

Handing In Assignments on Time: The Polytemporal Musicality of Class Work and Mindful Engagement

Réal Fillion, University of Sudbury

Author's Contact Information

*Réal Fillion, Associate Professor, Department of Philosophy
University of Sudbury, Sudbury, ON, P3E 2C6
phone: (705) 673 -5661 ext. 303
email: rfillion@usudbury.ca*

Abstract:

Much philosophy is taught to undergraduate students who take the occasional course in philosophy as an elective. The interaction between student and professor in such classes is as instructive about the kind of mindful engagement involved in undergraduate study as the more focused disciplinary work of students committed to their concentrations and majors. In the following, I make use of Hegel's systematic approach to the philosophy of subjective mind and John Russon's notion of the polytemporal musicality of our embodied engagements to throw light on the dynamics that often accompany the practices of handing in and getting back assignments that play such a crucial role in elective courses and in the overall experience of undergraduate study.

Key Words:

Assignments, grades, subjective mind, student-professor interaction, engagement, Russon.

Introduction

Two things always strike me as problematic when I consider how our interaction typically evolves. After I have presented you with my syllabus and talked about the general direction that the course of study proposed will take and solicited your expectations in taking it, we talk about the assignments which, depending on the class size, too often appear to sum up the extent of our actual interaction other than our (relative) co-presence in class. Understandably, you have few questions at this point, since the course has barely begun. However, as we engage the course and the date for handing in the assignment approaches, you often become very stressed and worried about it. My attempts to clarify the expectations of the assignment as they relate to the course of study only occasionally seem to relieve that stress. This stress (or rather the particular kind of stress that you exhibit) that accompanies the production and handing in of an assignment seems to me to be highlighted in such a way as to suggest that something has gone wrong in the engagement in the "course" of study (something has

driven us "off course," as it were). This is often signaled to me when you sometimes tell me, in frustration, that you don't know what I want, as though what I wanted were something *other* than the assignment you are expected to hand in as part of the course of study we are engaged in, as though I were asking you to produce a key that fits some kind of lock inside of *me*. Whereas the point of submitting an assignment, of course, is for you to express *yourself* in the context of the course, or rather, to *re-present* yourself as now shaped by the course materials and objectives. In other words, submitting an assignment is the (interim) culmination of the *creative* process of engaging a particular course of study, re-presenting yourself as you now are, having comprehended, interpreted, and appreciated the material that has been presented and discussed in the course. And despite the rolling of your eyes, I am serious when I tell you this should be exciting!

The other problematic feature of our interaction as the course proceeds is that, when I hand back the assignment with my comments and the grade, your entire focus is on the numerical or alphabetical grade that follows the comments, telescoping and dissolving the significance of the course of study into a feeling (relief, elation, disappointment, shock, indifference, contempt). Try as I might to explain that the grade given flows from the comments which themselves flow from my reading of what you have written, which itself (is meant to) flow from our engagement in the "course" of study that brings us together, the significance of what we are doing together seems to reduce itself to the act of registering a grade.

I would like to make more sense of this situation, one where the mindful engagement that is a course of study seems, in effect, to have been usurped or distorted, driven "off course," as suggested. Many explanations might be offered at this point, but I would like to proceed systematically which means, here, to leave aside for the moment what might be considered certain "objective" features, such as the administrative functioning of universities and the broader function of university degrees within the economy and our relative positions in regard to that functioning (you need a grade; I will give you one if you hand in an assignment as a duly registered student in my class, etc.). These institutional parameters and constraints shaping what we do together are the proper concern of what G.W.F. Hegel (2007 [1830]) calls "objective mind/spirit"; our concern here is with the dimension of our experience expressed through our "subjective mind/spirit."

If, following Hegel, we want to proceed systematically, then—instead of jumping into a consideration of the different "objective" features that can be said to be determining the situation—let us look at this situation of mindful engagement *subjectively*, that is, from the perspective of the subjective minds that constitute it, which is to say yours and mine, but with the specific focus on what is involved in this subjective dimension. While this perspective is inherently *insufficient* to grasp fully what our mindful engagement involves (which, for Hegel, needs to include both the "objective" and "absolute" dimensions that will *complete* the systematic account we are promoting—dimensions to be explored at another time), it nevertheless remains *inherent* to it as a situation. I have indeed "subjectively" assigned a grade to your paper, to which you are having a "subjective" reaction. That is *part* of what is going on. How are we to understand that part?

The stress that went into the production of the paper, and the reaction that follows upon receiving the grade attached to it, actually allows us to see how the situation involves, at a very basic level, *feelings*, or more precisely a fundamental form of self-relation that is ordered by feeling, understood here as distinct from the accompanying perceptions, desires, and thoughts, which further shape our mindful engagement in the situation. Feelings are always engaged in whatever we do, of course, but here they surface in a way that precisely draws out, or pulls each of us back into, the more basically self-relating subjective dimension of the our experience, where our own distinct self-relating feelings confront each other more starkly and the "course" of our mutual engagement is potentially disrupted. This need not be the case, of course, and in a smoothly functioning "mindful" situation, they would not. For example, the feelings you experience when you receive the paper might not be disruptive at all, the grade falling within the range of your expectations, leaving you more or less satisfied or, possibly, indifferent, depending on how engaged you actually are in this particular course. If the feelings are ones of satisfaction, then chances are your attention will move from the numerical or alphabetical grade to the comments that justify it; and these comments themselves can in their turn provoke different feelings that will shape your continued engagement in the "course" we are on as we continue to mutually engage each other.

But that kind of situation, though it is the more integrated one (logically and systematically speaking), is becoming less and less typical, in the sense that consideration of the grade itself and the feelings it provokes is *abstracted* from the course of study and isolated as an event. Something interesting happens here, to which I would like to draw attention. This *abstraction* of the reception of a grade, manifest in the *feeling* it provokes, transforms the relation we have established within the course of study; our *mutual* engagement is in a sense severed, as we are both thrown back into our separate distinct selves, where "you" are made to confront a grade "I" assigned. The *mutual* engagement that the assignment actually represents (where you re-present yourself as having "taken in" what the course is offering and I respond by providing my assessment of how well you have done this in the context of my own presentation of the material) has been broken, and taken over by feelings where the mutuality (the shared sense) of our engagement is harder to see. The situation that brings us together seems to have changed. In fact, the situation has become clouded, as it were, by the feelings provoked, and we can see less clearly what our mutual engagement requires.

What I am describing is no doubt a fairly common one in universities today, perhaps especially common in the context of courses like the ones I find myself giving: elective courses in the humanities. And in that sense, a closer examination of this recurring situation can be quite revealing about what is involved in the mindful engagement in a course of study. The shock of receiving an unexpected grade in a course one has *freely chosen* and which is *not required* for a particular program of study¹ turns out to be a privileged occasion to examine the forms and structures of mindful engagement.

¹ Though such electives (or, rather, a certain number of them) may be required by the degree sought, and in that sense their "free choice" is constrained differently than if they are taken by someone not looking also to obtain a degree, like the many retirees who "go back" to university to study things that interest

The first thing I want to draw attention to is that the surfacing of the feeling the grade has provoked such that it transforms the situation is a reminder that our mindful engagement in what we are doing is a *bodily* engagement. We feel with our bodies, indeed *because* we are bodies, and in that sense it is as bodies that we initially become mindful. Now, these bodies through which we feel the world and ourselves in the world are bodies that are simply a *given* to us in the sense that they have a history, the history of our growing up (and of course the evolutionary history of our species, but that is not our focus here). This is important to remember because part of reason why the reaction exhibited in the feelings that surface throws each of us back into our distinct and separate selves (and away from of our mutually engaged mindfulness in the matter that brings us together) is because it is this history that is manifesting itself, a history that has been experienced largely pre-consciously through our individually distinct embodied *habitation* to the world, the habits and ways of doing things we have adopted and adapted to deal with the world as we have grown up in it. This embodied habituation to the way the world works underlies our conscious perceptions and desires, just as these underlie our reasoned appreciation of the demands of any given situation. In other words, there are many layers to the way we mindfully engage with each other, and the expression of the "subjective feeling" in the example we are discussing (reacting only to the grade and not to the broader context of the grade as a function of the assignment being handed back within the context of the course) is best understood first as a manifestation of that basic layer. Given that we are not currently engaged in this situation, we have the luxury of examining it more closely.

As suggested above, then, as you react to the grade, and only the grade, you are abstracting yourself from the concrete flow that situates the course that engages both of us. When this happens, you are effectively being thrown back into your own "subjective self" in a way that cuts us off from each other (as mutually engaged in the course). This abstracted "subjective self" is not a separate "you", we might look at it as a kind of process; it is in effect the *overwhelming* of your engagement in the situation by your feeling. But what this reminds us of is that you are *first* a feeling self and that this initially shapes your engagement in the world. This "self-feeling" in Hegel's terms, is your initial (systematically-speaking) *psychic* investment in the world and it is always present, though of course, you have given further shape to that investment through your conscious appropriation of the world (developed as you have grown up into it) and your reasoned and intelligent appreciation of that world. Which includes, of course, taking courses and submitting assignments. However, what I am trying to point out is how, if we take these different dimensions (or levels) of your "subjective self"—your psychic investment in the world, your conscious appropriation of it, and your reasoned or intelligent appreciation of your engagement in it—then the overwhelming feeling that attaches to your reception of the grade taken in itself is actually the process of a kind of *abstraction*, a "cutting off," or rather, a *withdrawing* from the concrete determinations of the situation, a kind of retreat from its demands. (If this sounds overly complicated, it is because we are in the enviable position of being able to attend to the actual complexity of these everyday situations and attempt to work through the difficulties they present.) I

them. These latter students are also often surprised by the grades they receive, but it is usually a pleasant experience that enhances, rather than disrupts, our mindful engagement.

can tell you not merely to look at the numerical grade but to consider the comments that justify it, but that is not really an appropriate response to the *immediate* situation that involves a reaction that appeals to a different, more basic level of mindful engagement, one that is shaped pre-consciously.

But, of course, *you* are still here, and so am I; however, what has brought us together is suffering from a lack of communication, a break in the bond that our shared interest establishes for us (for the time being, for the time of the course). And so, in this failure of communication, in this regress of our mindful engagement to the pre-conscious level of feeling, we find ourselves confronting each other as separate, subjective selves. When this happens, we can try and re-establish communication or we can go on our own separate ways.

With the help of John Russon's work (Russon, 2003; Russon, 2009), let us look again at what happened, but now with more attention to its experiential qualities. You were handed back something that you had yourself produced and it was assigned a grade that you did not expect. This leads us to the question of what you did expect. Perhaps you do not know what you expected, at least not concretely (given that this is an elective course). However, you were expecting something other than what you received; otherwise the feeling would not be as overwhelming as it has proven to be. This notion of expectation is very important for understanding our mindful engagement. As Russon shows, it is ingredient in our embodied contact with the world. It shapes how we experience things in the world. Now, those expectations can be more or less attuned to the circumstances we find ourselves in, but in any case they will always be there. What they underscore is the fact that our experience is inherently temporal, not merely in the obvious sense that it takes place *in* time, but that it is actually structured and shaped by a *sense* of time. The way we move about the world in our everyday lives is shaped by our expectations. Those expectations are how we receive the *future* in what happens in the present, and those expectations themselves are shaped by our past, by what has happened to us and how we have responded to what was happening around us.² Your response to receiving the grade shows that it contrasts with an expectation that you had that is not being met by the specific manifestation of *this* grade. Indeed, it is through your surprise (a feeling) at *this* grade in the context of receiving your paper in *this* class, that you suddenly find yourself confronting your expectations (the way you receive the future) in a way that calls for re-examination. You unexpectedly have to deal with your expectations, as it were, because the way you are moving (expectantly into the future by taking courses and handing in assignments) has thrown up something (a

² Russon, 2003, p. 19. "The very nature of our subjectivity...is to be "simultaneously" in the past, the present, and the future. Just as our object is never a simple present but is constituted by negation and absence, so are we never fully present, never simply here, but instead we are always outside of ourselves, somewhere other than where we are. It is by being retaining and expecting that we can be present—that there can be something present to us—and it will thus be by understanding our processes of retention and expectation that we will come to understand who we are and what our world is. It is our memories and our goals that are condensed into the presentation—the appearing—that is experience. How things are present, then, is the revelation of our projects and our memories. It is indeed in the present that we will find out who we are, but only after we have abandoned the prejudice of the primacy of presence."

surprising result: an unexpected grade abstracted from its context by the strength of your feeling) that reconfigures your own sense of where you are (in the present), given what you so far have done (the assignment itself, along with the rest of your past).

Given this, your surprise at the grade you actually received was not *wholly* unexpected, but in fact was presaged by the stress that you manifested before you wrote and handed in the assignment. The growing stress you were feeling was expressing your habituated embodiment in the world in such a way that, rather than following the "course" mapped out by our mutual engagement, it was beginning to abstract itself from the *specific* demands determinative of that course, allowing the pre-conscious sense of how to move about in the world to become more manifest (which is what "feeling," taken in itself, is: a pre-conscious determination of oneself actualizing itself in the world; in this particular example, a feeling of stress).

I have often tried to address the stress that some of you have identified and voiced in class when I have asked how the assignments were "coming along," (assuming—naively at the beginning of my career, quixotically now (!)—that you were already engaged in working on them, even though the date for handing them in was still a few weeks away) but largely ineffectively (indeed, inappropriately, from a "systematic" point of view), because the stress is something each of you is *feeling* in precisely the sense of a withdrawing from the *mutual* engagement that brings us (understood as our self-relating feelings *plus* our conscious appropriations of things in the world *and especially* our reasoned and intelligent appreciation of the matters at hand) together in our "course of study." This sense of withdrawing or retreating from what is at hand (a specific date to hand in assignments) is especially evident in your favored solution to (or rather attempted resolution of) the stress being felt: an extension, i.e. a drawing out of the time you have to complete the assignment you have committed yourself to in "taking the course." This should be evident to you when you consider how short-lived the relief from the stress that solution turns out to be. And note how this appeal for an extension also illustrates the separation/withdrawal from what is meant to engage your mindful attention: in *pushing back* the date to hand in the assignment, you are effectively putting more distance between yourself and what you have to do.

I am of course sensitive to the reality that it is also the case, as a full time student, for example, that you are facing many assignments due more or less at the same time and that this contributes to your stress. This concentration of deadlines across your courses has certain "objective" (i.e. institutional) features and constraints that surely could be addressed, but the point for the time being is that these particular features would call for an "objective" response to such concentration, such as better organizational design, whether at the institutional level or at the individual level (and we might say that the "stress" thereby relieved is more mechanical/structural than it is psychological/anthropological). This is something to be considered, from our systematic perspective, within the context of "objective" mind/spirit. From the "subjective" perspective we are considering here, the presentation of those due dates was given to you at the beginning of your "course" of study, and therefore were ingredient in shaping your initial (and now continued) engagement. Given that you were aware of them from the beginning, it should be at least *puzzling* to you how the approaching due date should be proving to be so stressful.

What is equally interesting for us here, at this point, is how the response to my question about how assignments are "coming along" couched in terms of *feelings* of stress reveals something about the way conscious perceptions, and indeed reasoning, which normally build on these pre-conscious feelings, are here suffering because the stress is pulling us away from our mutual mindful engagement and back into our individual, separate selves confronting each other in terms that become increasingly idiosyncratic rather than mutually supportive. Indeed, as the issue of granting an "extension" invariably gets raised when discussing the stress associated with the assignment, it is remarkable how, despite its widespread support, the *reasons* given for supporting it get expressed in a growing cacophony, as each individual appeals to his or her particular circumstances in order to justify their own retreat from what is expected from the course of study.

This disharmony in expression, despite the shared experience, is interesting and revealing and is worth exploring further. In order to underscore how our mindful attention to what we are doing grows out of our habituated embodied ways of moving about in the world, Russon develops a mode of describing that movement as exhibiting a polytemporal musicality. I insist here on the notion of movement in describing our mindful engagement because it is indeed what comes first, and manifests itself throughout, just as your attendance in—or absence from— class illustrates (it is, after all, such movement that brings *us* together and mutually involved). This, of course, might seem obvious. And yet, we tend to think of our minds as distinct from our bodies. Or if we do connect our minds to our bodies, it is more in terms of reducing them to our brain and observed behaviour. Both the dualism (mind as opposed to body) and reductionism (mind as brain in body) in these modes of thought are being challenged here through an examination of our own *mindful* engagement, here "subjectively" explored, our minds as manifest in the way we engage each other and the world. (And my concern is with the quality of that engagement: I am concerned with the growing lack of communication endemic to that within which we are nevertheless mutually engaged.)

The notion of polytemporal musicality nicely captures the layered character of our engagement in what we are doing. Writing an assignment takes time; hence the logic of your appeal for an extension. But it also takes *doing*, that is, a physical exertion, and simply having more time will not ensure that that will happen. However, rather than appeal to the usual notions of will and motivation in this context, we can follow Russon and take a closer look at what our moving bodies reveal when we consider them in terms of the rhythms that support them, the harmonies that sustain them, and the melodies they pursue.³

When the due date for the assignment was announced, you noted it and therefore "fit" it into your schedule, itself a kind of schema of your movement over time, tracking and planning that movement through specific localizations and things-to-be-done. But from the perspective of your *lived* experience, your schedule is more like a sketchy score of that movement, noting where you *harmonically* need to be (in class with the others) and indicating *melodically* the line you are following (handing in your particular

³ Russon, 2009, p. 19. "Just as space is always structured in the three dimensions of depth, breadth, and length, so is time always structured in terms of something like rhythm, harmony, and melody."

assignments), all of which is supported *rhythmically* by the pacing of your efforts (energy, fatigue, etc.). Indeed, as Russon emphasizes, the rhythm of your lived experience is basic, the basis of your actual engagement in what you are doing.⁴ As you cry out for an extension for the assignment, you are speaking out of a rhythmic sense of time: a few more days, and nights to sleep, and meals to eat, and time to organize everything you have to do. More time and you will be able to get it done. However, as mentioned, and as you well know, the mere passage of time, the beating of your heart and the ticking of the clock, will not get your assignment done. Your habitual engagement in the world, which includes going to sleep, waking up, eating, defecating, washing, laughing, chatting, making love, all of these things do not add up to an assignment written and handed in. The assignment is not written rhythmically; it does not play that musical part in your engagement.

Though, if we parenthetically consider certain developments in the engagement in university study, such writing might become rhythmic, as it did for "the shadow scholar" (Domar, 2012, p. 2) who, in writing assignments *for others*, describes his practice in this way:

I'm automatic. I go into a zone. Sometimes, while I'm writing a paper, my mind will start to wander. When it does, my hands just keep writing—stock academic phrases, mostly. At this hour, I'm just stringing words together to get to the end. So if I get distracted and my thoughts stumble off to the comfort of my bed or the items in my refrigerator, I start typing stuff like "insofar as this framework serves to contextualize the subject at hand, we can see the degree to which this may be remarked upon as an effective way of approaching the research addressed here throughout."

But, of course, such "writing" becomes rhythmic precisely because its sole purpose is, for the author, to be exchanged for the money he needs to respond to his basic needs and, for the student who pays for it, to punctuate his attendance in college by handing in material in exchange for a grade—at the risk of being expelled if caught. No one is here mindfully engaged in study, even though all are rhythmically engaged in processes of exchange.

Your *own* assignment is, rather, your *melodic* contribution to the course, even though I assigned it as the person responsible for putting the course together and offering it. This is the point of it being your own submission: it is meant to capture something of your own appreciation (a re-presentation, as mentioned above) of what the course is engaged in presenting. Even as it "tests" your knowledge and use of the material presented in the course, what it is testing is *your* grasp of that material, and in

⁴ Russon, 2009, p. 21. "First, there are the familiar, repetitive rhythms of day and night, hunger and drowsiness, the seasons, menstruation, and sexual arousal. These are, in short, the rhythms of *nature*. Our lives are always embedded in the temporality of nature, and that is a rhythmic temporality of repetition rather than a developmental temporality of melody. *We find our experience* swinging to these rhythms, and we operate within their pulsations, whether we like it or not. Indeed, this irremovable natural temporality may well conflict with the melodic temporality of our projects: our desire to see a friend may well be an unfulfilled anticipation because the need for sleep intervenes. Though we can in various ways manipulate these rhythms, those manipulations must themselves operate within the thresholds and parameters the natural rhythms enable."

that sense, what you submit has to be identifiably *yours*, and this is what is captured melodically.

Seeing your contribution to the course through your submitted assignments as melodic (your own work on the question posed, composed out of your own appreciation of the material and presented in a way that marks it as distinctively your own) also helps us see the *harmonic* dimension of actually getting it back with a grade and comments. While the actual comments are no doubt part of my own melodic contribution to the course (which is why you can choose to ignore them inasmuch as you abstract yourself from the course and focus on the grade), giving and receiving them forms part of the *harmony* of our shared interest in the course. My comments on your work express my sense of your attunement to the material that is the stuff of the course (and can, of course, also include comments and suggestions relative to the harmonious use of language). The comments do not repeat what you have written nor do they try to replace it; their purpose is to harmonize what we are both saying relative to the course we are on, and this despite our own melodic lines of interpretations. Of course, because it is my job to set out the course in the first place, then my melody will be heard throughout, and yours will take up minor themes within it (your participation in class, the assignments you hand in); however, it is our shared interest in the course that produces the harmonious context that allows those melodies to be heard. And it is our rhythmic meeting and coming together that support both those melodies and harmonies.

Like Russon, I would like to insist that this polytemporal musicality is not a mere metaphor for understanding our engagements. It is a mode of description that captures something essential about their layered reality. Of course, it makes perfect sense to say that you were surprised by your grade because you are in the habit of getting an A or at least a B+ and that, for this assignment, you were not sure what I wanted and, besides, this is an elective and you had three other assignments and one exam due at approximately the same time and you didn't spend as much time on it as you might have. But the question I am raising is: how well does this capture your *actual* engagement—as qualified by your own surprise—in what you are doing, which includes taking this course and receiving the grade that you received given the assignment that you submitted? Might your surprise not be more significant and worth exploring further? Why did you take this course, anyway? And, of course, what I am addressing *through* your reaction is the broader concern of understanding what it is that we are mutually engaged in doing, and within the terms of the kind of understanding that is open to us when we allow ourselves to study these questions in a way that does not subordinate them to alien imperatives (for you, more earning power in the long run, i.e. a university degree; for me, my own research which may have little to do with the course I am offering).

Attending to what we are doing in terms of their polytemporal musical forms allows us to open up these questions in interesting and illuminating ways. How much time do you spend on courses you are taking in university? And which courses did you choose? There are no doubt rhythmic matters to attend to: meeting your own basic needs and attending to the needs of those around you (your family, for example, but also your friends); but there are also harmonic considerations: which courses fit into your overall schedule, what requirements do you need to meet, what broad interests are you

pursuing; and, further, to what extent can you trace a melodic line of development within all of these engagements and opportunities.

What is most valuable, in my view, about Russon's approach here is the way in which it places what we call our "choices and decisions" within a richer context and helps us see how these choices and decisions, although crucial for each of us, actually depend for their sense on this richer context of our bodily engagement in what we are doing. Indeed, my example of you receiving an unexpected grade is meant to illustrate how reflection on our "choices and decisions" can be occasioned by closer attention to those feelings that surprise us in the flow of our habitual expectations. This serves to remind us how much more there is to each of us than an immediate sense of our "free choosing" and explicit self-understanding. Attending to this requires, in Russon's terms, a kind of *descriptive honesty*⁵ of what our actual experience reveals. Whatever the melodies we attempt to produce as we move about the world, honesty about ourselves requires us to admit that they are but some among many; and describing them as such—as specific melodies—opens us up to hearing the harmonies and rhythms that accompany them (and not only the other competing melodies around us). Exploring this musicality gives us a richer sense of what we are doing, both singly and together.

References

- Hegel, G.W.F. (2007 [1830]). *Philosophy of Mind*, trans. W. Wallace and A.V. Miller. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Russon, John (2003). *Human Experience: Philosophy, Neurosis, and the Elements of Everyday Life*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Russon, John (2009). *Bearing Witness to Epiphany: Persons, Things, and the Nature of Erotic Life*. Albany: SUNY Press;
- Tomar, Dave (2012). *The Shadow Scholar: How I Made a Living Helping College Kids Cheat*. New York: Bloomsbury.

⁵ Russon, 2009, p. 25. "Our task is to present what shows itself as it shows itself, not to establish in advance a set of parameters to which our object must answer or a set of goals that we wish to accomplish. Such a method of description, such a witnessing to the epiphanies of sense, is in many ways simply an effort to adopt the stance of wonder that these "wonders" properly call for, and to recognize—perhaps for the first time—the shocking and miraculous dimensions of our everyday life that we normally take for granted."