring, although a great number of muscles are used and the metabolism is increased more than in "limply" mounting stairs (Buytendijk 1974, p. 123, italics in original).

If human beings really functioned in the way machines do, we would be well advised to climb the stairs with an absolute minimum expenditure of energy in order to spare ourselves from tiredness. However, we all know - from our own subjective experience - that this limp walk will make us even more fatigued. By walking slowly we begin to feel even more listlessly than before. It is only by squandering energy and walk up to stair in a dynamic way that we overcome tiredness. Likewise, when one feels tired during a walk (or when one visits a museum for that matter [Ibid.]), one shouldn't slow down, but act in a vigorous way and speed up - even if this doesn't make sense from a purely mechanical standpoint[[3]](#footnote-3). The point of these examples is, first, that we have to take into account the *meaning* we give to the situations we are in as bodies, in order to understand how our physiology works. A purely mechanical account will not suffice, and would lead to erroneous conclusions: to overcome tiredness we must waste (and not try and conserve) energy. Second, what Buytendijk describes is based on what we feel subjectively, and yet - in principle - everyone can recognize it (and test the truth of what he says). In that sense, his insights have, he claims, a scientific status, and transcend mere personal impression: '*the* "subjective" is not something which can only be known in personal experience, but something which, as a strictly-personal *quality* of that which is noticed, presented, desired, felt, appreciated, *always* expresses itself through this quality in the concreteness of existence, both bodily and personally' (Ibid., p. 115-116, italics in original). In order to get systematic insight in human phenomena we have no alternative but to study the qualities of subjective experience. However this doesn't mean that this insight is limited to one's own personal perspective. One can draw conclusions about qualities of experiences to which everyone can agree (intersubjective validation of experiences).

Now, this example has also taken us into the phenomenon of tiredness - which is a very important case for Buytendijk - to the extent that he choose it as the subject of his farewell address as a professor at Nijmegen University (Buytendijk 1961). It is only by taking into account often neglected phenomena such as tiredness (which he calls an 'exemplary mode of being human') that we fully understand what it means to be a human being. For instance, the phenomenon of tiredness clearly shows that we fully are our bodies. Angels cannot be tired. In every case of being-tired there is a bodily felt (relative) impotence involved - some unyielding part of ourselves that articulates itself as our bodiliness. Indeed, even when we are mentally tired, this feeling only comes about as a physically located feeling, e.g. our eyes hurt when having been reading for a too long period of time. Now, all this could easily point in the direction of some dualist vision of humankind, i.e. tiredness is due to a deficiency in the body which works against the powers of the mind: will-power and bodily capacity collide. This is, our active will, strong as it is, is overcome by an alien, passive bodily, force, and we are no longer author of our own existence (cf. Buytendijk 1974, p. 120) - *I still want to, but unfortunately I cannot*, so to speak.

This is, however, only a superficial account, as Buytendijk goes on showing. The formula *I still want to, but unfortunately I cannot* only applies in cases of extreme exhaustion: in those, and *only* in those cases it is indeed clear that whatever one tries to do, it is to no avail. One is fully at the end of one's abilities. In the case of tiredness, on the contrary, 'not being able to and not wanting to are inexorably entangled' (Ibid., p.121). Tiredness is not merely being overcome by something in relation to which we stand passive. *We are as much author as we are witness or victim of tiredness* (Cf. Ibid., 120). On a closer analysis, tiredness could be defined as that point at which it has become utterly impossible to decide whether *I still would, but I cannot* or *I still can, but I don't want* (Ibid., p.121). This is, phenomenologically speaking, what tiredness *is*: the *utmost* indiscernibility between inability and unwillingness. So, if we zoom in on the quality of what we experience, in tiredness we go through a paradoxical moment, as normally the two formula exclude one another. As such Buytendijk offers a very precise and insightful definition of the meaning of tiredness: it is a unique and exceptional moment in which two mutually exclusive possibilities (*I want to but I cannot* and *I can but I don't want to*) come together and cancel each other out[[4]](#footnote-4).

For Buytendijk, phenomena like tiredness deserve the full attention of the phenomenologist. It is not just a state next to many other examples one could think of. Rather, it concerns a unique and ontologically most significant, way of relating to the world[[5]](#footnote-5). The importance of this phenomenon is, as I explained in connection with his particular understanding of anthropological physiology, that it reveals something fundamental about the interconnectedness of bodily processes and (the limits of) meaning-giving subjectivity. The phenomenological analysis of tiredness highlights a particular, but vital border of what it means to human: in tiredness we experience a state in which intentional control over the meaning of what we do disappears. We ‘can’ without willing, at the precise same time that we have a will that can't possibly be actualized. The 'normal' way of governing our lives, in which will and ability are in relative harmony, is suspended so to speak[[6]](#footnote-6). We remain in a condition in which we are fully our tired bodies. And, this moment of *desubjectification* offers us unique access to what we 'can' as bodily creatures, but without being in wilful authority. It is this aspect which makes tiredness, as a feature of school practices, educationally relevant, I argue. However, in order to do so, I first need to turn to the work of Giorgio Agamben, and more particularly to some of his ideas regarding the two expressions crucial to Buytendijk’s definition of tiredness - 'I (don't) *want* to' and 'I *can*(not)' - the understanding (and critique) of which is the cornerstone of his whole philosophical endeavours (Agamben 1999).

**An Agambenian genealogy of the will**

As I indicated, Agamben's approach is genealogical, rather than phenomenological. When Agamben discusses what it means to be a creature that is not fully determined (a creature that is able to say 'I can') and a creature that possesses a will of its own (a creature that is able to say 'I want'), he goes back in history, and more precisely analyses the manner in which these words have been used in the intellectual history of the west since Greek Antiquity. This is, he meticulously documents how legal scholars, writers, but above all philosophers and theologians have struggled with the precise meaning of these words and which strategies they have devised to cope with difficulties that came about. Of course, this is not to claim that the work of more and less obscure medieval theologians - to which Agamben doesn't stop referring - has caused how we define ourselves today. Rather, the history of philosophy and theology is *a rich and unique laboratory* which offers us, often with an remarkably degree of clarity and exactitude, insight into different ways of how we have given shape to humanity, and which possibilities, difficulties, contradictions and risks came along. The background of this is Agamben's most fundamental conviction that humanity, in the most literal and radical sense, has no essence, and that the only thing which defines us as humans is that fact that we are always in the process of becoming human-beings. Anthropogenesis is an event that happens again and again. In other words, humanity is that being that puts its own definition continuously at stake throughout history, and the history of philosophy and theology are a most telling way for understanding how this never-ending process of becoming-human has taken form[[7]](#footnote-7). (Cf. Agamben 2015, p. 167-171)

It would lead us too far covering the whole genealogical account of the terms under discussion, and so I will limit myself to sketching two decisive moments here[[8]](#footnote-8): the articulation of what it means to be human in the heyday of Greek philosophy in terms of *potentiality*, and the way in which 13th Century Christian theology has appropriated and redefined potentiality in terms of the *will*. For Agamben, it is in the work of Aristotle that we first see an attempt to come to terms with human potentiality. Over and against the potential of non-human entities (e.g. the burning of fire which is an actualization of the capacity of wood and other stuff to burn), potentiality in humans is always also *impotentiality*: we can and cannot *at the same time*. Hence the formula (im)potentiality. Impossibilty is as much important as possibility is in defining ourselves. Aristotle's favourite example is that of the architect who *can*, but equally *cannot* build a house (whereas the fire cannot not burn when properly ignited). It should be stressed, however, that this is not yet a matter of what we would call today freedom of indifference. The point Aristotle makes is not that we can choose to build or choose not to build. Rather, what he describes is just the ambiguity, if not obscurity, of what it means to be human: *we are fully creatures of possibility and we can only experience this ourselves in so far we are also creatures who cannot actualize our possibilities*. Because of the indefiniteness involved, we look for coping strategies, and so we find in Aristotle an attempt to explain how we 'manage' to bring potentiality into actualization. More exactly, according to Aristotle, there is the principle of *orexis*, i.e. appetite, at work. Appetite is not a matter of wilful decision, but rather refers to an objective quality in things which attracts us and which makes us do particular things (i.e. actualize potentiality). The important thing to note is that there is no concept of *will* here. Our, contemporary, notion of the will only obfuscates what potentially originally means (Agamben 1999).

As said above, the concept of will is first articulated in Christian theology, and more precisely in the context of theologians discussing the origin of all things. The radically new language brought about by Christianity is, however, not that the world was created by God (this thought can be found in countless more ancient mythologies, and also in Plato), but that creation results from a completely contingent and gratuitous act. God was not obliged to create at all, and yet He did. God is omnipotent. If one thinks this idea of omnipotence through - and this is essentially what medieval theologians did day in day out - one cannot but stumble upon most interesting difficulties and paradoxes. At a given moment it became clear that the whole idea of omnipotence implies that God could also have created things in a totally different manner and even change them in absurd and ignominious ways. Frivolous and far-fetched as these discussions might sound today, for medieval theology it was a very serious problem that God, if indeed omnipotent, could embody 'himself as a woman, instead of as Jesus, to save men; or damning Peter and saving Judas; or even destroying all of his creation' (Agamben 2011b p. 104). Likewise, He could undo the past, and even make raped women virgins again. Therefore, theologians the likes of Thomas Aquinas introduced the distinction between *potentia absoluta*, the power of God considered *as such*, and *potentia ordinata*, His powers considered once He has created the world, i.e. once He has *willed* the world to be such and so. With the invention of the concept of *potentia ordinata* God's omnipotence got qualified in such a way that the aforementioned scandalous problems found a final resolve: 'with regard to his will and wisdom [God] can only do what he has decided to do' (Ibid., p. 104-105). So, before He decides creation to be like this and that, God was indeed omnipotent (potentia absoluta), but once he has created things in a particular fashion, He can only do as he has willed (potentia ordinata): Judas cannot be forgiven, revirgination is impossible, etc. What is gained by this, is that the world becomes again an orderly place capable of being governed (Ibid.).

Subtle and genial as this solution might sound, it opened the possibility to think in new and not innocuous ways, not only about God's powers in relation to creation, but also about ourselves - about what we can and what we will. Agamben's main argument is that the concept of will is derived from the *potentia ordinata*, and that it was invented to command, i.e. to limit and to regulate potentiality: the 'will is the principle that makes it possible to order the undifferentiated chaos of potentiality. [...] A potentiality without will is altogether unrealizable and cannot pass into actuality.' (Agamben 1999, p. 254). As I said, for Agamben medieval theology is not interesting per se. Rather, it offers a fascinating laboratory of thought: it makes us understand that at the same time that one tries to think potentiality *as* such, i.e. in its most radical consequences, one also realizes its chaotic, obscure and dangerous nature. And so, the figure of the will was invented as a 'theological apparatus' (Agamben 2011b, p. 105) to regain control and to secure order.

The lesson to take form this is that there is *a substantial difference* between conceiving our ability to act in terms of (im)potentiality as opposed to in terms of willpower: 'to believe that will has power over potentiality, that the passage to actuality is the result of a decision that puts an end to the ambiguity of potentiality (which is always potentiality to do and not to do) - this is the perpetual illusion of morality' (Agamben 1999, p. 254). With this Agamben means that once the idea of the will is introduced, all individual subjects become accountable for what they do. The apparatus links actions to subjects and now it can hold them morally responsible. As such the world becomes governable in a particular way - which is, of course, the contemporary order of things. However, this comes at the price of commanding, i.e. capturing and steering (im)potentiality.

One of the regrettable consequences of this historical shift from defining humanity in terms of (im)potentiality to understanding ourselves from the perspective of willpower is that is has become almost impossible to conceive of a true ethics (Agamben 2015, p. 58) . Ethics, as opposed to morality, regards giving an answer to the question how to lead a good life, individually and collectively, which takes fully seriously that we are creatures of possibility, that we have no fixed essence or calling in life, that anthropogenesis never comes to a conclusion. With the invention of the theological apparatus of the will, ethics has been substituted for morality, a system of well-defined rules which very precisely regulate what we should do and also who is to be addressed when the rule is broken. This is exemplified, Agamben claims, in its most pure form in the work of Kant, where we see something similar happen as in the Medieval theology of God's omnipotence.

On the one hand, Kant is very conscious of a particular challenge: at the very height of modernity it has become clear that humankind has no fixed destination; a morality based on the laws of nature or on the will of God has become utterly implausible. On the other hand, the only solution Kant can come up with is a self-grounding morality, based on human autonomy - humankind as commander of him/herself. In the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* Kant claims that the only serious moral commandment must take the form of 'man muss wollen können' ('one must be able to will' [Kant quoted in Agamben 2013a p. 115]) - which exactly reads as an appropriation of potentiality by the will. The content of this supreme wilful self-commandment, however, is *completely empty*: the superior moral being is, Kant literally states, 'zur Pflicht verplichtet' (quoted in Ibid., p. 117). Duty has no other content than subjecting oneself to duty.

**Genealogy *with* phenomenology: tiredness, (im)potentiality and beginning anew**

This rather disheartening conclusion of Agamben's genealogical investigations might have lead us far away, if not astray, from the issue of tiredness. Nonetheless, at this precise point I see a most fertile cross-over between Buytendijk's phenomenological analysis (of tiredness in terms of indiscernibility  between inability and unwillingness) and Agamben's genealogical account (of willpower capturing and regulating potentiality in the form of morality) in more than one respect - and, moreover, in relation to the sphere of education.

To begin with, tiredness could be conceived as a state of being which counters the dominant way in which we have come accustomed to give shape to our lives today, i.e. in terms of the accountable and wilful subject[[9]](#footnote-9). Recall here Kant's (1982) own definition of the goal of education as the development of autonomy, which we must assume to be present (but not yet actualized) in every child. Autonomy is the capacity to determine oneself - which is of course identical with the formulation of the moral commandment just discussed (the duty to be able to will; full wilful self-control). This modern account of education plays into the hand of the neoliberal order of the current society, in which everyone is supposed to be maximally productive and self-responsible, and to maximally realize one's possibilities: if one is willing, but unable to do so, one should learn - preferably always and even a whole life long; if one is able to be productive, but not willing, one needs to be punished - so that one becomes (re)educated and brought again in the position of having full control over one’s own life. Under this arrangement, the educated person is defined in terms of a perfect harmony between wilfulness and potentiality.

Now, as Buytendijk makes clear, when we are tired, *we can without willing*, and simultaneously *we have a will that can't possibly be actualized*. Thus, in the experience of the tired human being, it no longer makes sense to hold that what one can is an expression of what one wants and vice versa. It has become utterly impossible to claim that one, as a wilful being, is in command, *and yet* this doesn't mean that an end is put to the experience of being-able. So, negatively speaking, the way in which we are usually governed since the invention of the 'theological apparatus' of willpower (Agamben 2013b, p. 105), and even more so under present educational conditions, is invalidated and suspended. Experiencing tiredness is at odds with the current ordering of society and of the realm of education[[10]](#footnote-10).

However, my point is not solely to stress the negative side of the state of being-tired and the opportunities it might offer for interrupting existing societal and educational regimes. More importantly, tiredness can *also* be seen as a state or an experience of (im)potentiality, in the Aristotelean sense of pure possibility – i.e. the experience of 'I can' and 'I cannot' that is unconnected to any actualization, as discussed above. When we are tired, we *fully* *experience what it means to be able* – leaving behind the usual control over our abilities, i.e. the limits of morality, or for that matter the regime that governs us on the basis of subjective willpower. What is at stake here is an experience of ability which is completely not as-yet specified. This is, we are granted *the opportunity to begin anew* in the most literal meaning of the word newness: we can begin again in totally unpredictable and unforeseeable ways. In a sense, this is exactly what defines education in a more traditional meaning of that word (Cf. Masschelein 2010). We are educable beings because things are *not* fixed once and for all, and because therefore a deep *transformation* of who we are, individually and collectively, is always possible (Cf. Mollenhauer 2013).

The precondition of such a genuine transformation is that we - at least momentarily - go through a moment of self-loss or *desubjectification*. With this I mean the cancelling out of every self-identification that *retains* us in an established position and that immunized us against the possibility of thinking and living in truly different ways. This is exactly what Agamben means with the experience (or experiment) of (im)potentiality - which, as he notes, is an experience in the original meaning of the Latin verb *experiri* (Agamben 1993, p. 4): to seek out danger, to put oneself at stake. Here, we lose wilful self-control, and we experience our lives as utterly without destination: as a 'pure' state of ability that cannot be appropriated by the will of an individual. Experiencing (im)potentiality is a matter of ability that belongs to no one. It is an *anonymous* experience (Cf. Vlieghe 2013).

Again, this is - if we follow Buytendijk's analysis - exactly what being-tired comes down to. And so, I would argue that tiredness has an educational meaning in and of itself[[11]](#footnote-11). As I said in the introduction, more often than not tiredness is seen as a nuisance, or an unavoidable obstacle: as such we would better get rid of it, or if we can't, regard it purely instrumentally. Nonetheless, with Buytendijk and Agamben it could be said that in tiredness we find circumstances that make true education possible. Therefore, it is no coincidence that educational practices, which I called *school* practices earlier on, imply fatigue. Not as a by-product, but as a necessary condition. What I have in mind are collective activities we engage in when we are gathered as bodies in school. Activities that imply repetition, attention, discipline, and - most importantly here - wearing oneself out. During these fatiguing exercises we no longer relate to ourselves in a *moral* way, but in an *ethical* way - to recall Agamben's terminology (2013a). The meaning of what we do during repetitive exercise is no longer a matter of appropriating and actualizing our potential, and thus of displaying our willpower and strengthening our own subjective position in life. Instead, we lose ourselves, or at least we experience our potential in such a way that we truly can begin anew. This has always been at stake in educational exercises, as scrupulously analysed in the later Foucault's writings on the ancient Greek ideal of care of the self, or - more recently - in the work of Peter Sloterdijk on the intrinsic value of exercising and practicing (2013).

I would like to conclude this article on a more methodological note. With my combined reading of Buytendijk and Agamben, I have also tried to show how a genealogical approach can be extended by taking into account phenomenological analyses. This might seem as an utter mismatch, as genealogy is often considered to have discredited the ambitions of the phenomenological project as conceived by its founders: the belief that there is a transcendental subjectivity on the basis of which reality can be systematically disclosed and on the basis of which universally valid and trans-historical knowledge can be produced (to summarize here all too briefly Husserl's ideas). But, it can be shown that his belief is *itself* a historically contingent phenomenon (Cf. Foucault 1991). It is linked to a typically modern view of the subject which has a clear beginning and a clear end, which is the product of forces the subject itself has no control over, and which therefore has no universal validity whatsoever.

In my view, this is a most unproductive perspective to take: it is an *a priori* condemnation of potentially interesting work on purely conceptual grounds. In this article, I have tried to show that the opposite is possible. i.e. that these two approaches, phenomenology and genealogy, actually can inform an strengthen one another. These two perspectives cover common ground in that they both try to figure out how *anthropos* is constituted and deconstructed, and keeps to be constituted and deconstructed, *in history* and *in experience*. Agamben's genealogical endeavours show that anthropogenesis is a history of how we put our own self-definition at stake. And, Buytendijk's detailed analyses of tiredness - an exemplary mode of being human - show how particular liminal experiences of end of self-control contribute to our making-meaning of ourselves - and of education, for that matter. Therefore, a lot is to be gained by combining phenomenology and genealogy.

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1. One of the reasons why Buytendijk's work might offer this possibility of taking phenomenology into post-structuralism, is that he is interested in phenomena that are usually not of interest to mains-stream phenomenology: tiredness, but also sleep, hunger, thirst and lability. With this, Buytendijk inscribes himself in a strand of phenomenological research that goes back to Merleau-Ponty (2012) and his stress on the primordial role of the body (over pure consciousness). However, Buytendijk's approach also differs markedly form Merleau-Ponty (he actually draws more from the early writing of Levinas). Merleau-Ponty is *only* interested in the body in so far it is a source of giving meaning to ourselves and the world: as Nancy (2008) has shown, the body is only interesting for the Merleau-Pontian phenomenologist in so far it can do what only our consciousness was supposed to do before the body had been discovered (Cf. Vlieghe 2014a). Over and against this, Buytendijk is interested in the body *as such*: the phenomena he analyses, are those where the intentionality of the subject collapses, where the control over our giving meaning to the world falters. These moments of desubjectification are the most interesting ones for understanding what it means to be human. And, here, interesting connections with a genealogical approach can be made. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This is the discipline which tries to answer Kant's (1982) famous fourth basic philosophical question, 'What is man? [sic]' [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. If we would just look at the physiology of muscle tissue, it wouldn't make sense to do more effort. When the muscle is 'tired' (but we can only say this in a metaphorical sense of course), it means that it needs a certain time span of complete inactivity in order to retrieve enough energy in order to function again adequately (cf. Buytendijk 1974, p. 113-114). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In that sense it is very correct, as D'Hoest and Lewis (2015) claim, that exhaustion means the impossibility of tiredness. Exhaustion is, so to speak, a limit situation to which tiredness tends, but once this limit is reached, tiredness disappears. We will say *I want to, but I cannot*. However, *I can but I don't want to* is not part of the experience of exhaustion. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Tiredness is not just a state that passively affects us: it is a way of being in which the world (and in this case: we ourselves in the word) is disclosed. (cf. Buytendijk 1974, p. 117). This is close to Sartre (2001) when he argues that emotions are not biological impulses that interfere with consciousness, as much as actively constructed framings of the world, which cause the world to be disclosed in a particular sense. Being-in-love or being-angry means first and foremost that the world appears in a particular way to us. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Mind again that in exhaustion, subjectivity is regained in a particular way: even though we cannot, it is clear that we would if we could. As such intentional control is safeguarded (even if in a negative sense). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. At the same time this history shows that there have been various (successful and unsuccessful) attempts to take control over anthropogenesis. In this process particular ways of defining ourselves as human got naturalized and petrified. Agamben refers to these articulations of the human with the terms 'machine' and 'apparatus' [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. As such I will not go deeper into the writings of the earliest Christian writers, from Paul to Saint-Augustine, who also played a decisive role in this genealogy of the will. See Agamben 2011b. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Cf. Tyson Lewis' critique of the value placed on willfulness since modernization (Lewis 2013). Interestingly, in a criticism of Deleuze's well-known text on societies of control, Agamben (2011) makes clear that the most important menace of today's societal order is not that we are restricted in our willpower, i.e. in our freedom to do what we can, so much as that we are *narrowed down in our ability not to do what we can*. Power today doesn’t restrict us in what we can do. On the contrary, it continuously enhances our possibilities. And so, its core target regards no longer our possibilities, but our im-potentiality. We are left free to do whatever we can, but by being left free in such a way, we are no longer free *not* to actualize these possibilities. We are no longer allowed to remain in touch with our im-potentiality, and so there is no longer a position to take outside the order of the given – and to resist it. Otherwise stated, the desire to actualize one’s potential is no longer a force of transformation: it has become naturalized and just contributes to the continuation of the established order of things. Our desire for self-realization reaffirms the way in which our individual and collective lives are structured, and therefore the very possibility of escape, emancipation and freedom is menaced. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Referring to a related, but different phenomenon, some have claimed that *laziness* can and should be an antidote for the current societal order. See for instance Stengers (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This is not fully in line with Buytendijk's analysis, as he also deals at other places with tiredness in a quite instrumental way, for instance when he discusses the 'desired' and the 'healthy' fatigue (the anticipation of a welcome, earned and 'pleasant relaxation') (Buytendijk 1974, p. 119) [↑](#footnote-ref-11)