



# A Wayfarer in School Land: A Philosophical Time Trip to Civilisation

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## Abstract

How does the spirit of an age influence the prevailing ideal of education and civilisation at any given moment? Do education, civilisation, cultivativeness, and refinement mean the same thing? Is the spirit of a place linked to different educational ideals? In contemporary discourse, does the concept of education and civilisation transform into nothing more than a pawn in the game of politics? Can we talk about the school of yesterday and the school of tomorrow? Or do they both just mean a similar kind of educational institution? Is the concept of a book-based education becoming entirely obsolete in this era that worships electricity and artificial intelligence as deities? There are many such questions. The philosophical wayfarer in school land, an educational time traveller, sets out in search of answers. His success in this endeavour is possible only if his cultural perspective is both essayistic and deeply reflective in nature. Thus, the school land wayfarer must be able to present himself simultaneously as a herald, as a messenger of both artisticness and scientific inquiry. Let us wish him luck in this demanding task.

**Keywords:** existential journey; linguistic home; ethics and temporality; memories of the past; visions of the future; mirror of modern times.

## Introduction

The school land wayfarer is always also a time traveller. His existential journeys thus move from the present moment toward memories of the past and visions of the future. In doing so, the world inevitably splits into two: in the past lies an age of happiness, and in the future there await either dreams or nightmares. The present, then, serves as a transit point in the flow of time. It also acts as a vantage point, a place that functions as both the starting and ending point of time travels. It is there that observations are also dressed in verbal form. In other words, the present is likewise

the linguistic home of the wayfarer. It is the place where essayistic writing is born. The written form is an attempt to transform temporality into timelessness.

Now we shall continue an experiment begun in earlier essays. The starting point for these explorations is an already existing, polished text. It could be regarded as a kind of theoretical section or a introductory preface by a theorist. The goal here, too, is to illustrate the finished text. For this reason, the photo caption takes on a deeper meaning than usual. The theorist's speech is thus answered both visually and verbally. In other words, this seems to be a multimodal, multifaceted approach. At the same time, this may also give rise to metaphors and visual language.

First there always comes the theorist's speech. This is then followed by an applied response. In this way, an extensive world of dialogic exploration is created. If there are two or more images, the shared caption is placed with the final image. The ideal of visuality may influence the relative placing of images and writing. The purpose of the layout is to express the essay's ideal – in both senses of the Finnish equivalent, as a perfect example and as a fine idea – mode of existence. The invisible becomes visible<sup>1</sup>.



Photograph 1. The tree of knowledge. (Yrjö Kyllönen, 1953, Könönpelto School, Varkaus.)

The theorist's lines are presented by Professor Martti Rapola in his excellent work *"Pelto jää taakse"* ("The Field Is Left Behind", 1965). The wayfarer's lines are voiced by the observer and seeker of modern times, double-doctorate and cultural critic Matti Itkonen. A self-ironic humorous aside: the more degrees and titles one has, the more credibility and the greater the weight of what is said.



Photograph 2. Growing together. (Jarkko Liutu, 2018, Waltteri School, Varkaus.)

**The theorist:** "Culture is always long-term by nature. The name itself indicates that time, temporal depth, is part of its essence, that the tree has not grown without soil and roots.

To our knowledge, the Latin *cultura* has always signified, and still signifies, cultivation, tilling, development, refinement. If these meanings are detached from the concept of culture, the concept itself is destroyed. Culture always contains something that either in itself or as a seed has existed in earlier cultivation: in the field as fertile soil, in language as basic vocabulary, in art as rhythm and stylistic references from times past. Without this, it is not culture – and nor is what is being said anything new." (Rapola, 1965, p. 19.)

**The wayfarer:** “Art and the ideal of education belong together. They reflect and express one another. They also speak the pictorial language of the prevailing spirit of the age. This existential arrangement is missing two telling snapshots of the essential.”

**Photographs 1 and 2.** “The 1950s and the era of post-war reconstruction meant industriousness and unwavering faith in a brighter future. The ideal of education and cultivation reached out and forwards to days yet to come. The soil of culture is being prepared for the time ahead. The roots of cultivation and refinement lie deep in the soil of the past. There is pride in the past. The tree of knowledge is also the tree of learning and literacy. If literary education is scorned, the very concept of culture is simultaneously destroyed. Darkness falls, Minerva’s owl takes flight, and the age of ideals comes to an end. This is easy to say, at least in hindsight. Often, contemporaries are blind. Their gaze is not clear enough, and they fail to see the true state of things. Only the future will give birth to profound seers.

A new millennium, a changed mode of thinking. Right now, in the early 2020s, every effort is being made to break away from the past. The school of the past is feared. The new and revolutionary school of the future is celebrated. With the principle of 'growing together' the precious legacy of past decades is discarded. The basic soil of existence is pushed completely aside. The rhythm of life from earlier days is destroyed, along with the stylistic references of existence.

The technical, the electronic, and the world of artificial reality are worshipped. The kingdom of the past and actual reality are vehemently renounced. Things long in existence are reinvented and rediscovered. Probably it is this ideal of cultivation that the figure sees, gazing into the distance from its branch. Behind lies the circle of life that once was. It has also created the gazer. If that foundation is rejected, culture is also lost. Then cultivation and refinement would mean destruction. Each of us living in this time would do well to internalize this guide to being: 'Human, you need wisdom. It would be far from foolish to learn to change your way of thinking. Only then could you truly be regarded as also cultivated'.” (See also Itkonen, 2024a; 2024b for time-travel studies focused on Varkaus.)

### **Language and school review**

Once again, Professor Rapola appears in the role of theorist. This time, his statements focus on language, style, and criticism. We need one illustrative example image. The wayfarer responds separately to each of the theorist’s remarks. Together, their exchanges form a comprehensive picture of the subject under consideration. The aim and ideal of dialogue are thus pursued on as many levels as possible.



Photograph 3. The Factory School. (In each case, the wayfarer's responses immediately follow each of the theorist's statements.)

**Theorist:** "Our language is at times colloquial, at times official, even ceremonial. There exists a concept of language style. The sources of stylistic features sometimes lie in the vernacular or old Biblical language, sometimes in fashion trends – nowadays, for example, in English-language low culture – and sometimes in a personality creating their own style. Regardless of the makeup of one's personality, it can be said that no one escapes their own style, i.e., their distinctive way of presenting and expressing themselves, whether in speech or in writing." (Rapola, 1965, p. 41)

**Wayfarer:** "This concerns the wayfarer's former and very first school. Teaching activity in the building has since ceased. Yet it still serves as a repository for the school memories of many generations. The spirit of the times has changed, and with it, the stylistic features and ideals of language. Once upon a time, careful use of language was valued. The ideal of correctness in Finnish was upheld. The Finnish language was respected. Even today, using official and ceremonial styles would be excellent principles in many communicative situations. The importance of handwriting should also be realised. School libraries could also be revived. Pupils should be guided toward acquainting themselves with high-quality literature. This way, a touch of

refinement might be returned to their speech and writing. A museum is soon to be established in the former school building. It would be worth including an exhibit on valuing one's native language. The theorist's reference to English language low culture remains highly relevant. Uncritical worship of the English language adds neither depth nor refinement to anyone's mode of expression. On the contrary: it flattens and trivialises the entire message. Perhaps a new age of language is still to come – one in which flawless Finnish sets an example for all language users. This could well be the legacy of the Factory School for future generations skilled in the power of the word.

**Theorist:** "Style involves what I would call the aesthetics of language, the study of the aesthetic values of broad expressive entities. Here, linguistic and literary studies converge. Just as there is an aesthetics of music, visual arts, and literature, so too must there be an aesthetics of language, either as an entire field of its own or as part of literary aesthetics. In the current, and probably long-lasting, upheaval in literature, we need much more of this aesthetics of language than is presently evident among us. Its aim is to delve into the understanding and evaluation of how meaning is aesthetically conveyed, whether the message is informative or imaginative, i.e. to understand and assess the correspondence between the expression and what is expressed." (Rapola, 1965, pp. 41–42).

**Wayfarer:** "I would broaden the theorist's expression and speak of the aesthetics of the language of being. It would be possible to outline an aesthetics of the language of being in both everyday and ceremonial life. This is closely linked to the idea of the multidimensional nature of the school environment. The schoolyard and surrounding area then become central. The sandy field in the foreground was once a green meadow. It had birch trees, grass, and flowers growing on it. The grass was always cut down in the late summer. In its present state the field seems to be in transition, both actually and metaphorically. What was the environmental aesthetics language of being back then? And what is it like now? In winter, the field had a popular skating rink. There was also a skiing track that looped around it. In truth, the meadow was an excellent example of the theme-and-variations mode of thinking: in summer, it was a green pasture; in winter, a flat ice-covered athletic oasis and meeting place for children. The rhythm of its language of being was shaped by the seasons. Now, without students, there is no need for the multifaceted aesthetics of the landscape. Fortunately, the schoolyard remains a 'living' space. Beautiful flowers and shrubs have been planted and there are various play areas for physical activity. So people still have opportunities for self-expression and fulfilment. Perhaps we might speak of the calligraphy and literature of existence. Body language is the essential language of being human. Studying it demands an existential aesthetics and a value theory suited to analysing human life and existence. Reflection on this condition will continue in future research."

**Theorist:** “In literary criticism, one notices a new euphemism: old categories, such as beautiful and ugly, sublime and base, with all their old nuances, are becoming rare. This too pertains to the aesthetics of language. At the same time as the new educational ideal and, along with it, the new media have liberated our thinking and linguistic behaviour from countless restraints of modesty, and as we have been turned into all sorts of existentialists, or as the young phalanx’s favourite term would have it, we have become absolutely ‘honest’, public criticism has, simultaneously, become discreetly gentle regarding artistic expressions that offend our sense of beauty. A certain old-school aesthete has observed that the word *lewd* has been replaced with bold or *fierce*; *tasteless* with unconventional, *unprejudiced*; and *raw* or *coarse* with *powerful*, *hearty*. Many formerly positive evaluations within the aesthetic or ethical sphere of life are falling out of use, while at the same time, romanticism and idealism – whatever those terms may be taken to mean – have become alienating attitudes toward life.” (Rapola, 1965, pp. 42–43.)

**Wayfarer:** “Language is the mirror of modern times. It always reflects the prevailing ideal of expression and the spirit of the age. Language is the home of both its era and of human existence. Each generation, in its own time, tries to refurnish its linguistic home with old ‘word-furniture.’ Buzzwords become euphemisms. Meanings become blurred as precise and expressive words are pushed aside. Language becomes impoverished. Nowadays, words are distanced from their real-world referents. People don’t dare speak too directly. Long ago at the Factory School, there was a different atmosphere. Tasks were either easy or difficult. People thought of things as having certain qualities – straightforward, for instance, or uncomplicated. In political usage, there is talk of striving for honesty, just as the theorist has described earlier conditions. Often this leads to name-calling and insult. Nevertheless, ‘problematic’ becomes ‘challenging,’ ‘uncomplicated’ becomes ‘simple,’ the Finnish word *askel* becomes *steppi* (‘step’), *seuraava taso* becomes *neksti leveli* (‘next level’), and *suunnitelma* becomes *pläni* (‘plan’). Alongside the vocabulary favoured by the young phalanx, these euphemisms are also popular with older language users. As the theorist has also stated, English-language low culture certainly does not enrich or refine modern Finnish. Rarely does one speak of the sublime or even the base anymore. Long ago at the Factory School, they both dared and wanted to use such cultural expressions. In other words, the aesthetics and cultivation of language are still needed. The subject will be revisited in a later essay.”

## **Ethics and Temporality**

### ***Initial Impulse***

In examining ethics and ethical behaviour, it is well justified to draw on the thoughts of Urpo Harva, philosopher and professor. He had a long and significant career, especially as a developer of the academic field of adult education. His book *Etiikka* (Ethics), published in 1958, remains strikingly relevant. The views presented in it still

feel fresh and highly applicable. Indeed, Harva's entire literary output has maintained its philosophical and pedagogical significance across the decades.

From the perspective of the idea of an "age of ethicality," the key concepts that emerge are duty, consequence, and the actual moment of decision. But first, it is appropriate to highlight Harva's succinct characterisation of the starting point of practical philosophy, and simultaneously of ethics. He references (1958, p. 13) the views of Nicolai Hartmann in posing the following three core questions:

1. What can a human being know?
2. What must a human being do?
3. What may a human being hope for?

Harva continues along Hartmann's line of thinking and identifies the second item as the fundamental ethical question. It simultaneously reveals a kind of human inquiry that underlies the essential nature of practical philosophy: mere cognitive understanding is no longer sufficient. Ethics thus rejects mere theory and an emphasis on pure "what is." Instead, it leans toward a mode of existence that dares to say what ought to be. Of course, something must first exist in order for a person to know what is essential or necessary. (See *ibid.*, pp. 13–14.)

In his classic work *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant writes:

"All the interests of my reason (both speculative and practical) converge in the following three questions:

1. What can I know?
2. What ought I to do?
3. What may I hope for?

The first question is purely speculative. [...]

The second question is purely practical. [...]

The third question – namely that if I now do what I ought to do, what then may I expect – is both practical and theoretical, in that the practical only serves as a guideline for answering the theoretical, and in its highest form, the speculative question." (Kant, 2013, p. 457)

Professor of social pedagogy Juha Hämäläinen, has written an excellent introduction to the Finnish translation of Kant's *Pedagogy*. He summarizes the above Kantian thoughts in a particularly incontestable way: "The first question is answered by epistemology, the second by ethics, and the third can be reflected upon based on how the second is answered. [...] The will can rightfully choose only that which reason, independent of desire, recognizes as worth pursuing." (Hämäläinen, 2022, p. 32.)

To deepen this characterization, I will return to Professor Harva's distinguished work Ethics. This is necessary for constructing applicable developments. Harva's line of reasoning proceeds as follows.

In deontological ethics, the highest norm guiding all action is the observance of duty. In this view, emotions must not serve as guides for human behaviour. The only motive for an action is the fact that the action *must* be done. Considering its effects is entirely unnecessary. The notion of *must* is also linked to freedom: a person may do something because they must do it. In this way, the individual frees themselves from the yoke of an emotional burden and ceases the constant pursuit and search for happiness. The person breaks free from the chains of unfreedom: they choose to the path toward the self-illuminating glow of freedom. (See Harva, 1958, pp. 55–61; 1980, pp. 29–31.)

If an act is examined from the viewpoint of consequentialist or utilitarianist ethics, the only meaningful factor is the actual outcome of the action. Instead of talking about a consequence, the term outcome is also often used. A good act produces something valuable, and a bad act results in something without value. Only the end result matters.

In this context utilitarianism is also generally mentioned, according to which a good act inevitably results in benefit or usefulness. This doctrine of utility can take on varying tones depending on different emphases of significance. Sometimes, pleasure or the pursuit of pleasure is regarded as useful. A hedonistically useful action is capable of producing pleasure either solely for the actor themselves or also for others. Thus, one can speak of individualistic hedonism and social hedonism.

Another interesting element related to consequentialist ethics is the pursuit of happiness. A good deed generates happiness. For this reason, the mode of thought is called eudaimonism, or the doctrine of happiness. In accordance with the previous section, even the realization of happiness can be divided into two levels: the pure pursuit of one's own happiness refers to individualistic or egoistic eudaimonism, in which the happiness of others, fellow beings, is totally disregarded. If, on the other hand, the goal of action is set as the happiness of other people, then the appropriate term is social or altruistic eudaimonism. Therefore, happiness can be actualised both within the individual and in society. If happiness is understood as the experience of sensory pleasures, eudaimonism turns into hedonism. (See Harva, 1958, pp. 42–43; 1980, pp. 31–32; also Harva 1954; 1957; 1978, pp. 67–69; 1983.)

The following diagram outlines the problematic of ethics in our time in a compact and comparative form. It also highlights the significance of the moment of decision: the interweaving of past, present, and future. In the application section, the heuristic value of this structure will be explored and developed in greater depth. (See also Itkonen, 2010; 2012a; 2012b.)

Past	Present moment	Future
Self-loyalty		Self-disloyalty
Obligation, duty		Outcome, consequence
Principle		Compliance, catering to external influence
Voice of interiority		Rejection of voice of interiority
Internal ethics		Ethics dictated or imposed by the community
	Utilitarianism	
	Hedonism	
	Doctrine of happiness	

*Diagram: Ethics and Temporality.*



Photo 4. Luttila School.

### ***The wayfarer in school land***

On his philosophical journey of ethical reflection, the wayfarer plays a dual role:

- Inclined toward deontology, he is the *Principled Wayfarer* (PW).

- When emphasizing the significance of teleology, he appears as the *Outcome-Oriented Wayfarer* (OW).

According to this division, each role can take turns expressing a well-reasoned view on a current school-related issue. At the end, they (or the same person in two roles) jointly reflect on the possible causes and consequences of dismantling an important educational institution. Even then, the goal is not to reach perfect consensus. What matters more is the diversity of ethical perspectives. It is now time to present some selected examples.



Photo 5. Puurtila School.

**Photos 4 and 5.** Luttila School and Puurtila School. Which is more important: a long-standing tradition or a fresh future? Should the schools be preserved or closed down? If they are shut down – and perhaps even demolished – what will be irretrievably lost? If a new school is not built, what kind of opportunity might be missed? Which decision would benefit a sufficient number of people? Does happiness have any relevance in this situation? What things are truly valuable in the broader picture? And what does disvalue mean? What kind of decision would be most justified in terms of the ideal of education, and why?

There is an abundance of questions. What do the discussants have to say?

**PW:** "My duty is to listen to the voice of my inner being and to remain faithful to my own essence. That must be the unwavering principle guiding my actions. Otherwise, it ceases to be a principle. Both Luttila and Puurtila Schools must be preserved, and teaching must continue there. This shall be my opinion in all situations. I assume my view will be opposed on a multiplicity of pretexts. Nevertheless, I will not change my way of thinking. This is therefore my unchanging answer to the question of what I ought to do. I must preserve the heritage of past generations and honour the cultural achievements already in existence. If I do so, I may hope that a sufficient number of people will agree with me. Preserving history, after all, would benefit a very large group of people. Future students too would thank us for it. And the Luttila School wall clock would no longer count the hours of destiny. It would tick away the hours of smiles. And the impressive bridge spanning Komminselkä could be called the bridge of civilisation, as it would guide wayfarers to the cultural refuge of Puurtila School. If the new Kankku School were not needlessly built, there would remain a beautiful forest for people to walk through and find peace. This is what the voice of my inner being urges me to do. My decision was made long before this moment. The sense of duty emerges from the past, and its guidance must be sought and followed in all future situations. One must learn not to care about consequences. Ethical action is not really that complicated."

**OW:** "I completely disagree. Only the correct outcome matters. The community's view is far more important than my own opinion. I don't need to believe in every goal. In every situation, I make sure that my decisions achieve the collectively agreed-upon goal. That's the only thing that matters, as I stated at the beginning of my reply. And this is not pandering or currying favour with an external authority. This is politics and collective decision-making. It's a question of social action. Luttila and Puurtila Schools must be closed. In other words, the new Kankku School must absolutely be built. The old institutions have served us well in their time. Now they are schools of the past, and they must make way for the future. They can no longer serve the attentive and informed citizens of tomorrow. A new era demands new ways of studying and new learning environments. The era of classrooms and desks has come to the end of its existential path. The disappearance of a small part of the forest is not such a terrible thing either. There will still be more than enough forest left for people to roam through all year round. My duty, therefore, is to ensure the construction of Kankku School. That way, I can be sure that students will acquire sufficient skills needed for the future. The dark shadow on the wall of Luttila School is a symbol of dystopia, a nightmare of the future. A future without Kankku School would signal the superficiality of contemporary civilization and a halt in progress. Puurtila School appears to be an anachronism: a relic of yesterday placed awkwardly in the present. Thus, I dare to hope for the realisation of a viable cultural future. In short, I must do everything I can to bring about the outcome that feels right. Only such action embodies the ideal of truly lived ethicality. That is something that I too must not forget."

There follows an intertextual section: the researcher now refers to his actual self, his textual personas and his own writing. One more expressive photo is needed to carry this out.



Photo 6. The Last Days of the Lyseo.

**Researcher** (i.e., PW and OW together with the writer): "This snapshot depicts the beginning of the end, a nightmare, a horror vision of the future. By what ethical standard can the destruction of a venerable institution of learning be considered a moral act? The act is utilitarian in the sense that it causes sorrow to the greatest number of people. I would call it unethical, a doctrine of misfortune, and an inverted hedonism, i.e., the production of distress. Or perhaps someone derives pleasure from witnessing the extent of the sadness caused to others. But I do not wish to believe in such an interpretation. Therefore, I shall leave that matter with just this brief mention.

The ruins of the Lyseo can be compared to the nearby garbage bin. Both suggest something entirely unnecessary, something out of place in the present. The past comes to signify disvalue. The future, by contrast, means value. The past is dispensable. Only the fulfilment of a future utopia, an idealized dream, is important. It is both a duty and an ideal goal. So now, without shame, I claim that we are dealing

with both a doctrine of misfortune and a producer of sorrow. I shall briefly reflect further on the matter.

Anti-eudaimonism is, indeed surprisingly, altruistic in tone. As I mentioned earlier, I leave aside the hedonistic dimension altogether. When familiar features disappear from a landscape, people feel distress. At the same time in fact, a great many memories vanish – both personal and collective recollections of the past. A part of lived life disappears from the world permanently. The sorrow born from that loss connects people. When the Lyseo faced its final days, the decision-makers enacted the idea of a doctrine of misfortune. I am not quite sure whether they should be congratulated for that.

The front part of the schoolyard was turned into a parking lot. At the back of the square, trees and flowers were planted. In this way, a field was created where insects also thrive. Thus arose a trendy “insect hotel”. Pupils were replaced by pollinators. This is the positive side of an otherwise depressing outcome. Even I, as a harsh critic of our times, must admit this. For in that transformation, the world gained a unique form of beauty – and certainly at least a fragment of happiness.” (See also Itkonen 2021, pp. 46–49.)

### **Closing words**

The wayfarer’s current journey in school land has come to an end. It is time for some kind of summary or concluding reflection. Professor Rapola’s words of wisdom elegantly capture the essence of both my musings and observations on my contemporaries.

“Culture is thought of in many ways and seen in many forms, but on one thing we should all agree: culture always includes the idea of continuous progress. Sometimes, however, we are overcome by the feeling that the pace is so dizzying that the journey is deflected onto entirely new tracks. People speak of cultural crises. But we must keep up, no matter what is left behind, or so we think. We cling to a fundamentally altered worldview, to new speed records, to a secular ideal of education, to a new poem. Yet a dismissive attitude toward the past is shortsighted thinking, it is thoughtlessness. The past has not ceased to exist merely because its most visible manifestations lie under contemporary coverings. After every shooting star fades, we are reminded again and again that Mars and Venus continue to orbit nearby along their steady paths.” (Rapola, 1965, p. 19.)

What has vanished from the present has not been erased from the world. Memories matter. In them dwell the past and the life of former days. This is a fact that each of us should respect.

Farewells are best left in visual form. Let the final image serve as a time postcard, a memento of the journey.



**Photo 7.** Joutenlahti School. School activities have ended. Part of the building collapsed and was demolished. Already decades ago, apartment blocks reduced the size of the yard. The train still runs alongside the school. Along the tracks, time and culture have passed by an institution of learning. Is this a crisis of cultural ideals? Let each decide for themselves. In any case, today's mediated worldview is here now, valuing speed and digitality. Yet the days of yesteryear still exist. Often hidden, sometimes visible. Not everything needs to be reinvented, though it is often imagined so. And now the train whistles. There, in the window, the school land wayfarer waves.

The author thanks everyone for their company on the journey.

### Note

The original idea changed and perhaps was even slightly refined as the investigation progressed. It became more multifaceted, which is why the length and significance of the captions vary. In only some of the images does the caption correspond to a spoken statement. The layout and relationship between images and captions also take on different forms. In other words, the essay's appearance aims to express its ideal mode of existence (as promised in the foreword). The reader only gains a complete picture of the essay's structure once they have thoroughly engaged with the text.

English translation by Glyn Hughes

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### **Picture sources**

Photographs 1–7. Private collection. Photographer M. Itkonen. Held by the author.