CHAPTER 4

CHILD-REARING, RISK, AND STRIVING FOR HUMAN FLOURISHING

Abstract
Parenthood can be characterised as a leap of faith, it is inevitably ‘risky’. This characterisation of parenthood seems opposed to the current use of the concept of ‘risk’ in contemporary educational theory and policy, which emphasises that risk is something that is best prevented or avoided. Otto Friedrich Bollnow distinguishes between avoidable risks on the one hand and existential risks (Wagnis) on the other. This paper argues that Bollnow’s description of education as a Wagnis (i) contributes to the understanding of child-rearing and striving for flourishing as inherently uncertain; (ii) contributes to a clarification of the ways in which the concept of risk is being used in educational theory and policymaking; and (iii) leads us to recognise trust as a key concept in discussing risk-taking and child-rearing. We will argue that parents start with an ‘a priori’ trusting belief in their children.

Keywords
Risk, Child-rearing, Education, Human flourishing, Trust, Wagnis

Chapter 4

4.1 Introduction

Out on the ocean sailing away
I can hardly wait
To see you come of age
But I guess we’ll both just have to be patient
‘Cause it’s a long way to go
A hard row to hoe
Yes, it’s a long way to go
But in the meantime
Before you cross the street
Take my hand
Life is what happens to you while you’re busy making other plans

John Lennon – Beautiful Boy¹

In this song written for his son Sean, John Lennon gives a beautiful description of the uncertainties and vulnerabilities of parenthood. He opens with the image of sailing out on the ocean – it is unclear to where he is heading, and whether a destination will be reached. This is a strong image of the leap of faith parents have to take when they begin with the complex task of raising their child. Lennon and his son both have to be patient, because ‘coming of age’ is not something that can be enforced or controlled. Some things will happen because of how parents raise their child, some because of what they omit to do, and some things happen to the child that are beyond the control of the parents.

Most parents hope that their children will come to lead flourishing lives (I can hardly wait to see you come of age). Also, most parents will try to contribute to their child’s present and future flourishing (before you cross the street, take my hand). If parents strive for a flourishing life for their children, they will see their child-rearing as a contribution to their child’s chances of a flourishing life. They may raise their child in various ways, but we can assume that they would not do so in a way that, to their mind, would counteract the child’s chances of a flourishing life.

Chapter 4

There is no guarantee that parents will succeed in raising a human being that will flourish. Firstly because parents cannot control all the things that can happen to their child, but also because child-rearing itself (the things that parents do) is 'a leap of faith'. Child-rearing is inherently ‘risky’, because children are free to not do what their parents have intended by raising them. In other words, apart from a general influence of luck on what life might bring – whether it will be a flourishing one or not – we discuss here a particular form of risk, namely that when parents raise a child, there is no guarantee of knowing whether their parenting will succeed.

This paper thus concentrates on the inherent risk of child-rearing and parenthood as one specific way in which parents’ striving for a flourishing life for their children is uncertain. We will start with some remarks on parenthood, child-rearing and the parent-child relationship to give our argument context. Then, we will elaborate on how we can understand this inherent risk of parenthood as taking an ‘existential risk’ (Wagnis) by using the work of Otto Friedrich Bollnow.2 We will argue that Bollnow’s description of education as a Wagnis (i) contributes to the understanding of child-rearing and striving for flourishing as inherently uncertain; (ii) contributes to a clarification of the ways in which the concept of risk is being used in educational theory and policymaking; and (iii) leads us to recognise trust as a key concept in discussing risk-taking and child-rearing. We will argue that it is characteristic for parents to have an ‘a priori’ trusting belief in their children and that this is good and valuable.

4.2 Parents and Children

Judith Suisse argues that philosophy of education is in need of ‘a philosophical understanding of the parent-child relationship which will enable us to address broader questions about education’.3 When parents are discussed in philosophy of education, she says, it is often in a very narrow context, or focused on legalistic aspects of parenthood, such as rights and conflicts.4 A philosophical understanding of the parent-child relationship should pay more attention to the uniqueness of this relationship.5 We will make a few remarks on the parent-child relationship in order to provide a rough conceptual framework, which will enable us to address the broad question of parenthood and risk.

---

2 Bollnow 1959.
3 Suisse 2006, p. 75.
4 Ibid., p. 67.
5 ‘Uniqueness’ in two senses: 1) as a relationship sui generis; the pedagogical relationship is a unique kind of relationship, see Spiecker 1984; and 2) every particular parent-child relationship is unique, see Ramaekers and Suisse 2012.
In a minimal sense, ‘parent-child relationship’ refers only to the biological (genetic) connection between parent and child. Usually, however, we think of it in ‘thicker’ terms, as a relationship that involves care and education (child-rearing), and as an intimate relationship. Martha Nussbaum distinguishes four characteristics of intimate relationships. First, they are very important to people’s flourishing, both in a subjective and objective sense. Second, such relationships render us vulnerable. Third, when such a relationship breaks up, the damage goes ‘to the heart of who one is’ and fourth, we usually like the people with whom we have an intimate relationship.\(^6\) Specific for the intimacy of the parent-child relationship seems to us that parents have a relationship with their child.

Furthermore, when people speak of the parent-child relationship, they generally refer to a culturally informed conception of the parent-child relationship, which includes diverse evaluative and normative ideas about how parents and children should relate to each other, and ideas about what it means for a parent to raise a child.\(^7\) We can think of psychological concepts like ‘attachment’ that shape ideas about child-rearing,\(^8\) or of dominant sets of cultural repertoires as for example described by sociologist Annette Lareau.\(^9\) It includes several facets, or different types of relationships. For example: members of the same household, a relationship as family members, and maybe, to a certain extent, a relationship as friends.\(^10\) But a distinctive and important facet of their intimate relationship is that parents raise their children.

In 1984 Ben Spiecker introduced what he calls ‘the pedagogical relationship’ as the ‘foundation of the theory of education’ in the English speaking world.\(^11\) ‘Pedagogical’ as it is used here has a far broader meaning than its common English use. Pedagogical, as it is used in Dutch and German, refers to the (guiding) role that adults play, and should play, in the development of children towards adulthood.\(^12\) Likewise, Ramakers and Suissa explain that ‘although appropriately applied to teachers, the original Dutch term [pedagogische relatie, (pedagogical relationship)] also refers

---

\(^6\) Nussbaum 2016, pp. 93-95.
\(^7\) See for example Noddings 1984, who shows how parental care and the parent-child relationship are inherently connected to conceptions of the good life.
\(^8\) ‘Attachment theory’ is a psychological theory that argues for the importance of secure attachment for children’s later development which has had a tremendous influence on our current ideas about the importance of a good parent-child relationship. See for example Bowlby 1985 and Bowlby 1969. Attachment theory has roots both in the classical psychoanalytical idea of the importance of early childhood and the relationship of dependence between mother and infant, see Winnicott 1965; and the ethological idea of ‘imprinting’, see Lorenz 1952.
\(^9\) Lareau 2011. Lareau describes two prominent cultural repertoires in America: concerted cultivation, which refers to good parenting as developing one’s children’s talents in a concerted fashion (mostly observed in middle-class families) and accomplishment of natural growth, which sees as important to facilitate children’s natural development (mostly observed in working-class and poor families). See also chapter 5.
\(^10\) Kristjánsson 2006.
\(^12\) Idem.
to parents and, importantly, it denotes something like the development of the child, in a sense that goes beyond the narrow notion of teaching.\textsuperscript{13}

Any relationship between an adult and a child can have a pedagogical dimension, which refers to the dimension of child-rearing within this relationship (thus although it is typical for the parent-child relationship, it is not confined to it). In other words, we speak of a pedagogical relationship when the adult has the role of the ‘child raiser’ (parent/teacher/otherwise) and the child the role of she-who-is-being-raised. It is informed by pedagogical concepts. This is a normative matter. Spiecker cites Herman Nohl in describing the pedagogical relationship as ‘the loving relationship of a mature person with a “developing” person, entered into for the sake of the child so that he can discover his own life and form’.\textsuperscript{14}

We think that the combination of this pedagogical understanding of the parent-child relationship with the particular intimacy of the parent-child relationship, which is always embedded in a cultural repertoire of what child-rearing is and should be, offers a good starting point for a philosophical understanding of the (uniqueness of the) parent-child relationship.

4.3 PARENTHOOD AND THE NECESSITY OF DAS WAGNIS

Many philosophers of education have discussed the use of the word ‘risk’ in an educational context.\textsuperscript{15} A common sense description of the word risk is ‘an unwanted event which may or may not occur’.\textsuperscript{16} This meaning of risk is implied in statements such as ‘there is always the risk of an accident when driving in traffic’.\textsuperscript{17} When people take a risk, they are uncertain about which possibility out of a multiplicity of possibilities will be realised. They are not sure that the ‘unwanted event’ will (not) occur: they are not in control. Uncertainty is a necessary characteristic of risk-taking. In child-rearing, there is always the possibility that child-rearing fails in some way. In other words, child-rearing is uncertain because parents run the risk that their child-rearing fails to succeed.

The German philosopher and teacher Bollnow argues that such a ‘leap of faith’ is a type of existential risk taking that inevitably belongs to the nature of Erziehung. Erziehung is usually translated as education, but in his work Bollnow refers to the pedagogical dimension which, as discussed, is

\textsuperscript{13} Ramaekers and Suissa 2012, p. xiv.  
\textsuperscript{14} Spiecker 1984, p. 203.  
\textsuperscript{16} Möller 2012, p. 58.  
\textsuperscript{17} Idem.
not confined to teaching, nor to child-rearing. Bollnow’s line of argument applies to all Erzieher, i.e. all those in a pedagogical relationship with children. Therefore we choose to leave the word Erziehung untranslated in the following elaboration of his work. Because our main focus is parents we have chosen to translate Erzieher (child-rearer(s)) as ‘parent(s)’.  

The theme of his book Existenzphilosophie und Pädagogik is to see existential crises as crucial chances for Erziehung. One form of existential crisis is what he calls a Wagnis, which we translate as taking an existential risk. In this part of the paper we will first explain what Bollnow’s notion of existential risk entails, and compare it to two examples of the current discussions on the discourse of risk. Then we will argue that parenthood, as a part of parents’ striving for a flourishing life for their children, is aptly described in terms of taking an existential risk.

Das Wagnis (taking an existential risk)

Bollnow distinguishes between three manifestations of taking risk in Erziehung, a try or an attempt (der Versuch), a risk (das Risiko) and a type of existential risk, or venture (das Wagnis). An attempt is when you try something, to see whether it works that way or not. The professional variant of an attempt is an experiment. In principle the outcomes of these attempts are ascertainable, they are ‘knowable’. Bollnow uses the example of a new piece of rope, you can try it out (der Versuch), and test to see what kind of weight it holds, what you can use it for, etc. But, you can also just take a risk (das Risiko) and use the rope to pull up a cabinet to your new apartment on the sixth floor. Then, you don’t know whether it will work, you’ll just have to wait and see what happens and risk your cabinet.

With a venture (das Wagnis) on the other hand, in the sense that Bollnow is after, the distinctive element is that you risk yourself. It is an existential risk in the sense that you put yourself on the line, and the outcome is in principle unknowable. A venture is not the same as an adventure, because a Wagnis is a necessary risk, in the sense that Erziehung is not possible without engaging in it, and it is undertaken out of ‘the highest moral responsibility’.

Bollnow sketches the analogy of craftsmanship as a much used way of talking about Erziehung. If a sculptor has failed to create the sculpture she had intended to create, this will often be explained as either a failure of the material, a failure of the skills of the craftsman, or as a strike of (external) fate. In educational discourse, there is a tendency (or desire) to think about failures in

---

18 Bollnow 1959.
19 Ibid., pp. 135-137.
21 Ibid., p. 139.
a similar way.\textsuperscript{22} The fact that Erziehung sometimes fails to do what it had intended to do is explained as something that, unfortunately, happens every now and then, but could have been avoided if only the parent would have recognised the faults in ‘the material’ in time, and if only the Erziehung would have been better and more clever.\textsuperscript{23} However, in reality Erziehung is not analogous to a type of craftsmanship. According to Bollnow, in reality the inherent risk of Erziehung is due to the fact that it is a process between two ‘unpredictable’ – because free – beings (adult and child), and therefore it must lead us to an understanding of Erziehung that goes beyond the idea of craftsmanship.\textsuperscript{24}

The risk that is inherent in Erziehung is not the same as the risk of failure in the forms mentioned above (material, skills or fate).\textsuperscript{25} Rather, it is a risk of the type of a Wagnis. The existential nature of das Wagnis lies in the fact that the parent is personally committed to (has risked herself) raising a child who is always free to not do what the parent had intended with her Erziehung. So, in a different sense than with craftsmanship, Erziehung can fail too. According to Bollnow, existential risk always comes with the possibility of existential failure (das Scheitern). Not the failure, but rather the possibility of failure is what should be incorporated in Erziehung. ‘Failure (luckily) is the exception, but it is an exception which is not a stroke of (external) fate but – as an ever-present possibility – an internal part of what Erziehung is’.\textsuperscript{26} Bollnow argues that if the parent were to deny that fact of life, she would necessarily degrade the other human being (the child) to mere material to work with. In that way she would also infringe upon the dignity of this other human being and at the same time of Erziehung itself.\textsuperscript{27}

It does not become altogether clear from Bollnow’s text what falls under the category of existential failure and what not. Conceptually, his definition allows for all crises in which the child does not do what the parent has intended (because the child is free). Yet, when we look at his examples, existential failure only seems to refer to situations in which things are really going wrong, i.e. that the child does not flourish in any reasonable conception of the term (which ‘luckily’ is the exception).

However, these two do not necessarily follow from each other. ‘Failure’ as in becoming a ‘happy single’ accountant who lives in the city instead of a farmer with a traditional family life which

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., p. 133.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., p. 132.
\textsuperscript{24} ‘In Wirklichkeit gehört aber der Wagnischarakter zum innersten Wesen der Erziehung selbst, sofern diese als Umgang mit freien und in ihrer Freiheit grundsätzlich unberühmbaren Wesen über ein bloß handwerkliches Tun hinausgeht’, Bollnow 1959, p. 133.
\textsuperscript{25} Idem.
\textsuperscript{26} ‘Nicht das Scheitern, sondern nur die Möglichkeit des Scheiterns ist es, was in jeden Augenblick wagen Vertrauens in das Erziehende Verhalten einbezo gen werden muss. Das Scheitern bleibt (glücklicherweise) die Ausnahme, die nicht durch einen äußeren Zufall gelegentlich bereitvorbereit, sondern schon im Wesen der Erziehung von vorn herein angelegt ist’, ibid., p. 150.
\textsuperscript{27} ‘Der Versuch aber, den dadurch bedingten Wagnischarakter zu beseitigen und so die Gefahr des Scheiterns zu vermeiden, degradiert notwendig den andern Menschen zum bloßen Material meiner Bearbeitung, verletzt also die Würde dieses andern Menschen und damit zugleich die Würde der Erziehung selbst’, ibid., p. 134.
his parents had intended to raise is something else than failure as in becoming a drug addict and
dying young. Whereas failure in the latter sense equals non-flourishing in any reasonable sense of
the term, in the former sense it is still an open question whether someone whose education has
‘failed’ leads a flourishing life or not. And thus, while the child does something different than the
parent had aimed for, this is not necessarily not-flourishing. Furthermore, we can imagine that
some parents might perceive their child’s life as a ‘happy single accountant’ as not flourishing and
therefore be harmed as they experience parental failure, but other parents whose children in their
conception of flourishing do not flourish, might see and understand that the child is happy and
thus not experience harm in reaction to their ‘failure’.

Or consider the following example: Say that the parents of Hannah are liberal parents
whose intention it is to raise their daughter to become a free-spirited, autonomous adult who
pursues her own happiness. Hannah, however, starts going to church and becomes a member of
an orthodox religious commune, which includes giving up her autonomy. This is not what her
parents had in mind raising Hannah. But Hannah is happy, she works at the commune farm,
maries with children, and successfully sells fruits and vegetables from the farm at local markets.
The parents’ intention to raise Hannah as an autonomous adult (in the liberal sense) has failed. It
is a different question whether the parents believe that their child lives a flourishing life or not, and
yet a different question whether others would think so. The parents might take their daughter’s
devotion to the religious commune as a weighty reason to see her as not-flourishing (within their
conception of flourishing), but they might also understand and respect that their daughter has a
different conception of flourishing. By many people the daughter will be thought to flourish, but
for others this will be up for debate. So, in this sense, Bollnow’s existential failure does not exclude
the possible flourishing life of the child.

We do think that existential failure minimally implies a subjective experience of failure on
the side of the parent, and we think that Bollnow had examples in mind that minimally caused a
crisis within the pedagogical relationship (such as for example running away from home), where
both parent and child feel that there is a crisis, but for reasons of conceptual clarity we will proceed
to interpret failure in the broadest way that Bollnow’s text allows, which is when the child does not
do or become what the parent has intended.

As said, existential failure is something else than making a mistake. First, every parent makes
mistakes, but this doesn’t necessarily mean that the Erziehung has failed. Moreover, we can learn
from our mistakes, so mistakes can contribute to Erziehung. According to Bollnow, also existential
failure, or rather coming very close to existential failure, is a window of opportunity for Erziehung,
as is every crisis. Parents and children both can have a unique learning opportunity due to a near
failure of the whole activity of *Erziehung*. This does not mean, however, that parents should knowingly steer towards such an almost-failure; the learning opportunity lies in the sincerity (and thus existentiality) of recognizing the possibility of true and total failure.28 Secondly, *Erziehung* can fail without demonstrable mistakes being made or irrespective of such mistakes (on either side of the parent-child relationship). Thus, also when it is unclear whether the parent can be held responsible for the failure of the *Erziehung*, existential failure implies that, because the parent has risked herself while being a parent and raising her child, it is still experienced as a personal failure. The parent is committed to the *Erziehung*, has put herself on the line, and in that sense, regardless of what has caused the failure, the parent would experience it as existential failure. Bollnow gives an example of the pedagogical relationship between a supervisor and her PhD student.29 The inevitable tension between showing the PhD student the way (offering guidance) and letting her find her own way (creating space, offering trust) makes this a Wagnis, for it is uncertain what the right pedagogical choice is, and, for the supervisor, the success or failure of the supervision of the dissertation is a personal matter. She is risking herself in taking up this supervision, although it is not necessarily said that in case of failure the supervisor has made mistakes. This example shows how Bollnow sees existential risk as possible in every pedagogical relationship, not only in the parent-child relationship. This does however not imply that every educational activity is (potentially) a Wagnis, but it does imply that also teachers not only perform tasks, but sometimes risk themselves in educating the child.30

**Parenthood as a Wagnis**

Judith Suissa argues that ‘being a parent is intimately tied up with issues of our own identity, and with our values and choices in other areas of our lives’.31 *Being* a parent can therefore not be accurately described as a task, as merely doing something. If we would describe parenthood as a series of tasks, that would impoverish the notion of parenthood.32 Even though parents differ in the way they see themselves as parents – for example for some parents having children is what makes their life meaningful, while for others this is less or not so – we agree with Suissa that for all parents it must ring true that ‘parenthood’ says something about who they are, and that how they

---

28 Ibid., p. 150.
29 Ibid., p. 139.
30 However, in the case of the PhD supervisor it is not altogether clear whether this needs to be an existential risk. One could also argue that acting as a supervisor is merely a task which she does. It is conceivable that some PhD supervisors consider supervision to be merely a task which they execute, and it is this task that might fail or not (a Risiko instead of a Wagnis).
31 Suissa 2006, p. 73.
32 Ibid., p. 72.
raise their children therefore has to do with who they are, and as such is not reducible to a series of tasks.

We think that Sussa, by differentiating between doing and being, is pointing to the same distinction that Bollnow makes when he distinguishes an attempt or taking a risk on the one hand from a Wagnis on the other. In taking an existential risk (Wagnis) one has to put oneself on the line, and this, we think, is also what happens when becoming (being) an involved parent. We leave open whether Bollnow’s conception of risk applies to all adult-child relationships, but we have shown that because of its particular intimacy, for the parent-child relationship the idea of Wagnis is particularly appropriate.

Striving for flourishing as a Wagnis

Striving for flourishing is affected by a general uncertainty about what happens to us in life. Nussbaum argues that a good human life is fragile, because human lives are subject to ‘luck’. Therefore, when parents strive for the flourishing of their child, some things will happen that are beyond the control of a parent. We have said that according to Bollnow, the distinctive element of a Wagnis is that a person risks herself. Because striving for flourishing is subject to the influence of luck, parents who are committed to striving for their children’s flourishing can also be considered, for that reason alone, to take a risk of the type of a Wagnis.

We have shown, however, that child-rearing entails a specific risk that can also be typified as a Wagnis. Where the first riskiness is due to a general influence of luck on the course of a life, the second type of riskiness is due to the freedom of children to not do what their parents intend in raising them. Therefore there are two distinct ways in which we can understand parents’ striving for a flourishing life for their children as a Wagnis.

4.4 The discourse of risk in education(al research)

Philosophers of education observe that there is a specific discourse of risk used in educational research. In this discourse the word risk is depicted as something that should be avoided, i.e. that educational research and policy should be mainly focused on how to eliminate the possibility that something goes wrong when raising a child. As such, this discourse denies or (at least) ignores the possibility of inevitable risk, that is, the possibility that a) there are risks that cannot be avoided;

---

33 Nussbaum 1986, p. 3. Luck is related here to the Greek word τυχή, and is defined as ‘what happens to him, as opposed to what he does or makes’.
and b) that, moreover, it is even necessary for good education (here education includes both formal schooling and informal upbringing) to engage in such risk-taking. In other words; it denies the possibility and merit of a Wagnis. Some philosophers of education criticize this observed discourse of risk. Some of them focus on the bias in the negative connotations of risk in relation to children and families, while others emphasise the positive role that risk should have for good or ‘real’ education.\textsuperscript{34} We think that what these examples of critique argue for is the existence of a type of risk that is existential. We agree with their argument, and think that Bollnow’s description of das Wagnis contributes to the power of their argumentation.

\textit{Families ‘at risk’}

Paul Smeyers writes that there is a ‘tendency to speak of children and families as being “at risk”, which in many cases seems to lead to a climate in which the legitimacy of government interventions comes to be broadly accepted’.\textsuperscript{35} ‘At risk’ is perceived here as that there is a greater than average likelihood that unwanted events occur, and that these unwanted events are in need of a solution; someone (the government) who can fix them, or – even better – is able to prevent them. According to Smeyers, this need to fix it, and as such make education risk-free, is ‘self-deceptive’, because it indicates, wrongfully, that every educational problem can be solved.\textsuperscript{36}

If the implication is that all risks of education are, in principle, solvable, as in the flawed analogy of a craftsmanship, meaning that all families ‘at risk’ could be saved if one only did better interventions, and as such denies the necessity of Wagnis, then that is indeed self-deceptive. Smeyers argues that such use of the word risk implies both a certain way of looking at (and describing) child-rearing and a simplification of what parenthood is.\textsuperscript{37} It distracts us from the complexity and inherent uncertainty of parenthood. However, Smeyers should be careful that he does not lead us to the conclusion that we cannot speak of families ‘at risk’; there are families at risk for whom it is wise that governments intervene, just as much as there are risks that parents wisely seek to avoid (before you cross the street, take my hand). We think that if Smeyers would make a distinction between risks that can and should be avoided, and the type of existential risk that is unavoidable and necessary, in the way that Bollnow does, and that both types of risk are a part of the complexity of parenthood, this might make more clear that Smeyers thinks that it is ‘self-deceptive’ to attempt to make education free of existential risks, but that this doesn’t mean that governments can’t have legitimate reasons to intervene in so-called families ‘at risk’.

\textsuperscript{34} Illustrative of the former is Smeyers 2010, an example of the latter is Biesta 2013.  
\textsuperscript{35} Smeyers 2010, p. 272.  
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., p. 281.  
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., p. 283.
Chapter 4

The beautiful risk of education

With his book title *The beautiful risk of education* Gert Biesta refers to the inherent risk of ‘creation’ (as in ‘the process of creating’); ‘creation is a risky business and has to be a risky business and without the risk nothing will happen; the event of subjectivity will not occur’. With ‘the event of subjectivity’ Biesta refers to children becoming ‘subjects in their own rights’, something which he insists education should contribute to. We connect this to Sipecker’s description of the aim of the pedagogical relationship; human development in the sense of becoming a person.

Biesta proposes to make a distinction between an attitude of educators who are ‘willing to take the risk’ and an attitude of parents who are not. Educators who are not willing to take the risk perceive of education as a type of craftsmanship, or as Biesta puts it, see education as ‘the production of something – literally the production of some thing’. Paraphrasing Caputo, parents who are willing to take the risk are ‘cool’ whereas parents who aren’t are ‘nervous wrecks’. If the former is ‘a calm, distant, celestial, hands-off creator’, the latter is ‘very nervous about what he is getting himself into and is much more of a hands-on micro manager’.

So, for Biesta, parental risk taking is necessary for the child to become a person. Hence, it is a beautiful risk. Biesta’s beautiful risk falls under the category of Bollnow’s *Wagnis*. But although for Bollnow existential risk-taking is equally inevitable, Bollnow also stresses that it is something that parents generally seek to avoid, as most human beings in principle seek to avoid danger/failure. No educator should steer towards the failure of their education. Whilst Biesta thus focuses on the beautiful chances for education which occur when willing to take the risk, Bollnow’s focus is rather on the inevitability of risking yourself when raising a child. We agree with both aspects of the risk-taking in education, and we think that Bollnow’s recognition of risk as something that people generally seek to avoid is important and should not be left out. This implies, to our minds, that in Biesta’s work the possible not-so-beautiful consequences of risk-taking should be addressed, thereby admitting that parents who accept the risk of creation can sometimes legitimately be ‘nervous wrecks’, precisely because of this ‘leap of faith’ that they took.

---

39 With ‘subjectification’ Biesta expresses the thought that ‘the assumption that those at whom our educational efforts are directed are not to be seen as objects but as subjects in their own right; subjects of action and responsibility’, ibid., p. 18.
43 Biesta 2013, pp. 14-16.
44 Bollnow 1959, p. 150.
4.5 Trust

The educational discourse of risk to which Smeyers and Biesta (and others) object generally does not recognise the existence and significance of existential risks. Such existential risks render human beings, and specifically parents in this case, vulnerable. As such, an emphasis on risk-avoidance seems to minimize the place for/of vulnerability in an educational context. According to Annette Baier, the acceptance of this vulnerability is what we mean by trust.\textsuperscript{45}

Thus, we argue that a discourse of risk in fact minimizes the significance of trust in child-rearing. The emphasis is on the avoidance of risk, and the less risk (the less uncertainty) there is left – and thus the less trust there is necessary – the better. The use of such a discourse in matters of education does not promote the trust parents have in their children or themselves, nor does it promote a general trust – a kind of faith – that ‘things will be all right’ with the world and the people in it. The impression one gets is that ‘having’ to trust one’s children is something one resorts to by lack of a better alternative, namely eliminating the risk and emphasizing knowing what one should do to do ‘it’ right. It appears as if this discourse advocates that there should be no need to trust one’s children. This is, to our minds, harmful to the parent-child relationship, because this would presume that we live in a dystopian world where freedom is absent for children.

We want to argue that a conception of risk in education as an inevitable \textit{Wagnis} actually points to the opposite, namely to an affirmation of the importance of trust in child-rearing, because parents cannot avoid all risks. Above that, there are good reasons for parents to have trust in their children, and, as we will show, it seems that parents generally start from trust in the relationship with their children.

For Bollnow, the importance of trust is self-evident. In a different book he writes that human life is only possible on the basis of trust. Distrust on the other hand causes life to ‘dry out’ and eventually ‘die out’.\textsuperscript{46} Trust is the ‘indispensable precondition of all human life’.\textsuperscript{47} And in a third book he writes that trust is one of the key virtues for educators.\textsuperscript{48} We will first make some general remarks on the concept of trust before we can discuss what kind of trust characterises the parent-child relationship.

Spiecker argues that in general, we can say that ‘if X trusts Y, then X is convinced that Y (person or thing) possesses certain qualities’.\textsuperscript{49} He gives two further logical conditions of trust: if X

\textsuperscript{45} Baier 1986.
\textsuperscript{46} “Nur auf dem Boden eines Vertrauens ist Leben überhaupt möglich. Misstrauen umgekehrt läßt das Leben vertrocknen und schließlich ganz ersterben”, Bollnow 1958, p. 175.
\textsuperscript{47} Das Vertrauen ist die unerlässliche Voraussetzung alles menschlichen Lebens, idem.
\textsuperscript{48} Bollnow 1965, pp. 52-62.
\textsuperscript{49} Spiecker 1990, p. 158.
Chapter 4

trusts Y, it must also be so that ‘X expects Y, at a later point of time, to fulfil certain standards or criteria’ (ibid); and that ‘trust implies a certain degree of uncertainty’.50 Trust in powers or capacities can be said of things and people, whereas trust in inclinations or good will can only be in human beings and is based on a moral judgment. For Bollnow, however, ‘real’ trust is only applicable to human beings, because human beings are in principle unpredictable/incalculable, because of their free will.51

Interpersonal trust can be roughly defined as ‘accepted vulnerability to another’s possible but not expected ill will (or lack of good will) toward one’ or to another’s possible but not expected lack of competence.52 Baier’s account of trust allows for ‘unconscious trust, for conscious but unchosen trust, as well as for conscious trust the truster has chosen to endorse and cultivate’.53 Hieronymi argues that if one decides to trust, one rather entrusts someone with something, which is not the same as what she calls full-fledged trust, which must be based on a trusting belief, i.e. a belief in the trustworthiness of the one that is trusted. And a belief is not something one can choose to have.54 MacLeod makes a further distinction between Hieronymi’s full-fledged trust and therapeutic trust.55 Full-fledged trust requires a trusting belief and people therefore cannot decide to trust someone, just because it is ‘useful’ for some reason. Therapeutic trust (or ‘useful trust’), on the other hand, does work like that. It depends on (external) reasoning, i.e. one decides to trust as the result of reasoning. But this kind of trust is really a matter of ‘entrusting’. Hieronymi gives the example of a ‘trust circle’ (a trust-building exercise in which you have to let yourself fall backwards, trusting that the group will catch you). When you are in doubt about whether you trust the others to catch you (there is no trusting belief), perhaps because you don’t know them too well, you can decide that it is good to entrust the others with catching you, because you have good reasons to do so (e.g. it is beneficial to the group-building/trust-building/etc.).56

Trust in the parent-child relationship

First, although we can say of someone that she is a trustworthy person, often trust is about me trusting you, or – in this paper – about the parent trusting the child, and vice versa. The question we seek to answer here is how trust (and what type of trust) is important for the parent-child relationship. That being said, the parent-child relationship is a relationship between un-equals, in

---

50 Ibid., p. 159.
51 Bollnow 1958, pp. 177-178.
52 Baier 1986; Spiecker 1990.
53 Baier 1986, p. 244.
54 Hieronymi 2008.
55 MacLeod 2015.
56 Hieronymi 2008.
the sense that the adult (generally) is the educator and the child the one being educated. The trust they have in each other might therefore be of a different kind.

Baier sketches the ‘natural order’ of trust to show how children start from initially unself-conscious proto-trust to eventually self-conscious (chosen) trust. We agree that most children start from a position of great, possibly unconditional, trust (or better yet, ‘proto-trust’, since the concept of ‘trust’ arguably does not meaningfully apply to babies and infants yet) in their parents, which is rooted in their (initial) full dependency on their parents.  

Above that, children need parental trust. In a general sense, as Bollnow said, trust is important for human beings, and especially for human (intimate) relationships. But it is also important in a particular, pedagogical sense, because, ‘[b]y this trust the child is stimulated to both accentuate and expand his capacities’. As such it is ‘a condition for the development of the capacities of children’. But for parents this is different, they do not depend on their child to stay alive; they are not dependent on their child in the same way as the child is dependent on them. However, in a different sense one might argue that parents and children are mutually dependent, because they are in an intimate relationship together, and as such what the child does will affect the parent and vice versa. This type of dependency makes it also important for parents to be able to trust their child. According to Spiecker, appropriate trust is characterised by a cognition (belief), which is properly grounded. We think that this is true for parents’ trust in capacities/powers of the child. For example, letting one’s child crawl up the stairs all by herself, trusting her to be able to do that, is usually well grounded in the fact that before this point, the parents have supervised her crawling up the stairs numerous times. ‘Statistics’ persuade them to trust her stair-climbing capacities. Trusting one’s child’s good will/inclinations seems to be different. Initially there are no ‘proper grounds’ for parents to trust their child’s good will. However, this doesn’t seem to be a reason not to trust one’s child. Generally, we think, out of love for one’s own child, and because of the uniqueness of this intimate relationship (the mere fact of the child being one’s own child), a parent will start from a sort of a priori position of (an inclination towards) trust in the good will of their child. We argue that this is not a rational form of trust, if ‘rational’ is taken to mean that other

57 Baier 1986, p. 236.
58 See also Baier 1986, pp. 241-242.
59 Spiecker 1990, p. 163.
60 Ibid., p. 158.
61 Idem.
62 It can be argued that rather than to start from trust, parents start with the hope that their children will have a good will. We think that because hope can be defined as desire plus expectancy (see Eagleton 2015) parents also expect that their child is trustworthy, and therefore it can be assumed that parents start with an inclination towards trusting their child.
(external) grounds are required to justify one’s trust in one’s children. Deliberating whether trust in one’s child’s good will is (or was) appropriate might be done in hindsight, and there might well be good (pedagogical or developmental) reasons to trust one’s children, but we argue that parents do not decide whether or not to trust their children on the basis of such reasons.

Therefore, following Hieronymi, we think that it is characteristic for parents to have a trusting belief in their child. We propose here that this belief is ‘a priori’, meaning that the parent does not ‘build up’ this trusting belief. As such, we are not able to judge whether parents have good grounds for their belief, but because, as said, there are good grounds for parents to trust their children from the start, we side with Spiecker in saying that parental ‘a priori’ trust can be called appropriate. If it were the case that parents decide to trust based on its pedagogical/developmental merits, parental trust would be a form of therapeutic or ‘useful’ trust – instead of full or pure trust. And this, to our minds, would reduce parenthood to something that parents ‘do’ instead of what they are.63

Bollnow’s emphasis on the importance of engaging in existential risk when educating reflects his emphasis on the importance of trust in human lives. To trust someone means that we are not certain, but that we take this leap of faith anyway. According to Bollnow, the trust of a parent in their child creates space to take existential risks, and is therefore something that parents ought to do.64 Above that, as we have already mentioned, the consequence of not-trusting is that one takes away one’s children’s freedom.65 But trust in itself is also a Wagnis, says Bollnow.66 To trust someone is taking an existential risk, while at the same time trust is required in a situation of uncertainty, i.e. in a situation of risk.

4.6 Conclusion

Striving for a flourishing life is fragile, and parents who are committed to their children’s flourishing are therefore engaged in existential risk-taking. John Lennon’s song has given us a sense of how this vulnerability affects him as a father. We have shown in this article that child-rearing also entails a specific risk that can be typified as a Wagnis. Therefore there are two distinct ways in which we can understand parent’s striving for a flourishing life for their children as a Wagnis.

63 See Suiissa 2006.
64 Bollnow 1959, p. 143.
65 See also Spiecker 1990, p. 160.
66 Bollnow 1959, p. 144.
We conclude that a conception of risk as a *Wagnis* affirms the importance of trust in the parent-child relationship. Trust is something that is necessary for children’s development. Parents start from an *a priori* position of trust, a form of trust that is not based on reasons or reasoning. It requires a belief – a belief not grounded in reasons, though not immune to falsification – in the trustworthiness of the child.

Bollnow’s distinction between inevitable existential risks where a parent risks herself and avoidable risks which do not require such an existential dimension contributes to an understanding of the objections philosophers of education have to a prevalent use of the concept of ‘risk’ as something that is and ought to be avoided. It makes clearer why Biesta is convinced that educators have to be willing to take (beautiful) risks, and why Smeyers argues that it is ‘self-deceptive’ to eliminate risk in education in principle; when making their argument, they have a type of existential risk-taking in mind.