

Affect, Trust, and Dignity: Ontological Possibilities and Material Consequences for a Philosophy of Educational Resonance

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INTRODUCTION

This essay articulates a philosophy of resonance in education, from some of its theoretical possibilities through their material consequences. Contemporary understandings in educational philosophy have a tendency to utilize ocular metaphors, epistemological constructions that provide *frames* for *seeing* the world. There are at least the following three difficulties with such a reliance on the ocular. First, they are easily interrupted by nonocular metaphors. While this may seem to be a rather surface concern, it points to a deep philosophical set of problems. For example, what happens when the *augenblick*, a construct around which much philosophizing has been accomplished, is pressed slightly to become a “blink of an ear”?¹ This move not only questions the veracity of ocular-centric constructions from blinks to texts — for what does it say about an idea if it falls apart by shifting senses — but it also presses at the feasibility of framing, its inherently bounded nature as well as the large number of possibilities excluded by its gaze.

Second, the sonic provides another avenue for wonder. Sound is omnipresent and questions of hearing or listening are as much about physical anatomy as they concern sociocultural constructs about what sounds can mean. Unlike sight that is necessarily directional and constantly interrupted (for example, by blinking), sound is omnidirectional, creating a context in which focus requires a particular kind of attentive filtering rather than a reframing or panning directionality.

Finally, sound is and always has been. Mediated, manipulated, lost, and found. Moreover, there is as deep a history of relationships among science, medicine, philosophy, and the aural that is often overlooked.² Reason is not necessarily separate from resonance nor, as scholars in sound studies document, is the sonic apolitical, ahistorical, or otherwise distanced from questions of positionality and power.³ Sound, then can be understood as a strong means for philosophizing. An aspect of experience that has deep ties to the onto-epistemo-genic, from premodern to the post-nexts, that can offer pathways to queering the pitch of everyday understandings.

The ideas presented in this essay will undoubtedly seem familiar to those with knowledge of the works of such philosophers as William James, Walter Benjamin, and John Dewey. It will be similarly familiar to those with an interest in non-Western spiritualities and philosophies, understandings that have no need for postmodern, poststructuralist, or current movements of the “post-next,” for there never was the error of constructing false binaries between objects, ideas, ecologies, and the like.⁴

Where this work breaks new ground is in enunciating what it might mean to construct an educational philosophy around the ear, sound, and music rather than the eye, sight, and visual metaphors. In keeping with the interdisciplinarity of sound

philosophizing, this essay draws from multiple fields, each of which are in turn also interdisciplinary: sound studies, sensory studies, affect theory, and curriculum studies, fields that can be understood to reside at the complex nexus of philosophy, social theory, and materiality. Of primary importance are recent discussions about sound, vibration, and resonance, and it is these works that serve as the foundation for most of the arguments made here. These understandings are then dis/placed against interpretations in the social and physical sciences to form an educational philosophy of resonance, possibilities that also speak to questions about contemporary educational policy and practice.⁵

VIBRATIONAL AFFECT: ONTOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDINGS AT THE INTERSECTION OF
PHYSICS, SOCIAL SCIENCE, AND SOUND

Working from what he characterizes as James's notion of "pulsed vectors of feeling" and his articulation of Baruch Spinoza's discussion of movements and "the potential of entities to affect and be affected," Steve Goodman argues for a "vibrational ontology," an understanding that "everything is in motion, is vibrating."⁶ To this idea, he adds the Spinozan notion that "a body is, not because it thinks, but because of its power to affect and be affected. And for Spinoza [and more contemporarily Maxine Greene], we do not yet know this power!"⁷ When placed alongside one another, these create a context in which not only the material but also the philosophical and theoretical are vibrating in ways that are constantly and consistently affecting and being affected by everything from ideas to ecologies. This construction echoes not only recent work in anthropology, such as Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's notion of the generative nature, for better and worse, of affective points of friction⁸ but also Melissa Greigg and Gergory J. Seigworth's discussion of affect as emergent "bloom spaces" of possibility.⁹

That everything is in motion is also an axiom that lies at the core of much of contemporary physics — nothing is still. Such motion has similarly been visualized at the intersection of complexity science and mapping, noted for its queerly somatic possibilities, and the ordinariness of its iteratively recursive nested layers in everyday experience has been sensuously documented. In short, from physics to social science, from the theoretical to the material, there is an understanding in many corners of contemporary thought and practice that all things vibrate. Of equal importance, these vibrations are what Brian Massumi calls "ontogenic,"¹⁰ processes of ontology, the movement of the affective.

Sound is vibrational, and the limits for its perception are embodied limitations of sensation. In this way, not only does sound interrupt many commonly held philosophical constructions, such as the discussion around the *augenblick*, for there is no blink of an ear,¹¹ but it also disrupts similarly common understandings about both perception and embodiment. There are vibrations that sound both below and above the human range of perception, the aural, the somatic, the intuitive and other aspects of the sensorium.¹²

Vibration, like sound, "radiates spherically from a sounding source,"¹³ a material manifestation that similarly calls into question philosophical understandings that are based on ocular metaphors and visual meanings. For example, as I have

argued elsewhere,¹⁴ the spatial limits for educational transactions are often more aural than visual. These spheres of vibration are literal fields of affect that, like an omnidirectional microphone, simultaneously vibrate and are vibrated by the nested ecologies in which they exist. While this understanding of fields is in many ways not dissimilar from Pierre Bourdieu's construction of the same name¹⁵ — the idea that people are affected by multiple layers of ideas, power, and culture — it is closer to Sherry Ortner's discussion of agency:

the way I envisage social agents, which is that they are always involved in, and can never act outside of, the multiplicity of social relations in which they are enmeshed. Thus while all social actors are assumed to "have" agency, the idea of actors as always being engaged with others in the play of serious games is meant to make it virtually impossible to imagine that the agent is free, or is an unfettered individual.¹⁶

On this multiplicity of social relations, Ortner's construction of agency can take one of two central forms: "enmeshed in relations of (would-be) solidarity" such as "friends, family, kin, spouses or partners ... and so forth" or "enmeshed within relations of power, inequality, and competition."¹⁷

This construction of relations and relatedness jives with Tsing's construction of global connections as productive, though not necessarily positive, frictions, the moments when one group is affected by another's affects and vice versa: "Instead of starting with the dichotomy between global force and local response, these methods show the importance of contingent and botched encounters in shaping both business-as-usual and its radical refusals.... Such fragments of varied schemes and travels and encounters do create a world of global connections."¹⁸ Similarly, as with aspects of John Dewey's (and Arthur Bentley's) discussion of transaction,¹⁹ and contemporary notions of physics, if everything vibrates than no-thing is unconnected or can be successfully decoupled from another. The difficulty with transaction, unlike Tsing's self-proclaimed poetically ethnographic study of destruction, is that there is largely not a politics (read: power and relations) of transaction. In addition, although both transaction and friction are certainly affective and sensual, both are often grounded in the ocular, and transaction more so than friction.

What construct, then, might encompass the wide range of possibilities of an ontology of vibrational affect? The answer that I propose here, and the one around which this essay is constructed, is the same that is used in sound studies, social theory, philosophy, social science, and the sciences: resonance.

ON RESONANCE: POSSIBILITIES BEYOND CONSONANCE, DISSONANCE, AND RELEVANCE

As I have written elsewhere, if everything vibrates, then everything resonates. Resonance is produced by the oscillation of vibration, the peaks and valleys of something in and out of phase with itself and its surrounding nested layers of ecology. According to this understanding of resonance, everything has an iterative and recursive relationship at some level to itself and things not-itself. Rephrased slightly, every-thing resonates with itself and other kinds of things in ways that, while not predictive, are usually patterned, patterns that are in turn repeated so that they might be recognizable in kind. In this way, resonances can help identify possibilities of pattern while avoiding deterministic assumptions them. Resonance, therefore,

simultaneously denotes a particular kind of internal relations and the relationship between internal and external relations.

Musically speaking, resonances are often presented in relation to the constructions of consonance and dissonance. Rather than walk down this road of how a sound relationship is defined as consonant or resonant, particularly as is often done utilizing Western art music²⁰ and its relationship to pure harmonies first ascribed by the church in the Middle Ages, I wish here to note that consonance and dissonance are sociocultural constructions. What is dissonant in one set of musical understandings can be consonant in another set of musical understandings, the way a flat seventh can be dissonant in Western art music and consonant in the blues and many forms of jazz for example. To push at this point further, even jazz, with its similarly limited set of twelve possible tones, as compared to the so-called “microtones” of Carnatic (South Indian) or *musqi-e assil* (Persian) “classical” musics, often has tones that one is to play or not play in order to be consonant or dissonant with a given chord structure. Where resonance is inevitable, consonance and dissonance are constructed.

Philosophically speaking, affects and thoughts resonate. They resonate within and between systems: embodied/material, theoretical/discursive, self/other, object/ecology, feeling/thought, and so on. The ontogenic and epistemogenic are similarly processes of resonance. History and culture are resonant as are ordinary events and experiences. What is sensible makes sense, its processes of sensation and signification, through resonance. Resonance then bridges the gap in human experience between unique individuality and the sociocultural contexts that inform that individualism — resonance must exist both within and outside of the self.

This raises an important question: what isn't resonance? The answer to this question is also found in constructions of resonance. Simply because something resonates does not mean that a given idea, object, ecology, process, or ideal is resonant with either everything or even most things. For example, the work of an ethnographer can be conceptualized as an effort to better understand how local actors' sense-making resonates with other local actors as well as with nested layers of sociocultural norms, values, and processes.²¹

Additionally, if everything resonates, then one must attend to how such resonances might be resonant within any person and between any person and any other object, idea, ideal, feeling, process, or ecology. If resonance occurs within and between this endless array of possibilities, then each person should be trusted to know at some level their own sense of resonance and what is resonant to herself. Each person should therefore also be given the dignity of having such a positionality. This is not to say that resonance is without politics, position, or power, quite the opposite. It is by giving a person the trust and dignity to enunciate in some fashion (intention, action, verbalization, and so on) what they find to be resonant that a given resonance can be strongly critiqued. Only when a resonance is respected can it be fully engaged. In this way, rather than dismiss an act of hate speech as unintentional, trusting that certain racist ideas and ideals, for example, resonate with the speaker and giving the speaker the dignity of having those ideas, provides an ethical foundation for strong critique. Even if a given idea, for example, can be primarily attributed to a lack of

experience or understanding, the speaker, at that moment, resonates with particular racist views. Resonance is therefore not apolitical but is instead necessarily political, an alignment between self and world according to particular sets of processes, feelings, ideas, and ideals. Resonance does not remove power or position but instead emphasizes both.

Given this construction, resonance has particular advantages over relevance as a means for considering ideas and is equally valuable for the consideration of affect and process. Relevance is the consensus process through which various kinds of resonance are deemed not to be of value or where particular kinds of resonance are adjudicated and rendered valuable. As Jacques Rancière has argued, processes of consensus tend to form limiting, closed systems through which particular people, groups, ideas, ideals, and processes become ethical at the expense of others' values, processes, ideas, and ideals.²²

Where relevance is a consensus perspective that seeks to understand the world by valuing some ideas at the expense of others, resonance accepts that all ideas are possible and provides a space for critique. As will be further discussed in the sections below, where possibilities of and for resonance are more practically applied to education, deploying the category of relevance is a possibly dangerous and damaging act. For example, there is a long history in schooling in the United States of marginalizing people of color through discussions of relevance.²³

What might such understandings of resonance yield when applied to education? How would a philosophy of resonance aid conceptualizing educational processes, possibilities, ideas, and ideals? As briefly alluded to above, what might be some material consequences for a philosophy of resonance in education? The following section addresses these and other similar questions concerning a philosophy of resonance in education and its material consequences for educational actors.

AN EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY OF RESONANCE:

THEORETICAL AND MATERIAL POSSIBILITIES AND CONSEQUENCES

A lack of stillness has wide-ranging implications for education in theory and practice. The notion that everything is in flux even with itself challenges many contemporary notions of education. It pushes back at the possibility of stable learning objectives, ever-present standards, lesson plans, grading, and all other aspects of educational experiences where there is a lack of fluidity. It reinserts the significance of the ontogenic and interrupts linear and sequential epistemologies that often serve as the foundation for contemporary American education, itself a resonance of over 100 years of ends-means, product-over-process constructions of teaching and learning.

Learning objectives are a particularly illustrative example of this tendency: they are set before lessons begin and are met when students arrive at the prescribed goal. As such, learning objectives form "known information questions"²⁴ that often serve to circumvent open-ended educational experiences and student voice, forming a context in which a multiplicity of possible answers is narrowed to a singular measurably correct one. Similarly, learning objectives often lead to a process through which students continually learn that learning is more about getting it "right" (and

that there is a right) than understanding or inquiry, two areas in which often divergent fields of educational psychology, philosophy, and sociology all agree are in the best interest of students and learning.

Additionally, lesson plans are closed sets of teaching and learning where the educator works to lead students through a series of steps towards a prescribed end. Not only is this an idea that has in many ways remained the soul of education for the past 100 years, it is a system that often works to reify understandings of nondominant groups (that is, students of color, poor students, and girls) as less academically capable than their whiter, more wealthy, male peers. What is the need for the continuation of this system of education in a digital age where known-information answers are not only readily available but also constantly changing? Why is it that traditionally marginalized students receive more static information to “help” them learn “basic” information than their less marginalized peers?

That everything vibrates also has material consequences for bodies in space, children, and youth in classrooms. At all ages, rather than create spaces that better accommodate the number of students who spend their days there, students are often asked to accommodate school spaces in varying acts of stillness. From a resonance perspective, however, such stillness is not only impossible but also unethical, asking something to be what it can never be, and children to fulfill what they can never truly do. Somewhat ironically, teachers often move around the room and are encouraged to do so both to improve their pedagogy and, in some circles, also improve their health. Why is this not also the case for all students in general and children specifically?

Ontogenically speaking, as intimated above in this section, affects and ideas resonate in education within and across all other possible boundaries. From this perspective, there can be no separation between (1) school and “real life” (for students, teachers, or student teachers), (2) between any individual school actors’ understandings of self, others, processes, ecologies, feelings, and ideas, or (3) how any individual school actor is affected or otherwise impacted by the same diverse and open-ended possibilities. Again, resonance is therefore not apolitical, without power. Some ideas resonate more strongly than others (measurable goals and objectives) and their presence requires constant maintenance. Yet everyone does not have the ability to maintain a given way of being or knowing equally. However, as social scientists have strongly argued, a lack of power is not the same as a lack of agency, and the inability to overly impact one’s context is not the same as an inability to feel or think deeply in ways that can resist, reject, reify, or otherwise engage both self and context(s). Echoing a point raised in the previous section, if all ways of being and knowing, ideas, ideals, or processes might resonate with any given person, then each person should be given the trust and dignity of that resonance.

Because everything resonates in formal or informal educational contexts, no person, her feelings, or ideas can be irrelevant regardless of the lesson at hand. Rather than being off-task, a construction that is teacher-dependent and a way that adults articulate their resonances, resonance creates the space for the possibility that a student is deeply engaged in something, a set of possibilities that includes learning. This is not a call for a radical individualism (every resonance for herself), a call for learners

over teachers, or an argument against the importance of teachers, schools or pedagogy. It is a call to acknowledge the multitude of possibilities for studenting and learning. Resonance points to a path through the enactment of educational ideas that allows for those outside the culture of power to learn its rules, tools, and knowledge. For those whose ways of being and knowing that conflict with educational norms, values, feelings, and processes, it also creates a trajectory for their differences in resonance to be approached with a trust that such differences are possible and with the dignity of resonating in that fashion. In addition, because resonances can occur above and below the range of human perception (regardless of its definition or boundaries), it also foregrounds the whole person: feelings, sensations, and cognitive processes as well as intentions and intuitions and other such possible resonances.

If one has the dignity and trust of internal and external resonance, one must then also have responsibility for one's actions. In education, this is a responsibility of teaching, studenting, pedagogy, learning, leading, administrating, parenting, and all other such educational transactions. Such responsibility also creates a context in which particular kinds of accountability in education are at best unhelpful and at worst deeply unethical. It is one thing to take a snapshot of a moment in time, quite another to mistake that snapshot for a whole rather than a partial understanding, and something else to evaluate that snapshot as if it were indicative of a whole. By way of comparison, this limited parts-to-whole (not to be confused with debates in literacy that utilizes the same language) means for conceptualizing human understandings has long since been cast aside in interpretive studies of people in general and education specifically. An understanding that one can "know" a "whole" culture or society or gain a picture of a complete whole from examining a small portion of its parts — or even that there is any kind of singular, shared, universal whole — has been debunked since the early to mid-1970s and is now viewed as a turn-of-the-last-century growing pain at best, often more accurately conceptualized as a particular kind of colonialist, racist, sexist, Western, Anglo (and so on) hubris. Philosophy, too, has long questioned a singularity of understanding as has mathematics and many of the sciences, certainly in a contemporary context of the last thirty years. A philosophy of resonance, then, provides (1) a means for recognizing how ideas and power combine to reify particular sets of understandings over others and the necessary space to denounce such beliefs and (2) a fluid, emergent, bloom-space of infinitely morphing frameworks and resulting pools of possibility for what might count as educational ways of knowing and being.

Aesthetically political and politically aesthetic, ontogenic and epistemogenic, a philosophy of resonance emphasizes responsibility over accountability, flux over stability, open over closed systems of knowledge, and inquiry over known-information questions. It suggests, somewhat paradoxically, that the greater the dissonance in a learning ecology the greater the opportunity for resonance; the more room for diversity (of feeling, thought, process), the greater the likelihood that a student will resonate with a given idea, ideal, or process. It also speaks to the importance of intentionality and intuition for all educational actors, while providing the means for strong critique.

Educational resonance is an open system of affect in which there is no separation between the resonator and the resonant. Afforded the trust and dignity of internal and external resonance, each dependent on the other, creates a context in which students must be respected, encouraged, and critiqued; where teachers should be given the space to educate as they understand their work to positively impact students and a similar space to be critiqued by others (especially) including students; and where teaching and learning are emergent activities. Resonance also underscores the political actions of choice and the operation of power. If all ideas are possible, resonance provides an opportunity for multiple roads to success and understanding while emphasizing curricular and pedagogical choice, this idea over that, this teaching tool over that. A philosophy of educational resonance regards how knowledge, feelings, and processes are vibrational affects that are connected and interconnected in expected and unexpected ways, understandings that are, in turn, dependent upon a constantly fluctuating transaction of resonances.

A philosophy of educational resonance is therefore an ontological challenge to the linear and sequential educational epistemologies that serve as the foundation for contemporary American education in both theory and practice. On one hand, educational resonance is itself resonant with scholars and traditions that argue that how one “is” is a central determinant in how and what one knows, the significance of ontologies and its role for determining epistemologies. On the other hand, resonance is a call for the epistemogenic, plastic (flexible) processes of knowing that operate in emergently iterative and recursive ways, an understanding that is also ontogenic in its acknowledgement that ideas affect and are affected by other ideas, affects, ecologies, processes, objects, and the like.

According to a philosophy of resonance, measuring people and systems according to static goals, objectives, and standards in equally static ways is inaccurate and unethical. Because nothing is still, regarding any-thing as static is asking the impossible. Evaluating anyone, particularly children and youth for whom change is learning at an accelerated rate (and what we want from educational processes), according to what they cannot possibly do (be still) is unethical.

It is a move to put together the two musical instructions that accompany Anna Julia Cooper’s *A Voice from the South by A Black Woman from the South*: soprano *obligato* and *tutti at libitum*.²⁵ *Obligato* [Obbligato] is a line of music that is to be played as written, an integral, significant, and essential aspect of the score. *Ad libitum* is often now expressed as “adlib” meaning expressed as one sees fit with less to no obligation to the score. As most know, soprano is one of the two female vocal parts in Western art music and *tutti* means as a group, together, all, pulling out all the stops on the organ. Cooper’s musical instructions are at once a call for her to be given the trust and dignity of intentional meanings and to work together so that all voices and processes are possible as the individuals see fit. It is a call not to relevance but instead to internal and external resonance. Soprano *obligato/tutti ad libitum*, individually significant/all together, strictly heard/open to interpretation, internal/external, 1892/2014, vibrationally affective, in flux, resonance.

1. See, for example, Seth Kim-Cohen, *In the Blink of an Ear: Towards a Non-Cochlear Sonic Arts* (New York: Continuum Press, 2009).
2. Viet Erlmann, *Reason and Resonance: A History of Modern Aurality* (Cambridge: Zone Books, 2010).
3. See Michael Bull and Les Back, *The Auditory Culture Reader* (Oxford: Berg Press, 2003) and Jonathan Sterne, *The Sound Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2012).
4. As is the case in many forms of Buddhism, for example.
5. I have raised several of these points elsewhere, most recently published in “Vibrational Affect: Sound Theory and Practice in Qualitative Research,” *Cultural Studies* $\leftarrow\rightarrow$ *Critical Methodologies* 13, no. 4: 257–262. (2013). In addition to raising decidedly new points, I have repurposed them towards previously otherwise directed ends for a more nuanced philosophical argument.
6. Steve Goodman, *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 83.
7. *Ibid.*, 101.
8. Anna Lowenhapt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).
9. Melissa Greigg and Gergory J. Seigworth, “An Inventory of Shimmers,” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, eds. Melissa Greigg and Gergory J. Seigworth, (Durham: Duke University Press), 12.
10. Brian Massumi, *Parables of the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 8.
11. Kim-Cohen, *In the Blink of an Ear*.
12. Goodman, *Sonic Warfare*.
13. Peter Price, *Resonance: Philosophy for Sonic Art* (New York: Atropos Press, 2011), 20.
14. See Walter S. Gershon, “Sound Curriculum: Recognizing the Field,” in *Thinking About and Enacting Curriculum in “Frames of War,”* Rahat Naqvi and Hans Smits, eds. (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012), 63–82 and Walter S. Gershon, “Embodied Knowledge: Sounds as Educational Systems,” *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing* 27, no. 2: 66–81.
15. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).
16. Sherry Ortner, *Anthropology and Social Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 130.
17. *Ibid.*, 130–31.
18. Tsing, *Friction*, 272.
19. John Dewey and Arthur Bentley. *Knowing and the Known* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1949).
20. “Western art music” is the term musicologists and other associated fields of music use to describe what is often commonly referred to as “classical music.”
21. See, for example, Karsten Paerregaard, “The Resonance of Fieldwork: Ethnographers, Informants and The Creation of Anthropological Knowledge,” *Social Anthropology* 10, no. 3: 319–334.
22. See Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Steve Cochran (London: Continuum, 2010).
23. See Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice for the South by a Woman from the South* (Xenia: Aldine Printing House, 1892) and Ann Gibson Winfield, *Eugenics and Education in America: Institutionalized Racism and the Implications of History, Ideology, and Memory* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007).
24. Hugh Mehan, “‘What Time Is It, Denise?’”: Asking Known Information Questions in Classroom Discourse,” *Theory into Practice* 18, no. 4: 285–294.
25. Cooper, *A Voice for the South by a Woman from the South*.