

The Ascetic Model of Discipline as a Pedagogical Approach in Music

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Some twenty years ago, I was fortunate enough to experience a series of highly disciplined piano lessons. In contemporary society, discipline and creativity are often cast as antithetical. The order and practice of discipline are associated with rigid rules that, it is frequently assumed, inhibit creativity;¹ creativity, on the other hand, is often associated with unrepressed rebels and rule-breakers, such as children and artists. Artistic creativity is taken to be the result of exceptional individual expression bursting through everyday social constraints. Rather than inhibiting my creativity, however, the discipline of these lessons allowed me to experience an unprecedented creative freedom, and led me to question traditional perceptions of the relationship between creativity and discipline.

Anecdotes and first-hand accounts of the teacher–student relationship are usually ignored by the disciplines that study music; this article however is the result of my decision to take these experiences seriously. At the time, I recorded my impressions of the series of structured practices that took place during these piano lessons.² A couple of years after the lessons finished, a chance meeting with my old teacher resulted in a few extra lines added to my notes. After that day I forgot about this ‘diary’ for a very long time. Through an examination of my account of these piano lessons, I explore the idea that discipline and creativity are not irreconcilable notions but, rather, if we move away from dominant objectivist standpoints,

¹ The perception of discipline as essentially punitive gradually changed when a child-centred style of education became common. A classic example can be found in England’s educational system where during the twentieth century corporal punishment in schools was gradually abandoned. This change was initiated by ideas coming from philosophy, psychology and the social sciences, including those of Jean Piaget and John Dewey. See Benjamin Shmueli, ‘Corporal Punishment in the Educational System versus Corporal Punishment by Parents: A Comparative View,’ *Law and Contemporary Problems* 73 (2010): 281–320; Norma Radin, ‘Alternative to Suspension and Corporal Punishment,’ *Urban Education* 22 (1988): 476–95.

² A longer extract from the unpublished manuscript, titled ‘Prelude,’ that contains the account of the piano lessons is found in my PhD thesis, ‘Creativity, Order and Discipline,’ University of NSW, 2004. It can be found online at <http://unsworks.unsw.edu.au/fapi/datastream/unsworks:673/SOURCE01>.

can be seen as inseparable and central to learning. Although this article focuses on the role of discipline in the practice associated with music, it can relate to students and teachers in general. It suggests that discipline can allow creativity and responsiveness by producing a time and space unburdened by self-conscious ways of being. I propose that discipline and creativity, rather than being in opposition, are interrelated—two inseparable sides of the same coin—and part of everyday life. In particular, I examine the different senses of discipline and order that occur within the structured practices belonging to creative engagements with music, and the relationship between discipline and creativity in the context of pedagogy.

Within music education terminology and the arts in general, creativity is generally defined as composing or improvising, but always implying the act of producing something new: the work of art, the piece of music, the song, the symphony, the poem.³ In the case of pre-composed music, creativity is found in the music and musician's aliveness during performance. The concept of creativity introduced in this article is broader than this and comes from D.W. Winnicott's study of creativity in the context of developmental psychology, psychoanalysis and the imaginative living that, he argues, develops through play.⁴ He insists that in so far as the individual retains the capacity for play, experiences are potentially creative and meaningful. Winnicott's definition of creativity is not restricted to artistic production but is in a sense universal: as he puts it, creativity 'belongs to being alive.'⁵

Winnicott argues that creativity 'has not found its true place in the theory used by analysts, in their work and in their thinking,' because 'it cannot be located in either the self or the world.'⁶ As we will see, this point is particularly relevant to my experiences during these piano lessons. The creativity that accompanies the type of knowledge that students and teachers care about takes places in what Winnicott calls 'the intermediate area between internal and external reality.'⁷ According to Winnicott this transitional space is part of our experiences in early childhood, which, in a rudimentary way, represent the incipient creative interaction with the world in adult life.⁸ Ideally, the space for play and creativity has to resemble the space between mother (or primary caregiver) and baby, a space that allows the playing baby to feel the presence of the mother close by, without that proximity interfering with the playing. This space is safe and provides a warm and friendly environment for forgetting the part of the self that fears and wants to control. According to Winnicott, 'only in playing is communication possible,'⁹ but the kind of communication he is alluding to is not between subject/object as singular predetermined entities, such as teacher/student. This idea will be explored further below, in relation to the piano lessons.

What follows is a first-person account of my own experience as a student, originally written without thought to its potential use in research or publication. After an eight-year break from study, I returned as an adult in my late twenties to lessons at the Sydney Conservatorium of

³ D.W. Winnicott *Playing and Reality* (London: Routledge, 1996); see also Hans Joas, *The Creativity of Action*, trans. Jeremy Gaines and Paul Keast (London: Blackwell, 1996), and Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation* (London: Penguin Books, 1989).

⁴ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 66, 53.

⁵ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 67.

⁶ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, xi.

⁷ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 3.

⁸ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 47, 54–5.

⁹ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 54.

Music. My teacher had been a concert pianist with a successful and extensive career overseas and in Australia. He selected students through audition, based on both the applicants' current standard of performance and their artistic potential. These piano lessons took place during a single academic year. It was my final year of study, and the most important one in terms of learning. Many years later, I visited my old teacher and questioned him about his teaching method. He said that he did not follow a rigid approach, but responded to what each student asked of him. In his lessons with me, he had drawn upon a combination of techniques he had learned from different teachers.

THE PIANO LESSONS

When I returned to piano lessons as an adult, I remember thinking that my new teacher 'knew' something that he could pass on to me. I thought that he had a clear idea of what it was that he knew, that he could detach himself from this knowledge and manipulate this information the way he wanted. Without knowing it, I began to look for ways to fit into the mould as a student, trying to understand exactly what was expected of me, since I wanted to be a 'good student.' Without my realising it, this desire meant that my own position as a good student took precedence over my availability to the music. Music was in fact neglected, postponed. I assumed an active role that made me push for things to happen, but this feeling that everything depended on me was a block on my ability to learn.

First Piano Lesson

The first day I arrived at the studio, my teacher began the lesson by pointing to a chair for me. He sat at the piano and played for at least the first half of the class: Bach, Chopin, and Prokofiev. He had not introduced himself to me yet, or perhaps this was his introduction.

As he played, something happened that transformed my world. I felt so grateful to be there, I felt I needed nothing else in that moment. Then I suddenly felt the strong desire to play like him. I intuitively knew what kind of relationship and approach was needed. I understood by listening that he was humble in relation to the music. And I thought that, for me to gain all his knowledge, all I needed to do was decide to be as humble.

The rest of the lesson we talked about things relevant to the arrangement of the classes. He didn't ask me to play but he looked at my hands and touched them, turning them around as he made some comments. He suggested a minimum daily practice of five hours. He also suggested a way of organising my study time based on a cycle of five repetitions per exercise, fractioned into five repetitions for each section of it, which easily made one exercise last an hour.

My teacher gave me the impression that it was essential to respect this order. He said that any sign of improvement could only come through the strict disciplining of the time and the practice of repetition within that time. It was important also in terms of developing endurance. Listening to these instructions, I assumed that the structure of this disciplinary practice was concerned mainly with the physical aspect of piano playing, and I assumed that it had nothing to do with music or being creative. Discipline was one thing to me, music another.

Second Piano Lesson

For my second lesson, I brought with me a few books, thinking that my teacher was going to ask me to play for him. But I didn't have the chance to open them. I was shown the first exercise and the whole hour was spent on it. I still remember the frustration I felt at not being asked to play, but I didn't allow myself to show any signs of this disappointment. My pride had been hurt, since I considered myself already a pianist and not a complete beginner, but, fortunately, the insulted part of me was hidden under a polite reserve.

Sitting in front of a closed piano I was asked to lift my right arm in an arch, more or less in front of my head. In that position I had to relax my shoulders, relax the whole arm, while holding the hand above, and then I had to let my hand fall until it hit the lid of the piano, ideally with the thumb. My teacher did it first and it seemed easy.

Then it was my turn. I let my hand and arm go, but my teacher caught it. He said that my arm had not looked relaxed and that he could feel this tension as he caught it. I was embarrassed and surprised. I tried again. Again he stopped me. I tried many times. I was increasingly frustrated, even ashamed, but I couldn't pay much attention to those feelings. I was too involved with what was going on, and, also, fortunately, my teacher's authority was imposing a strict discipline that didn't leave room for self-pity.

The intensity of this physical exercise was unexpected. My teacher and I were focused on this hand that had to fall in a relaxed manner, but I didn't feel that it was really me he was paying attention to. In a way this made things easier. Finally I managed a relaxed falling of the arm and hand. It was a brief joyful respite, a surprise.

The lesson gradually became a lesson on breathing as well, for my teacher pointed out that I often forgot my breathing. As I experimented, I began to have an idea of how to breathe in order to move the arm without tension. The problem was that most of the time I couldn't let the arm go. I was 'trying too hard' to be relaxed. This was my second lesson, and I had to continue the practice at home, five hours a day.

I remember around that time thinking how slowly I was coming to terms with being a student again. It felt as if my teacher was testing my commitment to the music. I had been a good student in the past, but I was frustrated by this first exercise, which was apparently so simple. Not only did I want to play like my teacher, I wanted this to happen soon. The exercises made me feel as if I was stranded a long way from his playing. Anxiety about the length of the learning process made things more difficult.

Third Piano Lesson

I approached this lesson with a degree of dread. I already knew that I wouldn't play music for a while, but I didn't dare ask how long the wait would be. My teacher opened the piano and I had to play only one note, the middle C. His choice of the all too familiar middle C added to my frustration, but I didn't say anything. This was another exercise that, although apparently simple, was in fact very difficult. It demanded complete relaxation of the body, which I had not had before in my experience with piano playing. Dropping my arm again, I had to play only one note, that middle C, five times for each finger, beginning with the thumb.

My fingers didn't land on the right key, but this didn't bother my teacher. He was more concerned with the relaxed landing than the accuracy. After many repetitions I began slowly, without effort, to land on the right key. More repetitions meant that I was able to do the exercise by the end of my lesson, but I was to continue with this practice at home.

Playing at home didn't mean that I felt isolated from my teacher. In fact the space of my practice was simply an extension of my teacher's studio in some way. The seriousness I acquired in his studio

re-emerged in my new working place, and made me forget about the pressures of being checked, examined or judged each class.

At home I found myself undistracted with the piano, the given exercise and my five hours practice in front of me. Taking a deep breath, I'd simply begin to play, imagining myself following the example of my teacher, letting his presence emerge, letting the hand fall again and again. Each time I played the same exercise, I was completely involved with each part of my body, with my arms, with my fingers. I was not distracted; I was concentrated in the notes and the sounds, in the movements of my hands on the keyboard. I became acutely aware of the articulation of each finger, of the resistance or weight of each key depressed.

A certain rhythm took over these ritualised exercises. Because I was part of this mechanical repetitious process, things were intensely alive, and the practice was slowly becoming pleasurable. Not rushing to finish each exercise, I was enjoying each part of them, in a slow but attentive manner, feeling that the exercises were doing something to me, developing the way I felt about music. The discipline involved stilled my desires and thoughts and allowed me to be present.

The experience can be best described as one of austerity. When the hand landed on the note there was only that, that sound, not beautiful not ugly, just sound. Nothing else was there and therefore there was so much space to receive that sound and almost draw a shape with it. I realised that I could appreciate each sound as different. Then another note was played, another sound, and the fading of that sound, and another note after that. I wasn't pushing for things to happen, or trying hard to succeed. I was simply there with the sounds, following them but with a kind of neutrality. It was a new experience.

The exercise wasn't about musical content as much as finding ways of focusing on something that wasn't me. It was about work. My body was also feeling different, perhaps because I was paying attention to it in a new way. I was becoming aware of the relaxation that happened, fortunately, more and more often. It was hard work to lift the arm, to continue playing, but I was finding useful ways of being that felt comfortable and also curiously enjoyable. The piano and I were getting used to each other. All that was required was that I did my work. It is hard to explain but there was something beautiful in the way things were done during the moments I spent working.

Fourth Piano Lesson

The new exercise of my fourth lesson was a variation of the previous one. My teacher played just one note, the middle C, and then asked me to listen carefully. I did, and all I heard was the same middle C being played by him repeatedly.

Following this, my teacher asked me to play the same note, in the way he'd shown me before, with a relaxed landing on the key, with a relaxed body, breathing relaxed. My playing had improved since the last lesson, but was not completely successful. After I'd had a couple of relaxed landings, my teacher asked me to listen carefully. He asked: was that an 'open sound' or was that a 'closed sound'? I didn't understand the difference. I had only heard the same middle C. I had to play again, and again I couldn't answer.

After that I played once more with a relaxed sound, and my teacher said: that was an open sound, a round sound. I played again, this time not succeeding, and my teacher said: that was a closed sound. I was getting frustrated, and I tried again and again, but I was unable to listen. My breathing turned into forced breathing again, and I was reminded to relax. I again let the arm go, hitting the middle C with the thumb. That was a relaxed and open sound, said my teacher. Suddenly I noticed that although I couldn't listen to the sounds I could 'feel' the difference with my whole body. I felt happy, and quickly agreed with him that it was an open sound. I understood what he meant and knew he was right.

The desire to play like my teacher didn't seem to matter much in that moment. I had lived an experience that was far more important than that. I wasn't sure how it was more important, or why, but it had done something to the way I felt about music.

The moment made me feel inspired. I had forgotten that simple things could matter so much. How good it was to be a student again. I was so grateful to my teacher.

Fifth Piano Lesson

Another week had gone, and I had practiced the same exercises many times. I was becoming more relaxed, but I still couldn't listen to the sounds.

My teacher began the lesson with the same exercise, and the same middle C, but this time he left me alone. He moved away from the piano and turned towards the only window of his studio, which overlooked the Botanical Gardens. For a moment I thought that he was bored and was not going to pay attention. I also thought that without looking at my hand falling, he wouldn't be able to tell if it was relaxed or not. But I was wrong. Every time I played in a relaxed way he said: 'this was good, this was an open sound,' and every time I didn't manage to relax he noticed and said 'this was a closed sound.'

How could he know? How did he listen? What ways of being did he experience with the music? I thought, it is always the same middle C, and yet I knew he was right because I had felt the difference. During this exercise I began to trust slowly what my body was telling me about the playing.

It was only a few weeks later that I 'listened' to the open sound of a middle C for the first time. It happened as a surprise. I was overwhelmed by an intense emotion and although it was just the repetition of the same note, it was also different. It was music too in that moment. The sound's openness was my own, but it was not something that can be expressed with words because it wasn't really 'me.' I was happy and it couldn't have mattered much if it wasn't going to happen again. There was something in that moment of perfect harmony with the world that didn't leave room for anxious thoughts. I listened to the middle C's big open sound and I regained faith in things being right in the world. That moment had transformed me as a musician, and the feeling of joy lasted for a while after the sound had died.

Although these feelings later became inseparable from piano playing, I had never before experienced them when playing piano, perhaps only when listening to music. These feelings were also permeating the rest of my life, and this was a surprise. I seemed to be able to be happy in the most simple understanding of the word. Hardship and difficulties, effort and dedication, were being woven together with the satisfaction of doing this musical work regularly. I began to look forward to my daily practice as someone looks forward to a good meal. This was nourishment for my spirit. I was sure nobody could understand the kind of pleasure of this disciplinary practice; it was like a strange mystery for me too.

The ideas I had had of building up a repertoire were not as important as before, because I was becoming involved with this new world of music through a different relation with discipline.

With time I was learning that it was not my decision to be humble in relation to the music that was going to allow me to play music musically, as my teacher did. It is the music that makes you humble, and not the other way around. I learned that you are not humble just because you decide to follow a discipline and the regime of hours and days of difficult practice at the piano, but it is discipline and music that transform you gradually, that humble you over time. The kind of humility I had perceived in my teacher was alive and fresh, like his playing. It was not a proud display of humility that I saw.

The Following Weeks

Every time I entered the dark room where my old piano was, I felt the presence of my teacher. I felt very close to him as well as to the music, as if through his own relation to it. There were many moments of clear happiness during my hours of practice. Every time I played an open sound, a round note, it made me happy. It felt like a world-happiness, as if the world was a musical place, open and infinite.

After six months of this strict discipline, I was allowed to play a piece of music. My teacher chose a prelude by Bach. The exercises remained part of my study, but they had changed and were now difficult technical exercises that gave my hands and fingers strength.

At the beginning I had imagined that one thing was to learn piano, the discipline, and another was who I was, my life. And I thought of music as a thing, a beautiful thing, but one from which I was going to remain detached. With time I realised that discipline doesn't have to be only about difficulties. Perhaps precisely because I didn't expect any pleasurable moments as part of it, when they happened I was immensely grateful to music. In a sense the rewards and gifts that I felt were given to me day after day were also the result of my own participation. In a way they were also given by me and not only by the music. Those moments felt as if they had been waiting for the right time and place to happen.

Soon after I was playing several pieces of music by different composers. Each one required different aspects of discipline and different ways of playing. I was having a relationship with the music that was 'teaching' me things. I was not only learning during my practice; I was learning all the time. Today, years since I studied piano, I feel I am still learning from that experience. The relationship between me and music is still alive in many ways.

One day I arrived at the studio and found another student, a little boy, sitting on the chair. My teacher said he was waiting to be picked up, and that if I didn't mind he wanted the boy to listen to me playing one of the pieces I was preparing. He said to the boy, 'I want you to listen carefully,' and he asked me to play something by Bach that I was then learning. When I finished I realised that I had forgotten about the boy. He was quiet and looking at me now. 'Wasn't that the most beautiful music?' my teacher asked him.

These piano lessons obviously involved an intensely disciplined practice, but one that led to a renewed creativity in a way that is at odds with many of our contemporary views of discipline. I will therefore examine in some detail three common models of discipline and the ways that they fail to account for the student's experience in the piano lessons. On the face of it, there are many differences separating the common models of discipline. I will argue, though, that they share an assumption about the fundamental quality of things or entities—that is, the individual or society—logically deriving social relations from the interactions of these entities.

I will then suggest a fourth model of discipline, which associates discipline with devotional practice, and draws upon the ascetic traditions found in religions including Christianity and Zen Buddhism, and which has largely fallen out of use in social theory and education.¹⁰ This model, in contrast to the others, insists that relations are primary and that finite things emerge

¹⁰ Andrew Metcalfe and Ann Game, *Teachers who Change Lives* (Melbourne: MUP, 2006); Shoshana Felman, 'Psychoanalysis and Education: Teaching Terminable and Interminable,' *Yale French Studies* 63 (1982): 21–44; Mark Epstein, *Thoughts without a Thinker* (New York: Basic Books, 1995); Eugen Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery*, trans. R.F.C. Hull (New York: Random House, 1989).

from them. In essence, the ascetic model assumes that we do not begin with oneness, but with the non-finitude of social relations. This point is particularly relevant to the student-teacher relationship of the case study, and is in agreement with Winnicott's concept of creativity as aliveness, where the individual temporarily transcends ordinary subject/object ontologies. I will examine the inter-relationships between this model of discipline and creativity as discussed by Winnicott. I contend that such a model is still of great significance, animating many apparently secular practices that form part of our everyday lives.

A model in one of its simplest forms is defined as a way of doing things that reflects a shared set of values and beliefs that constitute the social. In other words, it implies a shared culture and collective 'know how.'¹¹ Most of my analysis will be devoted to demonstrating the ongoing significance of the outmoded model that I call the ascetic model of discipline. My aim in doing so is not to deny the common salience of the other usages of discipline. I assume that culturally important words like discipline develop their multi-vocality because they are associated with complex and varied situations that are not susceptible to single understandings. My point is simply to re-sensitise socio-educational and pedagogic theory to the ascetic sense of discipline, and show that there are common situations of discipline, and especially discipline in the context of pedagogy, that are misunderstood if interpreted through the assumptions of the other three models.

The first model of discipline, the liberal view, is popularly associated with restrictions and limitations on the free choice and therefore on the identities and creative possibilities of individuals. The negative effect of this model is implicit in Game and Metcalfe's observation that '[t]eaching is not simply a matter of transmitting knowledge from one to another; it cannot be reduced to inputs and outputs of teacher and student.'¹² Their words also remind us of the so-called 'banking concept of education,' where the student is imagined as an empty container to be filled with knowledge by the teacher, as if knowledge were a 'thing.' Discipline, within this model, works against the student's initiative to act as part of the world because of the assumption that the student simply lacks knowledge.¹³ Accordingly, school students chafe under the restrictions of school discipline, a word defined as 'severe training corrective of faults, instruction by means of misfortune, suffering, punishment, chastisement, obedience, a system of essential rules and duties.'¹⁴ Associated with a humanist understanding of the sovereign choice-making individual, this model corresponds to the Weberian tradition in sociology, which has played a major role in developing a concept of power as repression.¹⁵ This concept of power has been thoroughly individualistic, even in the hands of theorists, such as Steven Lukes, who are openly critical of Weberian individualism.¹⁶

¹¹ Hubert L. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division I* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001); Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge, 1993).

¹² Game and Metcalfe, *Teachers Who Change Lives*, xi; see also Andrew Game and Ann Metcalfe, *The First Year Experience* (Sydney: Federation Press, 2003).

¹³ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos, rev. ed. (1967; Penguin Books: London, 1996).

¹⁴ *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed. (Boston/New York: Houghton Miffling, 2000).

¹⁵ Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 28–36; Also, Anthony Giddens, *Politics, Sociology and Social Theory: Encounters with Classical and Contemporary Social Thought* (California: Stanford University Press), 57–78.

¹⁶ Steven Lukes, *Individualism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1973).

Consider Lukes's model of power. In *Power: A Radical View* he defines it by saying that 'in the case of an effective exercise of power, A gets B to do what he would not otherwise do.'¹⁷ This relies on the assumption that, but for the exercise of power, we are free and sovereign individuals shaping our lives through our own decisions. Lukes insists that much of what passes for the discipline of legitimate authority—invoking notions of universal truth that should not be questioned—is really based on the exercise of power.¹⁸ For him the difference between power and authoritative discipline hinges on the question of what B would have done but for A. If B would have acted differently but for A, then it is an exercise of power.¹⁹ This seems to imply that disciplines that come from A's authority can only be legitimated through B's free and fully informed consent. Crucially, this assumes that B is a finite entity who is so centred that they can be abstracted from the social relations in which they live in order to choose them. There is, in this model, no concession to what Hannah Arendt calls the 'thrownness of life,'²⁰ so necessary to counterbalance the demands and expectations of contemporary life, and to facilitate a graceful disposition towards learning, because of the creative freedom implicit in it.²¹ Individuals, it is assumed, have a stable subjectivity apart from the world around them: they enter into relationships rather than finding themselves always and already in them. In terms of pedagogy, there is no room for creativity and learning, in the Winnicottian sense of the word.

Lukes's understanding of discipline as repressive power constitutes the first model of discipline. This individualistic model cannot account for the role of either the teacher or student in the piano lessons. The teacher gets the student to do what the student would not have otherwise done, but the reverse is equally true. Neither teacher nor student is the subject of power, and neither is object; in a sense they are both constantly becoming who they are by experiencing a transcendence to a more musical way of being. If there is power, I suggest that it is in the life force of music, as a living and non-finite presence, and that both the teacher and the student were at once humbled and ennobled by it. Moreover, neither teacher nor student knew where it would take them and how it would change them, and therefore neither was in a position to make a fully informed choice about their relationship beforehand. Both had to surrender to the relationship, in order to be given what they only later realised they needed from it.

Lukes's approach assumes that things happen because someone makes them happen, and although he analyses overt and covert forms of power in society, the level of abstraction of his view seems to miss the potential for creativity still found in the individual's everyday life.²² The first lesson we can draw from these piano lessons is that no *one* can play piano musically or beautifully. Such playing happens, but not through the agency of A or B. Through the experience of presence that gradually emerges through the pain of her frustrated desire, the student learns that musicianship involves love or passion, but that this state is not to be confused with desire. As its etymology suggests, passion is a condition whose activity is at

¹⁷ Lukes, *Power*, 14–25.

¹⁸ Lukes, *Power*, 1–2.

¹⁹ Lukes, *Power*, 40.

²⁰ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

²¹ Rowan Williams, *Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006).

²² This potential creativity is always dependent on freedom, at various levels, one of which is the relative political stability of (good) society, but freedom is also an issue at a more personal level.

the same time a passivity: a waiting, a suffering, a patience, a weakness. Passion is a quality of *relation* and is not simply the desire of a subject.²³

The second lesson of the piano lessons is that a sense of freedom and possibility does not arise from the unfettered choice of independent subjects, but rather emerges from an unalienated sense of being implicated, of being involved and interested and present. These two fundamental lessons are beyond the conceptual scope of all pedagogies and sociologies based solely on subjects, identities and agencies, and of all political theories based on the assumption that freedom and creativity emerge when subjects make choices that express their identities. The case study gradually turns its focus from the student to the relationship.²⁴

The humanist understanding of a sovereign choice-making individual, central to Weber's sociology, corresponds to the first model of discipline. In this context, Lukes's analysis of the repressive character of discipline and power comes from his interest in explaining why things happen as they do and how we can intervene politically to change these patterns. This model of discipline defines itself by the assumption that things happen because some *one* makes them happen. This repressive model has been widely criticised by writers influenced by post-structuralism generally and by the work of Foucault particularly. As a result, a fundamental difference constitutes the productive model, the second model of discipline discussed here. Foucault was scathing of the way the repressive model presumed the sovereign subject as the natural unit of analysis. He insisted, instead, that power and discipline were dispersed rather than centralised and, crucially, that they were primarily productive and not simply restrictive.²⁵ Thus, Foucault describes discipline and power in terms of the production of subjects, whereby,

[P]ower applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorises the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, and imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognise and which others have to recognise in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects.²⁶

Foucault was interested in three ways in which 'objective' laws of truth turned human beings into subjects.²⁷ First were the scientific disciplines that classify the world, including its humans; second were the schools, hospitals, prisons and other disciplinary 'dividing practices' that separate the good and bad, the educated and the uneducated, and so on; third were the mechanisms, like the confessional, through which people turn themselves into subjects by identifying themselves as objects. For Foucault, then, the power of discipline turns people into objects of knowledge and encourages them to identify their subjectivity with this objective definition. Subjectivity is de-centred and socially enmeshed, in a never-ending process of change, but it should still be noted that Foucault assumes that the social nevertheless operates through the desires and resistances of these subjects. In other words, despite differing on the question of the productive or repressive effects of discipline's power, both Foucault and Lukes implicitly rely on a subject-object dichotomy. One posits a

²³ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Scribner, 1958); Andrew Metcalfe and Ann Game, *Passionate Sociology* (London: Sage, 1996).

²⁴ Metcalfe and Game, *Teachers who Change Lives*, 149–63.

²⁵ For an analysis of the concept of the *panopticon*, see Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

²⁶ See Michel Foucault, 'The Subject and Power,' *Michel Foucault, Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, ed. Herbert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 212.

²⁷ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1979).

centred and the other a de-centred subjectivity; one posits stable and the other a continually constructed subject, but both focus on subjects as the source of social life.²⁸ The piano lessons demonstrate how Foucault's taken-for-granted reality can be questioned or disturbed by everyday experiences.

Foucauldian analysis, based as it is on subjects and objects, on subjectification and objectification, may be unable to appreciate the significance of the humility associated with ascetic discipline. This second model, in terms of its ideas and assumptions, is challenged by what took place in the piano lessons. While the bodily micro-disciplines, the timetables, the examinations and the surveillance might seem to be straight from the object-and-subject-making apparatus described in *Discipline and Punish*, these disciplinary techniques actually led to a suspension of codified disciplinary knowledge and to the temporary suspension of identity. The boundaries between the student and the music are less noticeable during creative engagements. The student learned to play with a vulnerability that came from being without the defence of identity, desire and expectation, and feeling freed from the fear of not being good enough. The music, the piano, the composer, the teacher, and the student: the student learned that all were live presences in piano playing, irreducible to objects or subjects. In one way, the lessons' powerful effect on the student supports Foucault's insistence on the productivity of discipline, but the timelessness of the lessons' musicality simultaneously highlights the limitations of a view of change as endless productivity.

The third model of discipline that I see in social theory differs from the first two because, rather than being based simply on subjects, it presumes the existence of two interpenetrating orders of entity: the individual and the societal. The order or type of thing individuals are, as human beings, is necessarily different to society, an institution, or the societal, but they both emerge from the same specific cultural world. Experientially, the individual does not belong to the same type (or order) of *thing* as the societal or society. This model corresponds to the world as Emile Durkheim envisions it, and in particular to his account of 'homo duplex' and of his applications of this idea to educational settings.²⁹ Such an account understands discipline and self-discipline as governors balancing the desires of individuals and the needs of both societies and individuals. By keeping a check on the otherwise limitless desires of the individual, discipline and self-discipline protect individuals from distress and depression. For Durkheim, unfettered desire is not freedom, but the meaninglessness of *anomie*.³⁰

I am interested in Durkheim's claim that certain discipline is creative, liberating us from the miseries of the self, but his approach nevertheless remains committed to an identity-based

²⁸ In various academic and non-academic contexts we talk about society or the individual to make sense of the world, but a phenomenological approach necessarily disturbs and questions such fixed labels, thus introducing valid criticism to dominant paradigms. See Stephen Crites, 'The Narrative Quality of Experience,' *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1989).

²⁹ Durkheim's definition of *homo duplex* offers an important perspective on the experience of the individual and the world, including issues to do with the body, the duality of freedom and the potential creativity found in everyday life. See Chris Shilling (2005) 'Embodiments, Emotions, and Foundations of Social Order: Durkheim's Enduring Contribution,' *Cambridge Companion to Durkheim*, ed. Jeffrey C. Alexander (Cambridge: CUP, 2005), 211–38.

³⁰ It belongs to a form of meaningless existence or state of alienation, and it is associated with suicide. See Anthony Giddens, ed., *Emile Durkheim: Selected Writings* (Cambridge: CUP, 1972), 132, 169–98.

understanding of the societal. Durkheim uses 'individual' and 'society' abstractly, as names for finite, bounded things. Accordingly, he imagines that each individual belongs to a society that imposes an already ordered set of moral codes or structures. For Durkheim, 'the social' is not relational, not non-finite; it is only an adjective applied to the aspects of the thing that is society. Societies act, and individuals act, but there is always some *thing* that is making things happen. Again, this model would not explain in depth the teaching and learning experiences of the piano lessons, or the understanding of creativity as based on moments of purposeless and unselfconscious play.

The piano lessons do offer support for Durkheim's suspicion of the narrowness of desire and for his insistence on the deepening that comes with certain disciplines.³¹ Durkheim's theories, however, do not lead to the relational form of discipline that characterised the piano lessons. He imagines that each individual belongs to a society with its own set of moral codes that it imposes on its members, and this impositional model loses the sense of 'drawing out' that is so crucial to the relation between the piano, the teacher and the student. The student does not live out the disciplines to strengthen her social identity, to reinforce, for example, her sense of being a member of the group of expert musicians. Instead, contrary to what Durkheim implies, these disciplinary rituals simultaneously strengthened her sense of belonging while diminishing her ability to identify exclusively with the role she initially desired to play: 'to be a good student.' She explains this idea through paradox,³² '[t]he sound's openness was my own, but it was not something that can be expressed with words because it wasn't really "me".'

These three models are based on an identity logic, which, although it can be applied to many aspects of social life, is not conducive to creativity and knowledge. They tend to reduce experience to claims that the individual and/or society are prior to relations and the source of what happens, offering interpretations that lack the resonance of more open accounts.³³ A fourth model, which could be termed the ascetic model of discipline, is fundamentally different from the others, in that it discloses a relational logic that privileges the possibilities of relationships,³⁴ for example a teacher-and-student relationship where the 'and' is important.

This model is based on the claim that subjectivity is not a permanent state but is, instead, a defensive psychic structure that alienates beings from their undefinable potential, including their capacity to find ways of being that differ from the desires and roles they believe to be an essential part of them. The student's comments confirm this point: 'the desire to play like my

³¹ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Swain (New York: Free Press, 1965).

³² Winnicott acknowledges the paradox inherent to creativity. Many aspects of the piano lessons involve a paradox, such as when the student finds herself *in* the music. In that moment she is fully 'herself,' and yet (at the same time) she also finds herself in the open sound of the middle C.

³³ Buber, *I and Thou*, 103. The book beautifully explores the dual possibilities of 'being' in the world. It examines the transition from being in an objectifying (alienating) world—with its corresponding objectifying mode of relating with one another—to the relational world of the *I-Thou* self-and-other relationship. Buber reiterates a fundamental difference, such as the essentially ethical disposition that defines all relationships. This fundamental difference is also our hope: as nothing lasts forever, we are always free to move again towards the openness and creativity of the *I-Thou* world. This is the world where meaningful learning happens.

³⁴ Buber, *I and Thou*, 148–50.

teacher didn't seem to matter much in that moment. I had lived an experience that was far more important than that. I wasn't sure how it was more important, or why, but it had done something to the way I felt about music.'

Considered in the context of developmental psychology and psychoanalysis, creativity as Winnicott sees it, develops through play, but play requires freedom.³⁵ Winnicott says that creativity takes place in that 'intermediate area between internal and external reality' and in between 'that which is subjective and that which is objectively perceived.'³⁶ In other words, when the child or the student play, they temporarily forget about themselves, including that part of the self that fears not being good enough or desires to be good enough. The forgetting implies freedom in the sense that the student is free to be completely engaged with the music, to be present. This internal freedom is also a pre-condition for all real learning and knowledge.

From this starting point, discipline can be a restraint on the limitless and distracting demands of desire; by suspending the self-centred demands of subjectivity, it can open people to the limitless potential offered to them in the present, through their already existing relations with the world. Non-finite relations can allow things to happen that active subjects could not accomplish by themselves. When discipline is not just a rigid structure or a set of impositions, it helps develop a sense of responsibility. This caring aspect is released from the traps of a goal-oriented approach, and reflects the trusting relationship between the student and the teacher, and the student and herself. Martin Buber, referring to discipline and teaching, sees the relation as mutual: 'we are moulded by our pupils and built up by our works.'³⁷

In order to understand the model of ascetic discipline, we need to understand the alienating and life-denying role that it ascribes to desire and, consequently, the subjectivity that emerges from desire. I should add that, in this article, desire is being used strictly in the context of a relation with an other, when this other is being objectified. For this purpose, we can turn to Hegel's classic discussion of desire and mastery, as part of his account of the master-slave dialectic. This helps define Hegel's concept of mastery, so important in the analysis of piano lessons.³⁸

According to Hegel, subjectivity and objectivity are born, at once, of desire.³⁹ Our fundamental desire is, he says, for self-certainty and independence, which we seek by mastering the difference of the desired object.⁴⁰ Accordingly, the desire to master music is not based on love and interest, but on the needs of the desirous person, who seeks to know music ultimately in order to know themselves, using knowledge to negate the otherness of the other. But because there is no self without the other, just as there is no musician without music, the person who wants to master music is never able to fulfil their desire. They are caught in the never-ending struggle of trying to assimilate the music, to appropriate it, but finding that they negate it at the

³⁵ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, xi.

³⁶ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 53, 3.

³⁷ Buber, *I and Thou*, 16.

³⁸ See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Philosophy of Subjective Spirit: Phenomenology and Psychology*, ed. and trans. M.J. Petry, vol. 3 (Boston: Reidel, 1978).

³⁹ Hegel, *Philosophy of Subjective Spirit*, 177.

⁴⁰ Hegel, *Philosophy of Subjective Spirit*, 178–79.

same time, or negate the real possibilities that can be attained through it. The aim of mastering music diminishes the possibilities of finding ways of being that are musical and creative.

It is important to acknowledge that the experience of desire in the Hegelian sense can be powerful. The relation with an object of desire can attain an intensity that creates a kind of energy that can pass for aliveness. In the case of desire, the intensity is short-lived or only proportional to our determination to attain a goal. In the end it leaves the person empty and alone, disillusioned perhaps by the way the destinations of desire disappear like mirages. As Hegel writes: 'desire is... generally destructive in its satisfaction, just as it is generally self-seeking in respect to its content, and since the satisfaction has only been achieved in singleness, which is transient, it gives rise to further desire.'⁴¹ According to Hegel, we can shift to other goals, searching for a higher level of mastery or other pieces of music, and only in this way can we sustain the level of tension that generates a form of excitement, but this can easily become a meaningless exercise.⁴²

The negative role of desire is strikingly brought home in the case study, in the fact that the student has not (despite her prior accomplishments) actually heard the sound of her own playing. She has only heard her own projections, her own expectations, which have precluded her from hearing the difference of *this* middle C, of appreciating the uniqueness of *this* moment. Instead of appreciation of the uniqueness of what is actually present, the student judges, compares, ranks, approves, and rejects operations that seek to affirm her identity and control by reducing musical difference to sameness, operations that hold her back from the risk of an open and defenceless musical experience. As Epstein observes, 'when you develop an ear for sounds that are musical, it is like developing an ego. You begin to refuse sounds that are not musical and that way cut yourself off from a good deal of experience.'⁴³

Epstein's point echoes the student's comment about the austere neutrality that comes to characterise the fascination of her practice. Because she is no longer identifying with the sound, she can hear it for its difference, its uniqueness, and therefore surprise herself through dialogue with an otherness that is both inside and outside her. The implication of this is that, contrary to popular assumptions, desire is not an outward orientation; to the contrary, it is austerity, with its ascetic disciplining of the subject that allows surprise and delight.⁴⁴ John Cage put this succinctly when answering the question, 'Is discipline necessary?':

Discipline is, before everything else, a discipline of the ego. The ego without discipline is closed, it tends to close in on its emotions. Discipline is what ruins all that closure. With it one can open up to the outside, as well as to the inside.⁴⁵

Recall the moment when, through the humbling effect of disciplinary practice, the student finally hears the open sound of a middle C: 'It happened as a surprise.' This was not a conquest or conclusion, but the opening of a moment of wonder. The experience here is one of simultaneous surprise and recognition; it is a knowing that does not negate difference

⁴¹ Hegel, *Philosophy of Subjective Spirit*, 178–96.

⁴² Barthes' elaboration on the subtle transition between objective and embodied experiences of knowledge is a good example of *relational* versus identity logics for narratives of the self: see Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text* (London: Fontana & Harper Collins, 1977).

⁴³ Epstein, *Thoughts without a Thinker*, 116.

⁴⁴ Epstein, *Thoughts without a Thinker*, 115.

⁴⁵ John Cage and Daniel Charles, *For the Birds* (New York: Marion Boyars, 1995), 58.

but that meets or participates in difference. It teaches the student that mastery is not, as she initially assumed, a defended position at which people finally arrive; it is the ability to remain open and vulnerable, and thereby respond to difference anew. Musical practice, accordingly, is no longer a progressive path to achievement, but is a way of living in the present that leads where it will, and is only effective because of its disciplining of desirous fantasy.

The openness at the heart of this ascetic model of disciplinary practice presumes the possibility of non-subjective and non-identified states of being, where the student feels vitally alive but also, in her openness, different from her identity. It relies, in other words, on suspension of self-consciousness and on appreciation of a kind of invisibility or 'no-thingness'. This is mastery as continuous creativity. While there is no separate controlling master in this situation, there is mastery, as the pianist becomes the medium of a musicality that passes through her (as she passes through it).

To further draw out the logic of the ascetic model of discipline, let us notice the difference between the Hegelian and ascetic accounts of service and obedience. From the Hegelian perspective, the discipline of the master is a form of life-denying servitude that objectifies the other.⁴⁶ In the ascetic traditions of monastic life though, obedience is understood as acceptance of what *is*. Metcalfe and Game explain: 'Etymologically, obedience means listening attentively, but, rather than being a listening to an external subject, this listening is to a relation of which the listener is part, a listening to self-and-other.'⁴⁷ Hence, as Jameson says, 'the ascetic tradition believes that obedience is potentially the greatest expression of human freedom.'⁴⁸ He insists that in Benedict's ascetic *Rule* it is 'clear that obedience is not just about doing what the boss says; it is about mutual love.'⁴⁹

This mutual love is on display in the authority of the discipline exhibited in the piano lessons. When she finally hears the beauty of an open note, which includes her but is not her, the student experiences a love that leaves no room for anxiety or personal desire:

There was something in that moment of perfect harmony with the world that didn't leave room for anxious thoughts. I listened to the middle C's big open sound and I regained faith in things being right in the world.

This is a love for music that means she must obey, but there is no *one* to whom she is made subservient. This obedience is neither a subjective choice nor an external imposition, and it is also not a consequence of the identification or oneness of the student and music. It is obedience not as servitude but as grateful acceptance of the difference that is present.

In the case study, the Hegelian form of mastery is implicit in the student's initial desire to acquire for herself her teacher's knowledge. Only later, through the practice of discipline, does a different notion of mastery gradually become apparent, so that the teacher is able to pass on something else to the student, namely, the unuttered but living example of his own

⁴⁶ Hegel, *Philosophy of Subjective*, 180.

⁴⁷ Andrew Metcalfe and Ann Game, *The Mystery of Everyday Life* (Sydney: Federation Press, 2002).

⁴⁸ Ian Buchanan, ed., *Fredric Jameson: Live Theory* (London: Continuum, 2006), 75, 79.

⁴⁹ Buchanan, *Fredric Jameson*, 78. The Rule of Saint Benedict is about following rituals and creating a certain order in everyday life: in this case monastic life. Disciplinary practices, combined with the guidance of an authority figure (the Abbot), establish new conditions that facilitate spiritual growth and can transform the individual's life, giving it meaning. The connection between work and prayer is important in the Rule of Saint Benedict, as discussed by Jameson.

relation with music. She learns what he cannot tell her: the way of humility. She learns mastery by learning obedience as a form of responsiveness.

This leads us toward two key questions. If masters cannot make themselves open, cannot make the music come alive, how is mastery possible? And how do people learn to live with such a fundamental vulnerability? These questions highlight the central role of ascetic discipline, for it is the practice and work to which masters are lovingly devoted that produces and protects the open and creative life. Practice does what subjects cannot do, and it does so by gently but persistently frustrating our desires; thwarting our attempts to lie to ourselves through fantasy. When the teacher's discipline persistently guides the student back to what she is doing here and now—breathing, dropping her hand, playing a note—she slowly begins to let go of the self whose desires and anxieties alienate life from the here and now, the self that cannot attend to what is present because it is preoccupied with the gap between its identity and how it is being judged. The trust she has in the authority of her teacher accompanies her through her practice, and steadies her through momentary panic. And this loving authority, unlike the alienated authority of Hegel's master, continually returns her to the reality of her situation. The teacher's presence and patience provides the openness of a hope that does not congeal into desire.

In his book on learning the disciplines of Zen Archery, Eugen Herrigel talks at length about the apparent paradox of hitting targets without aiming at them. He uses the phrase 'obtuse devotion' to explain how he learned to attend to practice, and trust that practice would look after the targets.⁵⁰ It is a phrase that also helps us understand piano practice, as well as the ritualised practices of all teaching and learning relationships. Obtuse devotion implies that the disciplines to which students are devoted are only ever successful when they do not work as means to ends. The student in the piano lessons finds inspiration, but not when or where she was looking for it. The teacher does not bring about the inspiration, but then again without the relation with the teacher, and the student's devotion to him or her, the inspiration would not have occurred. The practice regime and the teacher serve, then, obtusely, as contemplative aids, like ritual icons or artefacts. This obtuse attention opens the student to respond to the real lesson that will emerge, that no one could have anticipated. If discipline appears to be an imposition and enforcement of individual will initially, it also propitiates unselfconscious creative engagements because it continuously affects this will, undermining its privileged controlling position, allowing the freedom Winnicott explains is necessary for play and creativity, which is at the heart of teaching and learning.⁵¹

Let the last word go to the student, who explains what she learned about the difference between desiring and accepting a humble relation with music:

[T]he ideas I had had of building up a repertoire were not as important as before, because I was becoming involved with this new world of music through a different relation with discipline. With time I was learning that it was not my decision to be humble in relation to the music that was going to allow me to play music musically, as my teacher did. It is the music that makes you humble, and not the other way around... it is discipline and music that transform you gradually, that humble you over time.

⁵⁰ Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery*, 30–35.

⁵¹ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 53.

Discipline is a concept that holds a pivotal place in popular and academic understandings of knowledge and creativity. The close analysis of these theories reveals the inter-play of a number of different models of discipline. The model of discipline found in ascetic traditions that associates discipline with devotional practice is, my analysis of piano lessons suggests, still relevant. The proposition that discipline and creativity, rather than being in opposition, are interrelated and are part of everyday life needs to be understood in the context of the student-teacher relation. We learn by examining the experiences of musicians and artists, whose comments are usually ignored by the disciplines that study music and art.⁵²

Disciplinary practice, as we have seen, can persistently guide the student back to what she is doing, by freeing her from the desires and worries that prevent her from being in the 'here and now.' By patiently and respectfully reminding the student of the boundaries of a disciplinary regime, the teacher also provides the student with the safe and caring environment that facilitates learning. This process, however, is often misunderstood, and its conceptual significance downplayed. The point is not that the teacher is nice or indulgent or flattering, as one individual to another. It is not that they like the student, personally. Nor is it that they boost the student's self-esteem. The point is that teachers teach unself-conscious ways of being that defuse the urgent personal anxieties of student life. In other words, the teaching environment is not safe because the student is given personal guarantees of her acceptability: it is safe because the teachers quietly deflect the student's need for personal approval. The equanimity of the living discipline is crucial in this deflection of the personal.

As the teacher explained to the student in piano lessons, we can see that the teacher's discipline arises from the situation of the moment, and is not rigidly applied from a preconceived formula. Neither the student nor the teacher necessarily has much insight into this. This unknowing is itself the key: learning happens because good teachers make themselves present in their teaching, allowing students to experience the stillness of this presence. The student can strengthen the teacher's authority by questioning it respectfully. They are also teaching teachers how to teach, while teachers, by offering an example of humble and respectful attention, are letting the student imagine that the task is possible. The student begins to trust the process, and stops trying too hard to be a good student. The lessons are suffused with hope.

⁵² When Pablo Casals was a young adult he suffered from a serious crisis or depression that affected his whole life. At the time he was an accomplished cellist, and yet he would find no meaning in the music or the playing. Fortunately, this disconnection with the world gradually changed, incidentally thanks to the music of J.S. Bach. One weekend Casals was out with his father, and by chance he found a copy of the score for the solo cello suites. Casals' book *Joys and Sorrows* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1974) provides a detailed and clearly written description of his transition from depression or alienation to creativity, or, in Buber's terms, the movement from the *I-It* to the *I-Thou* world.