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A critique of Peter Jarvis's conceptualisation of the lifelong learner in the contemporary cultural context

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Introduction

Although Peter Jarvis has contributed in many different ways to the development of lifelong learning – both as a field of adult learning engagement and as the object of a field of scholarly inquiry – it is with just the latter that I am concerned in this paper. He has contributed to lifelong learning as a field of scholarly inquiry particularly in his theorisation of lifelong learning from the learner's perspective. That work has been strongly grounded, both philosophically, especially in existentialist philosophy, and empirically, through his phenomenologically-grounded explorations of adult learning and his critical analyses across the wide-ranging bodies of scholarship that he has sought to embrace. This body of scholarship was first presented as a coherent project in the work *Adult and continuing education: theory and practice* (Jarvis 1983), reaching its zenith with the publication of his "trilogy" (Jarvis 2006, 2007 & 2008), which, as he has acknowledged, 'gathers together much of my understanding from my previous writings' (Jarvis 2008, p. 2). Although his published work has been focused on the goal of articulating a comprehensive theory of lifelong *learning*, any such theory must either be grounded in or entail a notion of the lifelong *learner*. Jarvis has acknowledged that necessity, with his oft-repeated leading statement that 'Fundamentally, it is the person who learns and it is the changed person who is the outcome of learning' (Jarvis 2009a, p. 24).

He has also acknowledged – and made evidentially clear in his theorisation – that lifelong learning cannot be understood without its cultural context. Correspondingly, the second volume of his trilogy is devoted to the exploration of

that context (Jarvis 2007). The question that may be raised then, and which is the focus of this paper, is that of the extent to which and the ways in which Jarvis's notion of the lifelong learner may serve as a foundation for a comprehensive theory of lifelong learning in the contemporary cultural context.

I here tackle that question by, first, sketching the notion of lifelong learning and education for the purposes of this paper, to frame the following overview of what I see as being Jarvis's theorisation of the lifelong learner. I then turn to his theorisation of the contemporary cultural context of the learner, before returning to the question of the extent to which and the ways in which his notion of the lifelong learner may serve as a foundation for a comprehensive theory of lifelong learning in that context, speculating, then, on the implications of that assessment for the longer-term status of the theory of lifelong learning itself. In here drawing on Jarvis's own extensive body of published work, I have adopted the approach of relying in the first instance on his recently published trilogy and parallel works, using his earlier work where it adds something of further value.

Lifelong Learning and Education

By way of background to the following critical analysis, lifelong learning is here understood as a field not only of practice but also of scholarship about that practice (Edwards 1997). In both of these aspects, it is recognisable and characterised by the *discourse* pertaining to and shared by those who engage with it: the knowledge, understandings, values, commitments and aspirations pertaining to its nature, purposes, the sorts of human actions appropriate to engagement in it, and the policies constraining it (Foucault 1992). That discourse has its recent origins in the field of non-formal adult education, from which it has been progressively evolving since the early 1980s, initially under the banner of *lifelong education*, now that of *lifelong learning* (Jarvis 2014). At the start of that evolution, non-formal adult education was widely accepted as an educational sector providing educational opportunities outside the mainstream of formal secondary and tertiary education and training (Jarvis 2004). Lifelong learning has now, though, transmogrified into a field emphasising learning *in* adulthood, as well as pre-adult learning that facilitates the capacity to engage in later such learning (Jarvis 2008). In that context, *lifelong education* is now used to refer to learning opportunities developed specifically to facilitate learning – still generally

those non-formal adult learning opportunities outside the main frame of formal primary, secondary and tertiary education (Jarvis 2009b).

Thus, although now wearing the label *lifelong learning*, the field has maintained its focus on learning by *adults*. However, it has also broadened that focus to embrace the contribution of pre-adult and mainstream formal education to providing opportunities for the development of adult-life learning capabilities and propensities. In these ways it may be – and standardly has been – seen as lifelong in its focus, but it is so substantially only to the extent that pre-adult learning contributes to adult learning opportunities and capacities.

Consistent with the early theorisation of lifelong education, that focus on lifelong learning calls for the foregrounding of the *learner's* learning interests, needs aspirations, preferences and inclinations, in contrast to the traditional educational focus on the provision of *educational opportunities* (Jarvis 2014). It has been picked up by Jarvis in his theorisation of adult learning and of what it means to be an adult lifelong learner within a cultural context, although he has repeatedly argued that there is no substantive difference between adult and pre-adult learning and that, in consequence, his theorisation may be seen as applying to individuals at any point in their life-span (Jarvis 2006).

Jarvis's Conceptualisation of the Lifelong Learner

In turning now to examine Jarvis's conceptualisation of the lifelong learner, I note, that it is embedded and somewhat implicit in his theorisation of *lifelong learning*: most thoroughly and recently articulated in the first volume of his trilogy (Jarvis 2006). Although my focus here is on the learner *as* a learner, the critique is thus intertwined with and inseparable from what is involved in *learning* and hence from what learning amounts to. What is *excluded*, though, is a focus on Jarvis's theory of learning as such, except insofar as the implications of the critique here may reflect on the utility of the theory.

Central to Jarvis's conception of the lifelong learner is what he saw to be the irreducibly *existential* nature of learning (Jarvis 2006, p. 3). He thus developed what he saw as an existentialist account of the learner. His published articulation of that account was first developed comprehensively in his earlier work focusing on what he constructed as the *paradoxes* of learning (Jarvis 1992), being presented again,

although somewhat sketchily, in the first volume of the trilogy (Jarvis 2006). It emerges in his later work as both descriptive and idealistic. It is descriptive to the extent that it embraces a view of learning as an unavoidable (essential) human property: ‘It is important to recognise that by virtue of our existence, we learn. Learning is the driving force of our human-ness itself’ (Jarvis 2007, p. 211) and ‘Learning is the process of being in the world’ (Jarvis 2006, p. 6). But he also emphasises its utopian idealistic nature, arguing that the evils of globalisation should become the basis of ‘infinite’ (lifelong) learning: ‘The challenge is to halt the destructive processes of globalisation and to facilitate an equal distribution of the world’s resources’ (Jarvis 2007, p. 210). The reconciliation of these apparently contradictory accounts I shall discuss in the penultimate section of this paper.

In any event, the existentialist focus foregrounds individual learners as holistic beings in dialectical engagement with their cultural contexts – their individual *life-worlds* (following Husserl 1970). It is the individual sensory, phenomenological experience of their life-world that is the foundation for all learning. Such an ‘experience begins with disjuncture (a gap between our biography and our perception of our experience) or a sense of not-knowing’ (Jarvis 2009a, p. 25). Learning, then, as an outcome, is ‘integrated into the individual person’s biography resulting in a continually changing (or more *experienced*) person’ (Jarvis 2009a, p. 25). That learning is said to involve the giving of *meaning* to the disjunctive experiences and to be in the form of social constructs, presumably at least to the extent that it is the learning of *descriptive* material. Since learning contributes to the formation of the individual person and is driven by the experience of an on-going succession of disjunctures between individual learner biographies and their perceptions of situations in their life-worlds, it is essentially life-long. Individuals, accordingly, are said to be always in an unfinished state of *becoming* a being (a person), to be engaged irremediably in lifelong learning until death: ‘Lifelong learning is an indication that humanity remains an unfinished project’ (Jarvis 2006, p. xii); ‘Being is always becoming’ (Jarvis 2006, p. 5); it is a project grounded in both our physical maturing and our lifelong learning. Thus, ‘Learning remains the driving force of the human being, something that is individual and individuating’ (Jarvis 1998, p. 67).

In what follows here, I am seeking to articulate the broadly existentialist features of Jarvis’s conceptualisation of the lifelong learner, because in them may be

found the adequacy of that conceptualisation to serve as a foundation for a comprehensive theory of lifelong learning. Existentialism, as a multi-stranded philosophical movement (Kaufmann 1975), has influenced the development and nature of humanism and its critique: as a social movement, as a philosophy of education, and as a branch of psychology (Buber 1996; Reynolds 2006; Valet 1977). Jarvis acknowledges and draws upon different aspects of those strands and influences in his theorisation, especially in the first volume of his trilogy (Jarvis 2006). My approach here is not to trace their interrelationships, but rather to accept them, as did Jarvis, at face value. I am also taking the approach here of commenting only on those features of existentialism that I see as being important in Jarvis's conceptualisation of the lifelong learner, rather than painting any sort of a fulsome picture of existentialist philosophy, since I consider the extent to which his work is true to the multifarious tenets of existentialism to be unimportant to task at hand. Suffice it to say here that Jarvis's articulation of existentialism is well informed, but appropriately selective for his purposes, as one has come to expect of contemporary applications of existentialist philosophy (Macquarrie 1972).

Arguably the central tenet of existentialism is that of *authenticity* (Burnham & Papandreopoulos 2016), through which all an individual's actions are judged by the extent to which they are chosen by that individual as an autonomous agent, free from extrinsic restraint and constraint (Heidegger 1996). For Jarvis, 'the authentic person has to be free.... Indeed, freedom is a condition of authentic humanity' (Jarvis 1992, p. 119). It is thus a measure of integrity, entailing individual freedom of choice and action, and responsibility for one's choices and their consequences. It thus drives the humanism that characterises existentialism (Warnock 1970): a humanism, though, that embraces spirituality (Walsh 2009). Authenticity suffuses Jarvis's conceptualisation of the learner in all those regards. The emphasis in his work, though, is on what he, following Macquarrie (1972), has argued to be the *interactive* interpretation of authenticity, 'where people discover themselves in a relationship with others in which they also endeavour to assist others to be themselves' (Jarvis 1992, p. 147). This interpretation opens up authenticity to embrace a respect and care for others. Thus, 'inauthenticity occurs when individuals are unable to interact in order to help other people achieve their own personhood or when people's actions are

controlled by others and their performance is repetitive and ritualistic' (Jarvis 1992, pp. 115-116).

Paralleling authenticity in existentialism is the notion of individuals' *alienation* from their cultural contexts and from themselves (Cooper 1999). Alienation from oneself recognises the point that one's construction of one's identity is also co-constructed by others and that that objective aspect of individuality is extrinsic or alien to each person. It thus foregrounds the *social* aspect individual identity, which is strongly displayed in Jarvis's account. Alienation from one's cultural context recognises that the world beyond the individual exists regardless of the individual's existence and regardless of the individual's knowledge of it, and that we can, accordingly, only come to know it through our engagements with it. Through such engagements, we affect it, but it always remains outside us.

This second aspect of existential alienation informs Jarvis's key notion of disjuncture, through the associated notion of *anxiety*, as the tension that is generated by the individual's alienation from his or her socio-cultural context: both the tension created by the difference between an individual's understanding of the context and his or her *experience* of it, and the tension created by differences between the individual's construction of him or her self as a person and how others are seen as constructing him or her (Macquarrie 1972). These tensions are recognised by Jarvis in the disjunctures that underpin his conception learning. Any act of individual learning, then, is seen as being grounded in the resolution of such a disjuncture, whether it is primary (between individual biography, or understanding of the context, and interpreted perception of it – one's life-world) or secondary (involving 'mediated or indirect experience that comes through communicative action' (Jarvis 1992, p. 14)). The resolution of any such disjuncture is seen as the process of replacing the state of disjuncture with one of *harmony*, through engagement in learning. Jarvis's account of the learner, then, is as a seeker of existential harmony: the resolution of a disjuncture returning us, from the state of disjuncture, to one of harmony with our life-world, in which we can take our life-world for granted.

Crucial, then, to existentialism, is the notion of *interpreting* one's lived experience of the world, through which one gives it *meaning* (Warnock 1970). Such interpretation involves one in drawing on one's aggregate of interpreted experience – a process that is irreducibly subjective, and which leads to individual, subjectively

constructed understanding (Pattison 2005). Because individual constructions of meaning are unavoidably informed by shared socio-cultural construction, such understandings are also *socially* constructed (Barrett 1990): the “facticity” of human existence. Such understandings, which Jarvis terms *knowledge*, comprise the learning that he sees as flowing from individual attempts to resolve the above-noted disjunctures. Existentialist value is thus highly *intrinsic* to being and knowing (Warnock 1970). Such an interpretivist process of giving meaning to experience points to a *phenomenological* approach to more formal knowledge generation (Cooper 1999), hence the importance of phenomenology to Jarvis’s work.

The on-going process and outcome of thus learning through giving meaning to the continuing flow of one’s experience is seen as progressively forming oneself as a human being – self-constructing one’s identity (Taylor 1989). In existential philosophy it is viewed as the *project* of existence, with which we must engage if we are to be authentic. It is a project necessitated by the *absurdity* of existence, by which is meant that human existence has no supervening moral or teleological plan to which it must conform: leaving individuals to create their own humanity (Gaffney 2006). It is a project that is also embedded in the on-going flow of time and experience. Time thus becomes relative to individual situation: non-linear, in that it reaches back to particular prior experiences and forward to different possible futures. And its flow is variable, depending upon the passage of individual experience (Macquarrie 1972). For Jarvis, this process of self-formation underpins his conceptualisation of lifelong learning as a necessity for human existence. All engagements that one has with the world are seen as part of this project of existence, or as sub-projects of it. Human beings, then, are always also in the process of *becoming* human through lifelong learning.

The project of existence is a reflective, mindful, project, through which meaning is given to experience and substance is given to being. Existentialism therein presents authentic living, in a sense, as a *philosophical* project in and of itself (Kaufmann 1975). The project of existence is also an *individual* project, albeit one that is embedded in the individual’s socio-cultural context, or life-world. Consequently, the knowledge that is generated through it is heterogeneous: a heterogeneity moderated by the socio-cultural context that is informing it.

Existentialism thus values heterogeneity – diversity – in being, knowing and valuing, and in knowledge itself (Warnock 1970).

Being human, then, the project of human existence, is highly situated (Burnham & Papandreopoulos 2016). What is important about it – what its authenticity amounts to – is particular to individuals at particular moments in time. It is informed by socio-cultural context, but through each individual's individuality (Cooper 1999).

Jarvis's Theorisation of the Contemporary Cultural Context

Jarvis's theorisation of the lifelong learner has thus been of the individual embedded in and significantly impacted by the prevailing cultural context (Jarvis 2006). Straightforwardly, that cultural context will impact on the nature and extent of *opportunities* available for learning engagement: the sorts of structures, relationships and situations supported by policy, public funding and popular recognition, including educational opportunities (Bagnall 2004). Less straightforwardly, but of fundamental importance to the subject of this paper, the nature of learners themselves – their interests, inclinations, commitments, intentions and understandings – are influenced by the prevailing cultural context. Within Jarvis's theorisation, the learner's experiences of that context are seen as creating the disjunctures that lead to learning: learning which, together with the effects of biological maturation, actually *makes* the learner what he or she is. The prevailing cultural context thus moulds the nature of adults as lifelong learners to an important extent (Jarvis 2006).

Jarvis's account of the nature of the contemporary cultural context and its impact on lifelong learning – which he has presented most thoroughly in the second volume of his trilogy (Jarvis 2007) – he describes as a 'Marxian analysis of social structure' (Jarvis 2007, p. 4), in which the prevailing cultural context is presented as 'the social forces of the substructure' of society (Jarvis 2007, p. 80). That substructure is seen as comprising three strands: 'technology, especially information technology, ... the economic institution, namely advanced capitalism, and the supporting might of America' (Jarvis 2007, p. 80). Those three strands are thus presented – in addition to the unexplained 'recognition that modernity itself was being questioned' (Jarvis 2007, p. 44) – as the *drivers* of contemporary globalisation. The economic and neo-Marxian emphasis in the drivers of contemporary globalisation are in accord with the

well established, but questionable, tradition of seeing that globalisation as an expression of an ascendant neoliberal ideology of advanced capitalism in mutually reinforcing reflexive relationship with contemporary communications technology (Lingard & Rizvi 2010). That reflexivity sees Jarvis also presenting “technological and information technology” as one of the five categories of *outcomes* of contemporary globalisation, although they are actually articulated as *facilitators* of globalisation (Jarvis 2007, p. 57). The other four categories of outcomes – the economic, the political, the cultural, and the ecological – present contemporary globalisation as an essentially negative force expressed in the power of trans-national corporations within a cultural context of postmodernity (Jarvis 2007, pp. 54-76).

The overwhelmingly economistic and political nature of that account, in the absence of any adequate explanation of the economism, allies it to the commonsense neo-liberal interpretation so frequently invoked in educational analysis and critique (e.g., Olssen 2016; Rizvi 2007). That interpretation, though, runs the risk of suggesting, or of being interpreted as suggesting, that liberal ideology is a primary *driver* of the nature of the contemporary cultural context. It could be argued that the neo-liberal tenets of the contemporary cultural context are, rather, essentially *incidental* to its cultural dominance, while acknowledging that the coincidence has provided a fruitful ground for much critique of neo-liberalism from concerned commentators (Davies 2014; Thornton 2014) and has served to embolden those reformers seeking to respond to the imperative for educational performativity in the contemporary cultural context (Bagnall 2004). In Western culture at least, the prevailing cultural context in recent times may be seen as the product of what Habermas (1983, p. 9) termed ‘the project of modernity ...to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art.’ That project, grounded in the Enlightenment, has seen the progressive undermining of traditional fundamentalist beliefs and the extraordinary generation of culturally transformative technologies (Howe 1994). It has progressively dominated at least Western (and westernised) cultural contexts from the eighteenth century (Dreyfus & Kelly 2011), infusing cultural realities with critical rationalist empiricism: undermining traditional metaphysical commitments and replacing them with commitments grounded in reason and empiricism (Toulmin 1990). Over the course of the first half of the twentieth century, with the progressive, but rapid, rise of a culture of instrumentalism (Bagnall

1999), the project of modernity reached the point where it undermined the grounds for believing in the truth of its own foundational commitments to the universal intrinsic values of progressive humanism as the zenith of the project of modernity – what Lyotard (1984) termed the loss of faith in the grand narratives of modernity. Such culture is substantially lacking in non-arbitrary intrinsic value. It is culture in which human activity is strongly focused on instrumentally achieving outcomes drawn from a multiplicity of different domains of human engagement and systems of belief (Bagnall 2004). It has become the culturally dominant determinant internationally under the influence of contemporary electronic communications technology (Castells 1998): technology which is globalising in the sense of its involving the international integration and convergence of culture and cultural artefacts, including political, social, and economic systems (Giddens 1990).

It may have been something like this interpretation to which Jarvis was referring in his enigmatic identification, noted above, of the questioning of modernity itself as a driver of changes in the contemporary cultural context. In any event, that contemporary cultural context pervades liberal cultural contexts just as it does the realities of other political persuasions. Any likeness to classical political liberalism in the contemporary cultural context may be seen, then, as quite accidental, and as focussed on the latter's individualisation of accountability and choice, the essential moral values of classical liberalism being understandably absent. It may be characterised using Lyotard's (1984) notion, adopted by Ball (2000), of its being *performative* in the sense that all human endeavour is judged in terms of its *effectivity*. That it is also globalising is clear, as many have argued (Bauman 1998). Correspondingly, then, it may better be characterised and labelled, perhaps, as the *globalisation of performativity*.

Such a cultural context – to continue the analytic account – exhibits the erosion of intrinsic value in knowledge, action and metaphysics: value being significantly reduced to *instrumental* value: to the value of the extent to which it is useful in achieving other ends (Bauman 1998), or what Vattimo (1988) termed “exchange value.” Value is thus *externalised* to lie substantially outside of or extrinsic to human being, action and community (Bauman 1995): it is conspicuously in the prospect of becoming or acquiring something else (Schechter 2010). It is also *privatised*, in that responsibility for value attainment – and hence for performance and risk – are

devolved to successively lower levels of social organisation, from governmental authorities, to organisations and, ultimately, to individuals (Edwards 2012). Such a cultural context focuses on, or places a high value on, *action*: on doing, performing, achieving, becoming and acquiring (Ball 2012). In so doing, it focuses on intended, desired or sought-after *outcomes* – on what is to be done or achieved in and through that action and on the *effectiveness* of the action in doing so (Bauman 1992). In its focus on achieving desired performance outcomes of extrinsic value, it places a high value on the *efficiency* with which resources are used in doing so, to the exclusion of other outcomes being attained (Rizvi & Lingard 2010). It therein promotes attention to the comparative competitive advantage of different types of engagements, processes, programs, policies, or organisational arrangements in achieving the desired outcomes (Marginson 1997). In assessing comparative competitive advantage, all such value tends to be reduced to a common commodity or currency – that of economic cost and benefit – cultural “economism” (Ritzer 1996). The focus, then, in human action and projects is on technical, mechanistic, and programmatic relationships between the desired economic outcomes and the costs of contributing human actions, engagements, policies, and interventions (Bauman 1998).

It should also be appreciated, though, that contemporary globalisation is importantly characterised by a dynamic tension between forces for globalising *homogenisation* (cultural convergence) and those for localising *heterogenisation* (cultural pluralisation) (Powell & Steel 2011) – a point noted by Jarvis (2007, Ch. 3). Until recent decades, the forces for homogenisation – which favoured highly systematic instrumentalism in cultural realities – have been seen to prevail over those of heterogenisation (Halliday 2012). There may now, though, be seen as occurring a shift to more localised forms of globalisation, foregrounding diversity, flexibility and situational responsiveness (Castells 2010). Contemporary information technology may also be seen as moving in the same direction: away from massified approaches to communication, towards more tailored, localised approaches, often within globalised frameworks (Castells 1998). More broadly, knowledge, value and action are also becoming more contextualised, facilitated by the privatisation of responsibility (Bagnall 1999). In essence, the globalised pluralisation of social meaning is currently undermining the ascendancy of globalised homogenisation (Edwards 1997).

The impact of those changes in the contemporary cultural context of lifelong learning is reflected in Jarvis's account. The above-noted change in the discourse – from a predominant concern with providing non-formal adult education opportunities to a preoccupation with individual engagement in (lifelong) learning – captures the important contemporary focus on the privatisation of value, risk and responsibility. The externalisation of value has seen the commodification of learning itself: both as an engagement and as an outcome. That commodification is reflected in the erosion of the traditional distinction between education, as the development of human character, and training, as the development of skills and routines of some sort, but with the educational emphasis shifting strongly in favour of training for life management and vocational skills. Lifelong education provision now focuses largely on highly instrumentalist forms of education – or, more correctly, on training – especially on economically-directed *workforce* training, re-training and up-skilling. There has also been a shift to learning for organisational change and renewal, with organisations using lifelong learning in projects to change workplace culture and skill sets. State funding of lifelong education provision has been increasingly out-sourced, competitively, to non-government providers and is now commonly skewed towards basic life-skills workforce entry training. Beyond such provision, individual adult learners are increasingly expected to carry the responsibility for their educational success and failure and the cost of their own education and training.

As Jarvis has noted in his recent work, those shifts have tended to alienate workers from the contemporary cultural context, in the sense that the context is not something to which they belong, become a part of, and identify with. It is, rather, something that is out there, confronting, challenging, an external presence with which they must deal, use as best they can, but not be taken over by. That alienation includes the alienation from educational opportunities to which they feel impelled by the expectations of the cultural context, but to which they are seldom drawn. The loss of intrinsic value and its erosion of community also leads to the fetishization and the aestheticization of commitments, to a desire to conform to passing populisms and to a flight into fundamentalist ideological and religious commitments to counter the alienation. These latter responses create an educational need for re-education in the public interest, at least when they are anti-social in their impact.

Jarvis has also, interestingly, presented the contemporary notion of lifelong learning as an *outcome* of that context, wherein:

Lifelong learning has also become a social phenomenon – it is about learning but it is also about education. In a sense, it falls between the individual learning process and the formal bureaucratic educational process – it is something of a market – one of learning opportunities and one of opportunities to enrol in courses! (Jarvis 2007, p. 67)

A Critical Assessment

I return now to the question of the adequacy of Jarvis's conceptualisation of the lifelong learner to serve as a foundation for a comprehensive theory of lifelong learning within the contemporary cultural context by noting that its existentialist nature suggests, a priori, great promise. The existentialist focus on human existence as a philosophical project of self-creation in the face of a challenging cultural context captures the *necessity* of living life *as* a learner. As Jarvis has noted in his published work, if individual being is always an unfinished project in a state of becoming through reflective awareness of his or her changing situation, learning will, indeed, be a life-long and life-wide event, even if it is so somewhat episodically.

However, existentialism is essentially a cry for recognition of the freedom of the individual from the oppressive constraints of traditional rationality, morality and collective wisdom (Kaufmann 1975). It developed the notion of the ideal human being as the authentic individual – free of tradition, institutional constraint, and the impulse to conform to social norms – to generate his or her own unique identity, spirituality and understanding of the universe, for which he or she was, then, solely responsible (Heidegger 1996). Such a philosophical project pitted the individual against his or her cultural context – the crowd – placing him or her in a position of anxiety in relation to that context (Pattison 2005). It meant that critical self-reflection became a way of life for everyone (Burnham & Papandreopoulos 2016). It marginalised modernist rationality and science as being *insufficient* to comprehend the realities of human existence, while recognising their contribution to human understanding of the world (Barrett 1990). It saw 'Habit and custom, traditional and routine ways of doing things ... as falling below the level of truly human action' (Macquarrie 1972, p. 186). It called for a focus on one's *situatedness* (Heidegger

1996). It called for the acceptance of individual responsibility for one's projects in life and of living – including the project of one's self-creation as a human being (Sartre 1989). It is thus irreducibly focused on the *humanness* of human existence: of being an authentic human being in everything that one is and does, including one's relationships with others (Reynolds 2006).

Jarvis's conceptualisation of the lifelong learner thus has a number of points of compatibility with the contemporary cultural context. It picks up the focus on the learning needs and interests of the individual learner. It emphasises the freedom of the individual and, with that freedom, individual responsibility for one's adult life decisions, including those pertaining to one's lifelong learning development. It focuses on action as evidencing human engagement. It sees that action as highly situated. It recognises the contemporary compression of time and space as a crucial contextual feature with which individuals must cope and through which the competing pressures for heterogenisation and homogenisation are heightened. And it focuses attention on the alienation of contemporary adult learners from the educational opportunities to which they feel impelled.

The crucial points of difference and hence potentially of *incompatibility* between that conceptualisation and the contemporary cultural context are arguably those that are captured in the epistemology and the nature of the normativity in Jarvis's conceptualisation and those that are favoured by the contemporary cultural context. As has been argued elsewhere (Bagnall & Hodge in press), the contemporary cultural context strongly favours *instrumental* epistemology in all engagements, whereas Jarvis's conceptualisation of the lifelong learner sees the experience of authentic engagements as being informed by what amounts to a *constructivist* epistemology.

An instrumental epistemology has, at its core, a view of knowledge as effective action – as the capability to act on and in the world according to rationally proven procedures. It thus values realist, reductionist knowledge and pragmatic, performative and outcomes-oriented action, focusing on the economic effectiveness and efficiency with which those outcomes are achieved through highly formal, technicist approaches. It favours learners who are flexibly responsive to the contingent demands of the context. It emphasises learning for capacity building through cycles of practice and assessment, learning being assessed as the performance

of predetermined actions. And it is evidenced in behaviourist, competence-based and outcomes-based types of educational engagement.

Contrastingly, constructivist epistemology has, at its core, a view of knowledge as authentic commitment and engagement. It emphasises learning for actualisation through immersion in authentic experience. It thus values experiential, holistic knowledge and reflective, humanistic and engagement-centred action, focusing on the subjective value of the engagement in *being* and in achieving some sense of satisfaction (“harmony” for Jarvis). It favours learners who are autonomous and reflective. It emphasises learning through lived experience and reflection. And it is evidenced in progressive, humanist and learner-centred types of educational engagement.

The contemporary cultural context also exhibits a strongly egoistic normativity, in that it encourages individuals and organisations to pursue their own self-interest, however informed or otherwise (Bagnall 2004). This normativity has seen an overwhelming increase in the disparity of wealth and power within and between nations in recent decades (Berry 2015).

Standing starkly in opposition to that contextual normativity is Jarvis’s conceptualisation of the normativity of the individual as involving the principle of *respect for others*, in their projects of being human. This entailment is the core of its social normativity, linking it strongly with humanism, with which existentialism has been closely associated by many of its critics and some of its apologists (Reynolds 2006). Existentialism, thus, is echoed in articulations of humanism, for example, in Blackham’s (1968, p. 13) account in which ‘Humanism proceeds from an assumption *that man is on his own and his life is all and an assumption of responsibility for one’s own life and for the life of humankind*’. That social normativity has been picked up to varying degrees in lifelong learning policy, as Jarvis (2008) has suggested in his analysis of lifelong learning policy initiatives at various levels – international, regional, national, organisational, and sub-national – in spite of the power of the contemporary cultural context. While humanistic principles that articulate this social normativity may be, and have been derived independently of existentialist philosophy, as those that emerge through deliberation as being of common (shared) concern to *all* peoples (as has been done, for example, by Bagnall (2007) in his informed

commitments of lifelong learning). They are captured also in Jarvis's explicitly existentialist articulation of his theorisation of human learning (Jarvis 2006, Ch. 1).

Existentialist philosophy – and Jarvis's derivative theorisation of the lifelong learner – are therein irreducibly *normative*, in that they embrace respect for oneself (as authentic) and respect for others (in their authenticity). Such a strongly humanistic normativity and the epistemic constructivism of Jarvis's conception of learning place his theorisation somewhat at odds with the global imperative for environmental sustainability, which forms a significant counter-current to the predominant egoism of the contemporary cultural context. That imperative draws its strength from the widespread destruction of the natural environment through the exercise of the power of human technology and the demands of humankind (Agyeman 2005). It demands a conception of learning that embraces a thoroughgoing and long-term *stewardship* of the environment (Wylie 2005), but the humanism and constructivism of existentialism have been argued by, for example, Bowers (2005) to have very little, if any, purchase on that demand.

Nevertheless, it is through its normativity that I suggest lies the greatest potential of Jarvis's work for influencing the future of lifelong learning. While the points of compatibility of his theorisation with key features of the contemporary cultural context may be seen as giving it a significant measure of *acceptability* within that context, its *impact* may be most significantly in its humanising of lifelong learning policy and practice within it. Given, now, the pervasion of contemporary cultural realities by lifelong learning – with notions such as learning communities, learning organisations, learning cities, and such like – the extent and import of that impact stand to be considerable.

However, there are evident some further weaknesses in Jarvis's conceptualisation of the learner, which may be seen as limiting its persuasiveness and utility. First, I note Jarvis's challenging reduction of knowledge to *knowing*: 'Knowledge, then, is the outcome of learning' (Jarvis 2007, p. 78). Knowing (and hence learning) he argues, true to his informing existentialist philosophy, is a subjective matter, and hence knowledge is always significantly constructed. Only with such knowledge can one be said to *be* knowledgeable. Contrastively, in that account, knowledge (as commodified public knowledge) is *not* to know authentically. However, it is erroneous to see such *understanding* (as it would normally be

regarded) as the essential defining feature of *knowledge*. Knowledge that is known at some stage may well be shared with others and documented in such a way that it becomes *public* knowledge outside the beings of individual knowers (Popper 1979; Scheler 1980). While it retains its constructed nature, it does not cease to exist when no one is understanding it.

This point is sharpened in the light of Jarvis's proclaimed agenda to develop an all-encompassing (and hence, incidentally, all-powerful) universal theory of learning – one that subsumes and explains all other theories of learning – ‘a single theory [of learning] that embraced all the other theories, one that was multi-disciplinary’ (Jarvis 2009a, p. 24) and that focuses on ‘the human processes of being-in-the-world and learning to be a self in society’, (Jarvis 2006, p. xi). What are we to make of this knowledge-creating project if the theory, the knowledge, created through the project is dismissed as a regrettable aberration of the contemporary ‘having society’ (Jarvis 1992, p. 151) and not captured in publicly available documents, which others may access to the benefit of humankind now and in the future? If all knowledge is *knowing*, as Jarvis has claimed, it cannot exist outside an individual's knowing it, whether it is knowledge to which he or she has contributed or whether, it is, more broadly, any part of the extensive bodies of knowledge that have been generated and recorded throughout historical time. It may also be noted, without comment here on what one may make of it, that Jarvis's hegemonic project to create a superordinate theory of learning surely sits uncomfortably with the existentialist nature of the theory generated.

Jarvis, of course, accepted in hindsight that he had not developed a superordinate theory of learning that subsumed all others. Nevertheless, the *scope* of the theory that he has developed – and of the conceptualisation of the learner on which it depends – remains an important matter for consideration, since it directly influences the *utility* of the theory. In that regard, I focus now on Jarvis's notion that all learning is grounded, directly or derivatively in disjunctures between an individual's biography and his or her experience of events in or aspects of his or her life-world. This view of learning strikes me as being extraordinarily limited (and limiting), denying as it does the massive body of accumulated knowledge and experience that points to so many learning projects being driven by interests, curiosities, enthusiasms and unexplained drives without any identifiable experience of

pivotal disjunctures. If to learn, we must wait until we experience a disjuncture, must we not be passive non-learners when we are not dealing with a disjuncture? Is this not implying that learning is highly *extrinsically* driven? If we reject these implications of Jarvis's account of learning, we reject disjunctures as a *necessary* condition of learning, which is not to deny that their occurrence may well be an important driver of *some* learning, at least. Learning, though, is surely to be understood as a much broader form of engagement with experiences of all sorts, with ideas, and with feelings, being encouraged, facilitated and impelled by a diversity of factors. It is surely with that breadth of content and process that any comprehensive theory of learning – if any such were possible – must engage.

Relatedly, the experience of disjunctures is not a very reliable foundation for learning since, as Jarvis has noted, an individual may ignore or reject the opportunity for learning presented by a disjuncture: 'In this rapidly changing [globalised] world, we are frequently in a state of disjuncture and so we are forced to learn, or to reject the opportunity to learn and learn to live in ignorance' (Jarvis 2007, p. 39). A disjuncture may thus be seen, also, as an *insufficient* foundation for learning. Something else is required for even a disjuncture to be used as the basis for a learning engagement.

A further limitation of Jarvis's conceptualisation of the learner is his notion of learning as the process and outcome of giving *meaning* to disjunctive experiences in the form social constructs, since such a conception may be seen as prioritising *cognitive* learning: 'Learning is, therefore, a process of giving meaning to, or seeking to understand, life experiences' (Jarvis 1992, p. 11). His focus on the attainment of *harmony* through learning from disjunctions suggests an emotive property of cognitive learning, but there remains a concern that non-cognitive learning – such as emotive, operational (performative), aesthetic and dispositional (Bagnall 1997) – are unavoidably of secondary importance. Other types of learning would thus seem to be, at best, secondary to the development of *understanding*.

His earlier work was strongly grounded in his commitment to Kolb's simplistic concept of a "learning cycle" (Kolb 1984). Using that concept as the stimulus for discussion among workshop participants on the nature of their (phenomenological) experience of learning, he elaborated the model into a picture of learning, first presented in the book *Adult learning in the social context* (Jarvis 1987)

as his “model of the learning processes”, and frequently since then in publications, up to and beyond the trilogy (Jarvis 2006 & 2009a). The focus of the Kolb model on individual experience has – under the influence of its use in Jarvis’s empirical research process – thus carried forward into his more mature theorisation. Although he has suggested that ‘In my mind, the move from experientialism to existentialism has been the most significant in my own thinking about human learning’ (Jarvis 2009, p. 24), in fact, the commitment to experientialism looks rather to have been retained and – true to existentialist philosophy – made central to his conception of individual learning. It may be seen, though, as underpinning the foregoing weaknesses and the limitations of his fully developed conception of learning.

I end this critique with a minor quibble. Jarvis’s writing exemplifies two irritating features of much lifelong learning scholarship: its encyclopaedic and cyclical nature. Although his work is firmly located within and dependent upon lifelong learning discourse for its meaning, it tends significantly to be written in each account as though it were for a new and uninformed readership – in the manner of a good textbook, although lacking the explicit socialisation discourse that marks out a textbook. Thus, it tends not to take forward or to develop a line of scholarly argument from the point at which it last left us, but rather to re-build and up-date the story beside that previously presented, using it as a superior position from which to absorb the surrounding barbarians or to shoot them down. In this manner, much of that which Jarvis has written in recent years can make rather frustrating reading.

Implications for Jarvis’s Theory of Lifelong Learning

Let me offer some speculations, now, on the implications of the foregoing assessment of Jarvis’s conceptualisation of the lifelong learner for the longer-term status of his theory of lifelong learning itself.

Although Jarvis’s account of learning fails to subsume all others, in spite of his hopes that it would, it may be seen as standing beside them and as holding them to account with its own standards. On the one hand, it gives lifelong learners formal recognition and assurance of the place and importance to their lifelong learning and wellbeing of the alienation they are experiencing in the changing contemporary cultural context. For those learners who have sufficient existential autonomy, it may also serve as a bulwark against their adopting any of the fetishes and fundamentalist

ideologies being paraded in the contemporary cultural context. On the other hand, it gives lifelong education change managers and leaders an understanding of how they may effect cultural change through manipulating the cultural context (the life-worlds) of their target learners in such a way as to generate learning disjunctures that are more likely to lead to the attainment of change management goals. Since learning is always – at least ultimately – seen to be grounded in disjunctive experiences, it is unavoidably constrained by the social constructs constituting the contemporary cultural context (through individual life-worlds) and may, therefore, be influenced by the manipulation of that context. Ironically, then, the primacy of disjunctures may thus be seen as presenting an effective way of intelligently manipulating the life-worlds of learners in ways that are more likely to lead to the provider-desired learning outcomes: the learning outcomes of those who exercise power over others. This is certainly not a situation that aligns well with the existential foundations of Jarvis's work.

In both of these respects, though, the account of learning is short on practical detail – identifying, therein, potentially fruitful territory for future elaboration and experimentation.

The account of learning is also limited by its singular focus on disjunctures as the foundation for all learning. In that singularity, it tends, also ironically, to craft the learner as more driven by changes experienced in the prevailing cultural context, than by any qualities of the autonomous individual that are seen as so paramount to an existentialist conception of humanity. The failure of disjunctures to be either sufficient or necessary foundations of learning, together with the limitations of the existentialist humanistic normativity and constructivist epistemology, and the bias towards cognitive learning, serve to reduce the scope of the conceptualisation of learning developed in Jarvis's work.

Those limitations of Jarvis's conceptualisation of lifelong learning, then, will surely limit the utility of his theory of lifelong learning. Since the theory is grounded in the conceptualisation of learning. Nevertheless, Jarvis presents a stimulating and appealing account of the lifelong learner – one that will surely stand into the future as saying important things about learning and its relationship to the human condition at this moment in time.

Perhaps its author has expected too much of it. Had it been presented, not as the foundational product of an attempt to develop an all-encompassing theory of learning, but as an irritatingly persuasive *alternative* to the raft of predominantly behaviourist views of education and learning, it might well have been able to stand its ground. As an oppositional irritant under the humanistic banner, Jarvis's theorisation may be seen as having already had significant impact on lifelong learning practice, and that impact may well continue to grow. That will be, I suggest, the strength of its legacy: a legacy that, at least, cocks a magnificent snook at the contemporarily hegemonic behemoth of behaviouristic instrumentalism.

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