# "Subjectification": Biesta's Strong Link to Education

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In his essay, Gert Biesta's stated goal is to "make a case for the weakness of education," which he sees as a weak connection between educational "inputs" and educational "outcomes." His argument is that "the weakness of education is actually something that belongs to education and is proper to it," with the concomitant risk that "if we fail to acknowledge the fundamental weakness of education [that is, the weak link between teaching and learning] we run the risk of forgetting what may well matter most in our educational endeavors." Biesta wants to make his case by focusing on what he identifies as one function of education, which he calls "subjectification" — the other two being "qualification" and "socialization."

The "problem with humanism" and Emmanuel Levinas's "ethics of subjectivity" have preoccupied Biesta for some time, and he has discussed them at length in several publications.[1] Consequently, in this short response to Biesta's "On the Weakness of Education," I will focus on what he sets as the foundation to his argument, that is, "subjectification."

Biesta defines "subjectification" as the "opposite of socialization," and stresses that it enables us to acknowledge "the uniqueness of each individual human being." This concern with uniqueness is precisely why Biesta makes an excellent choice in using Levinas to argue his point. To quote only one of the many affirmations of Levinas's: "The Other as other is not an alter ego: the Other is what I myself am not…because of the Other's very alterity."[2] However, we must note that, although uniqueness and subjectivity are central themes for Levinas, "subjectification" (or *subjectivation* in French) is a term Levinas hardly uses. In *Otherwise Than Being*, Levinas offers subjectification as a synonym for "the very hypostasis of a subject…of an ex-ception,"[3] and in *Proper Names*, in contrast to Martin Buber, he uses it to emphasize the importance of separation in the *I-Thou* relation: "Man…is also a separate being. He accomplishes that isolation in a process of subjectification [*subjectivation*] that is not just the recoil from the word *Thou*."[4] Other (rare) uses of "subjectification" in Levinas's books (not his texts) are in his translators' introductions.[5]

Subjectification is a term that has gained popularity in the post-postmodern phase, yet, it has been "pervasively underexamined."[6] Here I would like to consider several problems inherent in the concept of subjectification. Seeking uniqueness for each individual presents a paradox that troubled Levinas: at the moment of the encounter, do not the I, the Other, and their relation "inevitably acquire universal meanings"?[7] Adriann Peperzak argues the possibility of perceiving "the encounter of two or more persons" as the relation of "two or more *equal and similar instances of a universal class or genus of being*."[8] After *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas addressed what he called this "fundamental problem," with regard in particular to the inescapability from the "universal discourse." He wrote about the limits inherent in

language, which is "ancillary and thus indispensable": "Language permits us to utter, be it by betrayal, this *outside of being*, this *ex-ception* to being, as though [the] being's other were an event of being."[9] It is in this attempt to escape the "language of ontology," writing about "the otherwise than being," that Levinas developed his distinction between the "saying" and the "said."[10]

Another problem inherent in "subjectification" emerges in what Levinas identifies as the "insistence to be," when the individual's "right-to-be" becomes problematic.[11] "Being-there," says Levinas, may also mean "usurping" someone else's place in the world. Absorbed in its "insistence to be" absolutely unique, distinct from "the Other [as being] what I myself am not,"[12] the individual, sustained by its "instinct of preservation," perseveres in its "adventure to be" as if it were what it is meant to be, as if it were "its meaning."[13] In this insistence, in this "concern" to be, Levinas sees a violence, even a "savagery," in this struggle to affirm oneself "without regard, without care" for the Other.[14] Out of this line of reflection, Levinas developed his notion of *dés-intér-essement* (dis-inter-estedness), and his concept of *il y a* (there is). To emerge from the *il y a*, the individual must renounce the hegemony of his or her "I." And therein lies the paradox. Levinas distinguished this coming out of being through the encounter with the face of the Other from the coming out of being made possible through knowledge, and called it "sociality…a means of coming out of being, otherwise than through knowledge."[15] It is in this rupture of indifference, this concern for the other, that ethics emerges, that surges the ethical event.

In contexts of racism and the status of minorities, both of which are prevalent in education, the concept of subjectification is particularly problematic, and even "damaging,"[16] when individuals who are recognized to possess subject status, and who are respected as unique, are nevertheless treated as if they had no objective worth. David Schraub argues that subjectification stands in opposition to what Charles Taylor calls "the politics of recognition," which extends beyond the simple survival of a subordinated group, and also requires that "their *worth*…[be] acknowledge[d]."[17] Leslie Green writes: "people may…[not] see themselves as something desired, wanted, or useful at all, even as they retain their standing as civic subjects, applicants, supplicants, users or consumers. They become, to coin a term, *subjectified*."[18] Three arguments have been raised against subjectification when discussing the needs of minorities: (1) While trying to acknowledge the uniqueness of diverse identities based on race, gender, age, and so on, the uniqueness of each individual is erased, and subsumed to the totalizing characteristics set for the group with which they are identified. (2) In a racialized and classed society, the dominant groups' attitudes play a paramount role as they contribute to the construction of the Other's self-image,[19] and "one becomes a self-identified ego only through interaction in which one experiences oneself *as* a self by being mirrored in the eyes of others."[20] (3) Even assuming that the Other develops a sound sense of his or her own subjectivity independently, and enjoys his or her own autonomy, the fact still remains that members of the dominant group need to overcome their own subjectifying attitudes toward the Other.[21]



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By the end of his essay, Biesta has not addressed what he called, in his introduction, the "weakness" of education, that is, the "weak link between teaching and learning." However, in his conclusion, he returns to his concern for "weak education," but, following his argument based on subjectification, he shifts to a concern about "reach[ing] the singularity of the subject" and developing an education that would foster "any encounters or experiences that have the potential for singularizing our students."[22]

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1. For example, Gert Biesta, "Levinas and Moral Education," in *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 2000*, ed. Lynda Stone (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2001); Gert Biesta, "Who Is There? Finding the Other in the Self," in *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 2007*, ed. Barbara S. Stengel (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2007); and Gert Biesta, "Pedagogy with Empty Hands," in *Levinas and Education: At the Intersection of Faith and Reason*, ed. Denise Egéa-Kuehne (London: Routledge, 2008).

2. Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other and Additional Essays*, trans. Robert Cohen (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 83.

3. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being and Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague, The Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), 17. See also Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, (The Hague, The Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978), 65–85. For an analysis of hypostasis, see Clarence Joldersma, "The Importance of Enjoyment and Inspiration for Learning from a Teacher," in *Levinas and Education*, ed. Egéa-Kuehne, 45–51.

4. Emmanuel Levinas, *Proper Names*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996), 35; and Seán Hand, ed., *The Levinas Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 74. The translators of Michel Foucault's 1984 interview with Gilles Barbadette and André Scala used "subjectivization": "I will call subjectivization the procedure by which one obtains the constitution of a subject, or more precisely, of a subjectivity which is of course only one of the given possibilities of organization of a self-consciousness." See "The Return of Morality," trans. Thomas Levin and Isabelle Lorenz, in *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977–1984*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman (London: Routledge, 1988), 253.

5. For example, Michael B. Smith, in Emmanuel Levinas, *Outside the Subject*, trans. Michael B. Smith (London: Athlone, 1993), xxvii.

6. David Schraub, "Racism as Subjectification," (2008), 4, 10, http://ssrn.com/abstract=1032263.

7. Adriann Peperzak, *To the Other* (West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 1993), 136.

8. Ibid., 135 (emphasis added).

9. Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 6 (emphasis in original).

10. Ibid., 5–9.

11. Especially in Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, trans. Michael B. Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); and Emmanuel Levinas, "The Meaning of Meaning," in *Outside the Subject*, 90–95.

12. Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 83.

13. Emmanuel Levinas, Entre Nous*: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 10.

14. Ibid.

15. Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 62.

16. Schraub, "Racism as Subjectification," 4.

17. Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), 25, 64 (emphasis in original).



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18. Leslie Green, "Pornographies," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 8, no. 1 (2000), 46 (emphasis in original).

19. See Taylor, "Politics of Recognition," 66.

20. G.W.F. Hegel, quoted in Drucilla Cornell, "Toward a Modern/Postmodern Reconstruction of Ethics," *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 133, no. 2 (1985), 361 (emphasis in original).

21. Schraub, "Racism as Subjectification," 9.

22. In his response to Richard Shusterman at the 2007 meeting of the Philosophy of Education Society, Biesta asked a very relevant question here: whether education should "be an *affirmation of the self* or…an *interruption of the self*." See Biesta, "Who Is There?" 45 (emphasis in original).



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