

Review of

## *Educated*

By Tara Westover, New York: Random House, 2018

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In her memoir, *Educated*, Tara Westover describes her upbringing in rural Idaho under the shadow of Buck's Peak. Just below that mountain, her father worked a scrap metal and construction operation. Paranoid and domineering, he rejected all things having to do with external authority, including modern medicine and public schools, preparing feverishly for the end of the world. Her mother was a midwife focused on unusual forms of spiritual healing. The family practiced a fundamentalist version of Mormonism, intermixed with conspiratorial right-wing politics. Westover received no formal schooling, and her instruction at home, when it existed, was perfunctory and largely unsupervised. She spent most of her formative years working in the ragged and dangerous family junkyard, barely escaping serious injury on multiple occasions. Common trappings of mainstream American life, such as seat belts, hand washing, and aspirin were ridiculed. She was emotionally and physically abused by her older brother, a fact the family ignored and, at times, covered up. The difficulties at home, along with the example of another older brother who fled the family to pursue a college education, gradually pushed Westover to seek something different. She taught herself algebra and science and did well enough on the ACT to earn entrance into Brigham Young University (BYU). There, she was exposed to new ideas, people, and ways of thinking. She was listened to by sympathetic clergy, eventually realizing the extent of her ignorance of the larger world (she had never heard of the Holocaust). The family drama, however, continued: while at BYU, her father suffered a serious accident and was treated with home therapy. He recovered (sort of) and he and his wife became missionaries for their vision of natural healing and essential oils. While at BYU, Westover was encouraged to attend Cambridge University on a study-abroad opportunity, an experience that continued to broaden her vision and build her independence and academic self-confidence. As a Gates Scholar, she completed an MPhil and PhD at Cambridge in the history of political theory. She eventually tried to confront her family about the truth of the abuse she and her siblings had suffered at home, but her memories were disputed, and she was cut off from the family unless she “repented” and submitted to the will of her father.

Those who have read this book know this outline is only the thinnest account of Westover's story, the details of which are in equal measures mesmerizing, inspiring, thought-provoking, and terrifying. The book is a masterpiece of storytelling; indeed, as I write this review, the book remains permanently camped on national bestseller lists. But beyond the sheer spectacle of Westover's life, what can be learned from her account? And why should this book be reviewed in a journal focused on philosophy of education? While Westover's academic credentials are impressive, the book is written for a popular audience, not an academic one, and certainly not a philosophical one. Westover does seem to be somewhat conversant in

educational thought—the preface of her book includes a quote from John Dewey about education as the “reconstruction of experience”—but she largely refrains from theorizing her experience. In the end, the book is a memoir: one person's expression of her own experience.

I think there are several things that make the book worth reading from the standpoint of educational philosophy and theory: first, it serves as a data point relevant to ongoing philosophical debates; second, it offers some fairly unique and interesting ideas about education, particularly relating to the emotional experience of her education; and third, it allows us think about the book's literary form (as a memoir) apart from substance, that is, it allows us the opportunity to consider the place of memoir in philosophy of education.

As a data point, the book has much to offer. The story is one of overcoming abuse, ignorance, and domination, and achieving a degree of enlightenment and autonomy. Westover thinks of her path as leading toward Isaiah Berlin's vision of positive liberty, the ability “to take control of one's own mind; to be liberated from irrational fears and beliefs....” (p. 256). This is an achievement she likens to Bob Marley's challenge to “emancipate yourselves from mental slavery” (p. 257). One question that the book might help with, then, is the enduring question of how autonomy is to be achieved.

When we think of liberal education and the achievement of autonomy we often think in terms of curriculum: the books and subject matter that liberate the mind. Westover does mention these things; indeed, she says her youthful self-study of physics suggested to her, despite her chaotic family life, that “reality was not wholly volatile” and that “perhaps it could make sense” (p. 125). And, at the end of an exhilarating semester studying history and politics in college, she writes, “the world felt big, and it was hard to imagine returning to the mountain” (p. 228). Books and curriculum certainly mattered in Westover's education. Her account, however, goes well beyond such things, offering other clues about what it takes to overcome mental servility.

One of the other key features of Westover's education was the role played by music. At her brother Tyler's urging, she became enthralled with the soft and harmonious choral music of her Mormon tradition: one of her first encounters with a world beyond the Mountain. In contrast to the rough and tumble disorder of her home life, Westover found in music a world of “study, discipline, and collaboration” (p. 44). When her brother Tyler eventually left for college against the wishes of her father, she ascribed Tyler's departure to the “music in his head” and to “some hopeful tune the rest of us couldn't hear” (p. 51). Thinkers since Plato have long thought that music was a key to an educated life, and that rhythm and tone mattered, not just the lyrics. Interestingly, this rhythm and tone functioned in Westover's life as an atmospheric counterpoint, embodying values of order and community that were missing in her chaotic and individualistic surroundings.

There is an unexpected player in Westover's enlightenment, namely, a conservative university. Westover eventually enrolled at Brigham Young University (BYU), the Mormon university in Provo, Utah. BYU is a famously conservative place, known for having purged feminists and counter-thinking intellectuals in the 1990s. To this day, it retains policies unsupportive of LGBTQ students. We might not expect BYU to be a place conducive to challenging tradition and customs, and in Utah it is understood that a BYU education often simply affirms the preexisting beliefs of “mainstream” Mormons. (Growing up in Utah, I myself, as a Mormon liberal, avoided it for this very reason). And yet, as conservative as BYU might be to the liberally-enlightened, it served as a kind of autonomy-promoting sweet spot for Westover. Because it was linked to the family religion, it was less scary to Tara and her siblings than other colleges. “The school's run by the church....how bad can it be?” Tyler asks his skeptical father (p. 43). Yet

there she also found friends who supported her emancipation, professors who opened opportunities to the larger world, and religious leaders who listened; one even seemed “to surrender [his] authority the moment [she] passed through his door” (p. 200). This conservative university was a productive blend, for Westover, sounding comfortable notes of faith but forming chords that she had not heard before. This account might make us rethink institutions such as BYU; maybe there is something to be said for conservative religious institutions as moderating forces in the lives of far-right or fundamentalist students.

Not to be forgotten in all of this is the role that financial support played in Westover's journey toward autonomy. Even with all the talk of books, music, and people, money still exerted its omnipresent force. At BYU, she eventually was convinced to apply for financial aid, which she had previously feared would enslave her to government control. Rather than enslaving her, however, she writes that the aid she received enabled her to maintain distance from the pressures of home, something she had previously promised herself she would do. Moreover, the monetary support allowed her space to think about her life, to reflect on who she was and what she was becoming. She writes, “I began to experience the most powerful advantage of money: the ability to think of things besides money” (p. 206). With these resources, her “professors came into focus, suddenly and sharply; it was as if before the grant I'd been looking at them through a blurred lens” (p. 207).

This isn't the end of the autonomy-promoting influences. The notion of *place* plays an important function in Westover's account. Her physical surroundings seemed to embody alternatives, first in Cambridge: “I didn't think I was dreaming, but only because my imagination had never produced anything so grand” (p. 233), and then in Rome: “The world [it] represented, of philosophy, science and literature— an entire civilization—took on a life that was distinct from the life that I had known” (p. 268). In these cases, as with music, place seemed to produce an atmospheric tone, a tone that stood for a set of values challenging her previous vision of both the normal and the possible. It was a discordant chord from what she had known, though, and it blew up her universe.

While Westover's liberation was a break from the past, there are also elements of continuity. Her father in a later interview defended the education of his children, pointing out that three of the seven Westover children eventually earned PhDs: “That's 42 percent of our children,” he says. “I think you'd be hard-pressed to find a public school with those statistics.”<sup>1</sup> Mr. Westover isn't totally wrong in his assessment. While the family dynamic and religious practices were based on top-down authority, the overall message living in the Westover home must have also been deeply anti-authoritarian. It stressed a Mormon vision of self-reliance taken to an extreme. Every expert was to be questioned, all mainstream views were suspect, and anything suggesting dependence on others was to be rejected. Moreover, it was believed that the individual should have the courage to be different from the mainstream, resisting easy social conformity. One way of understanding Westover's education is to recognize that she brought this anti-authoritarian ethos of the family and this courage to be different to bear against the family structure itself. Not only that, her upbringing was also deeply textual, focused on archaic religious books, which she struggled to understand. Westover credits this difficult reading as the key achievement of her self-education at home: “The skill I was learning was a crucial one, the patience to read things I could not yet understand” (p. 62). In these ways, Westover's education built on the values of the family, but she came to express them in a new way. Liberal educators tempted to treat the home life of fundamentalist students

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Seamons, “‘Educated’ should be read with grain of salt.”

with scorn should take note of Westover's story: as with all students, there will be *strengths* as well as deficits in the family background.

As an example of how this "data" might inform a debate in philosophy of education, consider the issue of whether an education for autonomy can take place within the boundaries of a "comprehensive tradition" (like a home religion) or whether it needs to offer sympathetic exposure to alternative belief systems. Robert Reich would endorse the second view: "minimal autonomy" is developed as students "engage intellectually with the history, traditions, and values of a diversity of cultures" (2002, p. 131). This type of education is intended to present a "range of real and meaningful options that the student could choose" (p. 108). Shelley Burt, in contrast, argues that we should understand autonomy as independence, a "non-subordination to the will and opinion of others" (2003, p. 189), rather than as an ability to choose among different options, and this independence can be developed fully *within* comprehensive traditions. This development is possible for several reasons. For example, she argues that children educated within comprehensive traditions often develop a type of moral courage as they live apart from mainstream culture, and this courage facilitates their independence. In addition, she asserts that comprehensive traditions also generally contain enough diversity within themselves to stimulate critical thought. Finally, she argues that children will be exposed to a diversity of ideas simply as a side product of living in a diverse society; the larger society can never be completely hidden from students.

While I have been critical of Burt elsewhere (Warnick, 2012), we can see that these three factors were all present in Westover's account and that they indeed encouraged her independence. She was exposed to diversity within her own religious tradition at BYU and through the choral music mentioned previously, she certainly developed a courage to be different as part of her religious upbringing, and we can see how the larger world still managed to creep into her sealed environment, particularly through things like her participation in community plays, where she met different people with new ideas. While Burt would certainly not be supportive of Westover's education, the data from Westover's story might support Burt's contention that some degree of independence can develop within the confines of a family religious tradition. Still, it remains the case that the full development of Westover's personality required that she be exposed to ideas outside of her comprehensive tradition. This is what happened in college, after all, when she was exposed to new ideas and her world started to feel "big." Taking all this together, *Educated* seems to support a layered approach to the education for autonomy. That is, it might first begin with a gently expanding exploration of a student's home tradition, moving on from there to alternative options as the student matures.<sup>2</sup>

Beyond data informing us about how to achieve a liberal education, Westover provides a rich description of the emotions and insights that came with her educational journey. Westover talks repeatedly about a feeling of "impersonation" in the formal stages of her education. That is, she describes transitional experiences in which she felt a tension between who she felt she was and the current role she was attempting to play. One of her professors noticed this: "You act like someone who is impersonating someone else. And it's as if you think your life depends on it" (p. 242). Indeed, she was wrestling with a deep incongruity between her sense of self and her educational development. "No matter how deeply I interred the memories," she writes, "how tightly I shut my eyes against them, when I thought of myself, the images that came to mind were of *that* girl" (pp. 242-243), the girl that had been ignorant and abused.

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<sup>2</sup> This scheme would be something akin to Rorty's idea of primary schooling focusing on socialization and higher education focusing on individualization, although, if Burt is right, some forms of socialization might contribute to individualization. See Rorty, "Educational as Socialization and Individualization" (1999, pp. 114-126).

This idea of impersonation in liberal education is worth thinking about. Surely, it is something many educated people have felt to some degree; “impostor syndrome,” as it is sometimes called, runs rampant in graduate programs. Westover presents us with salient questions: Is this a feeling to be fought and overcome, or should it be embraced or utilized somehow? Would it help to recognize explicitly such feelings? As an individual undertakes radical change, as new possibilities are encountered, it seems educators should reflect more on these feelings of impersonation, where people walk in educational shoes they do not yet feel comfortable wearing.

One of the emotions Westover reports in the course of her liberal education, which also deserves more investigation, is disgust. At first, disgust appears in the book in relation to her own sexuality, a disgust that had been carefully cultivated through family shaming based on its deeply sexist values. But, like the anti-authoritarianism, this emotional disposition turned eventually against her family. Disgust struck her in moments when she realized that her family was deeply mistaken: her shame at being ignorant of the Holocaust, her shock at her brother using the n-word, her embarrassment as her father loudly ranted about wild conspiracy theories in restaurants. Eventually, she felt a disgust again with herself, but this time it involved her own complicity in covering up for her abusive brother. These moments of disgust build on and amplify each other. They enable her to eventually achieve an *anthropological perspective* on herself, to see her previous life as not necessarily natural, to see it as an outsider would, in a troubled and distancing way. In Westover’s case, disgust seems to be a primary emotion driving the creation of this outsider perspective, and this perspective eventually helps her overthrow her imposed mental servitude.

If disgust was a key emotion, doubt and fallibility were her key intellectual reactions. She gradually moved away from thinking of her father as an unquestioned authority. Westover’s bishop at BYU became a principal counter-influence as he “surrendered” his authority in order to listen. Surprised and impressed by this, she implicitly contrasted this surrender with her father, who demanded all the obedience afforded him in the patriarchal religious tradition. The glaringly mistaken nature of what she was taught at home eventually alerted her to the role of external authority in shaping human pathways, often without sufficient warrant. She reflects on the fact that she hadn’t heard of the Holocaust: “I knew what it was to have a misconception corrected – a misconception of such a magnitude that shifting it shifted the world” (p. 238). This led her to study how historians had dealt with ignorance and partiality, and from “the ashes of their dispute” she hoped to “construct a world to live in” (p. 238). She concludes, “In knowing the ground was not ground at all, I hoped I could stand on it” (p. 238).

She found that a liberal education means standing without a firm foundation, then, but this groundlessness proved to be even more poignant than she first realized. At the end of the book, she found herself immersed in a series of disputes with her family about her memories of abuse, what happened and why. Basic facts were called into question. She is left with *her* truth, but not a shared truth. Her truth is not what the family recognized, and a sharp alienation from her family ensued.

Reading educational memoir, one sometimes finds a sense of loss. The loss stems from the realization that enlightenment has come at the expense of important connections. Westover certainly shares this sense of loss. After Cambridge, for example, she found it difficult to communicate with her sister: “Conversation was slow, halting...she had no frame of reference for my life...there was no common ground between us” (pp. 265-266). And, at the book’s conclusion, much of her family would not speak to her, something Westover seems to mourn, even after all the trouble and pain her upbringing had caused.

As a point of comparison, one thinks of Richard Rodriguez's educational memoir, *The Hunger for Memory*, where Rodriguez also mourns the silence between himself and his family that came with his college education. He bemoans the loss of intimacy that came with thinking about life very differently than his family did. While not wanting to go back to a life before education, Rodriguez finds himself in the grips of a paralyzing nostalgia, and he turns to educational scholarship and personal writing to make sense of his life and his loss. Similarly, after completing her PhD, Westover writes of a disconnection to her past that seems to go even deeper than family, extending to all the groundedness that her previous life entailed: "I had built a new life, and it was a happy one, but I felt a sense of loss that went beyond family" (p. 319). These observations, I think, should haunt liberal educators: What should we make of this sense of loss, this nostalgia? Does it have moral weight? Should we be willing to trade intimate family connections and groundedness for personal liberation and enlightenment? In Westover's overtly abusive situation, the answer perhaps seems obvious; in other cases, it is much less so.

Perhaps there is a way forward through this dilemma. In Rodriguez's case, one of his consolations is that a liberal education, while stealing away intimacy, also allowed him to understand and think about his family and culture in unexpected ways. That is, education facilitated new ways of connecting, while shutting down old ways. He writes:

The ability to consider experience so abstractly allowed me to shape into desire what would otherwise have remained indefinite, meaningless longing....If, because of my schooling, I had grown culturally separated from my parents, my education finally had given me ways of speaking and caring about the fact. (Rodriguez, 1982, pp. 77-78)

Indeed, his education ultimately allowed him to write his memoir, which created a pathway to express the pathos of his loss.

Westover also points to ways her education brought both connection and distance. She notes that her PhD dissertation gave her a fresh way of thinking about her Mormon past, as one cultural voice with something to contribute, rather than God's own truth: "It didn't treat Mormonism as the objective of human history, but neither did it discount the contribution Mormonism had made in grappling with the questions of the age" (p. 318). Her education allowed her to retain this piece of her past, not necessarily celebrating it, but acknowledging it and making room for it. Also, if we consider her family relationship, her education also gave her a voice in trying to reconstruct and reclaim her place in her family history. She writes that she realized, at the end of her doctoral program:

I had lost Buck's Peak, not by leaving, but by leaving silently. I had retreated, fled across the ocean and allowed my father to tell my story for me, to define me to everyone I had ever known. I had conceded too much ground -- not just the mountain, but the entire province of shared history. It was time to go home. (p. 319)

The development of one's voice, the ability to situate the old within the new, might be one of the most important achievements of liberal education. Education gave Westover the voice to reinsert herself into collective family memory and, in some sense, to reclaim memory as her own. The development of this voice culminated, it seems, in her memoir. Her education allowed her to recoup her religion through her dissertation and reimagine her family through her memoir. The anxiety never yields to acceptance; the pain of the dispute with her family is still there. But she has created her own story to hold onto.

I've noted this book is both useful as data and useful for the educational ideas it contains. I have argued that Westover's memoir plays a role in negotiating the emotional landscape of her education. Finally, we might ask about the usefulness of memoir itself as a literary genre. What does this literary form have to say to educational philosophers? We see within *Educated*, and in all good memoir, a mind struggling to understand itself. We see Westover wrestling with memory: postulating and doubting, checking and rethinking, considering and reconsidering the disputed truths of her becoming. There is something about this grappling with the self that best exemplifies what it means to live the examined life.

Proponents of the "examined life" believe that self-questioning both makes people better and affirms their basic humanity. And yet, ever since Socrates, there is something shallow about how the examined life has been envisioned in philosophy and education. Self-examination, it is said, involves the logical interrogation of our ideas, concepts, and beliefs. Notice this emphasis on knowledge and belief in Edward Glaser's seminal study on critical thinking: "Critical thinking," he writes, "calls for a persistent effort to examine any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the evidence that supports it and the further conclusions to which it tends" (1941, p.6). Critical thinking theorist Robert Ennis concurs, "Critical thinking is reasonable and reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do" (2011, p.1). While the beliefs that are examined could be beliefs about one's past, to be sure, the critical examination of one's memories and self-narratives is rarely mentioned in critical thinking textbooks. Instead, the critical examination called for by such writers focuses on what the self believes rather than on the self that does the believing. It is an examination in the abstract, emphasizing our propositional beliefs as most central to who we are. It ignores the idea that we are story-telling animals.

Fostering self-examination is a central goal of education, to be sure, but we should not forget that the self to be examined is a narrative self. A deeper form of the examined life is a questioning, not of our propositional statements, but of the stories and memories that build our identities. The examined life does not lie simply in searching for the logical consistency of our beliefs; it also involves trying to retell stories about ourselves in a way that is most accurate and most expansive. The examined life in this case involves both an interrogation and expansion of the narrative self. It seeks to align memory to what "really happened," whenever possible, but it also seeks to place memory within a larger context, within the historical moment, within the memories of others (particularly when memories of others are in conflict), and within the framework of all the other memories a person possesses. Thus, interrogating and reshaping memory must be a central goal of a liberal education focused on the examined life. Reading *Educated*, I was reminded that this activity of narrative self-examination is exemplified in the best memoirs. Memoir can teach us, by example, what it means to question ourselves. Memoir is thus one of the highest expressions of education: it is a concrete, material, embodied monument to the examined life.

What should education theorists do, then, with *Educated*? Perhaps it is best viewed as a book of questions, a set of provocations useful in both our scholarship and teaching. What are we to think of the emotional landscape of education that Westover describes? What are we to make of her data points and how should this influence our normative arguments about autonomy? And what might it mean to employ memoir, as a literary genre, in search of the examined life? Does the search for the examined life make us all creatures of memoir, in some sense? And, reaching this last point, we may want to pause the stream of questions and allow ourselves to simply be inspired by a writer like Westover, someone committed to examining her narrative self.

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