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TEACHING OTHERWISE*

ABSTRACT. In this paper I discuss some conditions for understanding teaching as an act of responsibility towards an other, rather than as an instrumental act identified through epistemology. I first put the latter into context through a critical reading of teaching as it is inscribed in humanistic discourses on education. Within these discourses, I explore how students are treated as objects of knowledge that reinforce the teacher's ego. I contend that the taking up of this position makes not only an ethical relation to the student impossible, but also disqualifies any type of meaningful social relation. Therefore I argue that teachers have to give up their position on the safe side of knowledge and participate in the time of risk when meeting the other means to take responsibility for that other from a position of vulnerability. Moreover, it is precisely because of this risk that teaching as an ethical relation becomes possible and where it begins to resound with poetry.

KEY WORDS: humanistic discourses, Levinas, responsibility, teaching, the other

One cannot love humanity one can only love people

Graham Greene

INTRODUCTION

In this paper¹ I will discuss some conditions for understanding teaching as an act of responsibility towards an other, as a special relationship between persons. A relationship whose ethical quality is revealed for the teacher by the question: have I the right to teach? The response to this question, so I will argue, provides little comfort to the teacher, for it cannot simply be answered by a simple yes or no, nor can it be answered in terms of laws and regulations or through an appeal to the discourse on professionalization;

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rather, as will be shown, the question itself opens up a space for moral consideration since it cannot end in any natural finality. It is a question that moves us away from a self-possessed, self-fulfilled legitimacy for teaching based in knowledge of the rules of the game of institutionalized teaching, and acknowledges a radical and necessary uncertainty as a condition for teaching. In this paper, I understand teaching as a relation whose existence does not depend on any institutionally predefined positions in a social/institutional space (i.e., through the power relation of a teacher teaching a student, or as an exclusively rational activity of teaching someone something), but as a relation that signifies an immediate ethicality in which no slipping away is possible, as an openness in which an exposure to an other is the condition for teaching as well as for the coming into being of moral subjects.

What I will discuss in the following is one possibility for rethinking the 'ground' of the concept of teaching by viewing it as a relation between human beings that is direct, open-ended and unpredictable. In order to do this I learn from Emmanuel Levinas's moral orientation to the other where responsibility is located within this space of unpredictability.²

In the first section I set the problem, which can be expressed briefly as the dehumanisation of the act of teaching through a common overemphasis on the rationality of knowledge. Here I argue that this rationality is inscribed within the very understanding of teaching that appears in humanistic discourses and that this inevitably leads to a view of teaching as instrumental. In the following sections I discuss the conditions for altering this understanding of teaching. In the final section I specifically discuss teaching as an ethical relation and suggest that teaching may be understood as a process in which an Ego is sobering up from its being-for-itself to being-for-the other. In this view, teaching is an awakening to humanity, a process through which moral subjects come into being.

TEACHING AS A CAUSAL RELATION AMONG THINGS

Education, generally, is intimately linked to ideas of progress and change which are endemic to conceptions of modern 'man' as the master of critical reason, enlightened and free to act out 'his' will (or the will

² What seems to be especially valuable with Levinas's approach to discussions of teaching is that it opens up a possibility to articulate, in a language of ethics rather than psychology or sociology, experiences common to teachers. A Levinasian ethics particularly speaks to the experience expressed by teachers is that there is something else that transpires in a classroom which matters for an adequate understanding of teaching as such, something which cannot be addressed through instrumental means.

of 'his' communities) for the good of humanity. More specifically, the concept of teaching in many educational theories is formed within the general discourse of modernity which carries with it such enlightenment ideas of humanity. In Usher and Edwards's (1994) words: "educational theory and practice is founded on the discourse of modernity and its self-understanding has been forged by that discourse's basic and implicit assumptions" (p. 2). Among those assumptions is the idea of a rational subject whose behaviour, grounded in reason, fulfils the Enlightenment ideals of individual freedom, progress and benevolent change exercised by a self-motivated, self-directing rational subject "capable of exercising individual agency" (Usher & Edwards, 1994, p. 2).

To become worthy of humanity, within the modernist view, everyone has to be taught the principles through which their self-realisation is made possible. The educator is a fundamental actor in this play, s/he is given the role of fostering individual agency: *one has to be taught in order to become a part of humanity, to become a self-fulfilled rational subject*. Teaching, then, in this 'humanistic discourse' on education is basically reduced to a rationale for delivering the 'secrets' of a pre-disclosed, idealized understanding of humanity, a humanity firmly based on rationality. Teaching the 'secrets' of humanity means to teach the necessary knowledge through which the subject becomes more fully human. According to such a discourse, it is through knowledge that subjects can enter into ethical relationships with one another; thus every ethical relationship is a result of knowledge rather than the other way around. Knowledge, in this view, is something which fills students up; it supposedly not only represents the pre-given world, which now appears to the student as knowable, but also gives the foundation upon which ethical human relationships can be built. Accordingly, the more knowledge we have, the more we can understand the world and the freer we will be in our agency in relation to other moral agents.

Conceptual knowledge is central to humanistic discourses in two ways. First, the aim of teaching tends to be primarily focused on developing in students certain conceptual representations of the world. It is understood that through such development the world, so to speak, appears for the student at a higher level of complexity and in a brighter light; it takes them closer to the Truth through which the world becomes transparent and explained. Secondly, not only is the world made transparent, but so too is humanity itself (and education often appeals to knowledge of what it means to be human through developmental and cognitive psychology).³

³ See, for example, Walkerdine's (1995) critique of Piaget's genetic epistemology. According to Walkerdine such genetic epistemology inevitably leads to a view of knowl-

The so-called ‘secret’ of humanity is then no longer secret, and teaching becomes the name for the effective management of this rationale for which the outcome is already given. The process of teaching is reduced to an instrumental act in relation to a pre-given good and becomes a means to an end, an end which is already in the possession of the teacher. In this security of knowing the end – what is good, what is truth – the teacher can safely rest.

To become a teacher, then, is to become a knower of things, both in relation to the subject knowledge and to the learner. The teacher has to have knowledge of the learner in order to enter into ‘appropriate’ relationships with her/him. The more a teacher knows about how the learner experiences the world the more the teacher can adjust the knowledge to be delivered in order to move the learner into what is, essentially, an abstracted and idealized humanity. Learning theories following developmental psychology therefore make perfect sense in such a discourse. For teachers, this knowing reduces the anxieties of living in the ‘mystery’ of existence, and allows them to enter into a world of secure and comforting meaning within a given society. Educating teachers, then, can end up being motivated by the reduction of anxieties through knowledge of the why, what, how, and to whom one teaches. To be a teacher is often understood as being on the safe side of knowledge.

But this ‘safety’, I would like to argue, is based on a non-human relation in which the subjects involved in the process of teaching are subordinated to the rationality inscribed in knowing the other. The relation between the teacher and the student becomes defined through this rationality. From the perspective of the teacher, the student is the other one must know something ‘about’ in order to ‘do’ something with him/her. From the perspective of the learner, s/he is reduced to a cluster of more or less developed concepts, to an ‘it’ that is not yet fully human. Therefore, the teacher as the already individualised rational agent is someone who exercises her/his freedom of the fulfilled I in order to make the student the same.

However, this relation has to be considered as a non-human relation dealing with the rational ordering of things, which in and of itself is a non-communicative, non-dialogical, mono-logical act where being, as something other than conceptualised through rationality, is excluded. If teaching is understood in such a context, it becomes an act in and of itself, defined through knowledge and rationality rather than through a relation to the other. It becomes seen only as an instrument, a tool, to mould students’

edge as that which follows a supposedly ‘natural’ development of conceptual structures within individuals; that is to say, it thereby reduces individuals to these structures (pp. 141–142). See also Walkerdine (1988).

learning. If the teacher in his/her 'safety' of knowing masters this rational instrument, then s/he masters a non-human relation within a space where nothing takes place outside of the already fulfilled Ego of the teacher. So what tends to be central in 'humanistic' discourses on teaching, at least the ones I would like to move beyond, is a non-human and non-relational conception of teaching. How then, can one think differently about teaching in order to take it beyond knowledge of people as things and make it more human?

BEYOND HUMANISTIC DISCOURSES ON TEACHING THERE IS THE OTHER

Pragmatism has delivered one answer to the question posed above, through its critique of any kind of metaphysical propositions as the basis for human relations. Humanism loses its meaning when it becomes metaphysical, that is, when it is supposed to be based on a concept of 'human nature' or 'human destiny' (cf. Rorty, 1991, 1980; Mulhall, 1997). That is, for humanism to become more human, it has to be understood as being based on relations between people and not on relations between ideas or things. Or, to take it a step further, it is the quality of an actual relation that is the marker of what is human. Pragmatism, at least in the words of Rorty, offers a shift from objectivity as the context for making rational knowledge of the world to solidarity among humans as a frame of reference for such knowledge. It brings us beyond the metaphysics inscribed in 'humanistic discourses on education' and makes relations between actual people a central concern. In my view, however, Rorty's suggestion does not go far enough because what still remains problematic for thinking differently about teaching is the centrality of knowledge and rationality in what Rorty offers.

For Rorty (1991), solidarity guarantees 'rational' knowledge by expanding the community of those who think like us. This is not only problematic because of his emphasis on communicative rationality as a guarantee for knowledge, but also because of his emphasis on how distinct individuals come to be collapsed into a "we" or "us". If we make the emphasis on knowledge as our starting point, as Rorty does, then to think differently about teaching only becomes a question of how to think differently about knowledge. But my intention in this paper is to think differently about teaching itself, and especially the ethical aspect of teaching.

Additionally, to have knowledge of how the other person thinks as a basis for human relations, whether or not it is through communicative rationality (which for Rorty it is), is to find oneself in the other and the

other in oneself; that is, it is to reduce otherness to sameness. It is to disregard the uniqueness of the other and in the other find that which is the same as in me. Seeing this commonality becomes crucial for defining social relationships and thus, for Rorty, finding common ground motivates the relation to the other.

The discursive turn in Rorty's project signifies an entering into the language of the other, or the other entering into my language, which is made possible by Reason upon which knowledge is supposedly grounded. That is, Reason, in language, is where this coincidence takes place. But again, Reason tends to be problematic as a basis for entering into an ethical relationship with the other since Reason is that which is stable, beyond specific subjectivities and passions, and becomes representative of an abstracted notion of the 'true inner life.' Moreover, since Reason is singular it is a non-dialogical concept; there is nothing outside of it. Consequently, there is "no one left with whom to communicate . . . Reason is like the silence of inner discourse" (Levinas, 1998, p. 141). Teaching as an act of Reason could be contained within a single soul in a single consciousness, it does not require any other.

However, if we want to focus on the ethical aspects of teaching, one thing needs to be made clear: that they ought to involve some kind of difference, some kind of dialogue, some kind of sociality, which would make interaction central. Unlike Rorty, though, this dialogue, sociality and interaction cannot be ruled by the telos of commonality and Reason. If teaching involves a relation between people and if this relation is to be understood in terms of knowledge it tends to be reduced to a non-human relationship where I and other are dissolved, imploded into the same.

This entering into the same through a non-dialogical understanding of teaching, into a single consciousness, might be called sociality, if sociality refers to "the unity of the multiple consciousnesses that have entered into the same thought in which their reciprocal alterity is suppressed" (Levinas, 1998, p. 141). But this understanding of sociality reduces the dialogical act to a bringing of someone into Reason in which alterity is suppressed. It consequently becomes violent in its erasure of the other, in its collapsing the other into the same. And if an ethical relation is only possible as a relation between two, or more generally, as a consequence of difference, then this collapse into the same prevents any possibility for a subject to enter into an ethical relation with the other within processes of teaching.

I would like to try to move beyond the centrality of knowledge and Reason as the prime frame of reference for talking about teaching since it tends to lead to an inevitable instrumentalism which excludes the ethical character of the relationships involved. It is not, of course, to abolish or

deny that knowledge is involved in teaching processes, which would come close to an absurdity, but to try to find the place for ethics within teaching itself. What makes teaching as a relation to an other possible in the first place?

SOCIALITY AND DIALOGUE IN PROCESSES OF TEACHING

Sociality should not be understood, I want to argue, as some kind of unity against which the positions of the student and the teacher would be stable. There is no common “measure or domain available for some sort of coincidence” of two parties, rather the I and You are absolutely different in relation to each other (cf. Levinas, 1998). It can even be said that there is no *and* possible between them, no binding together by a common sociality beyond the actual dialogue: “There is precisely because the You is absolutely other than the I that there is, between the one and the other, dialogue” (Levinas, 1998, p. 146). Dialogue as a characteristic of sociality is made possible by the facing of the other, I face you and you face me. In this instant of facing the other ethics begins. Levinas says: “insofar as within the immediacy of the relation to the other man alone (and without recourse to some general principle) a meaning such as worth [*valoir*] is sketched out. This is a worth attached to the other man coming out of the value of the You, or of the man who is other; a value attached to the other man” (Levinas, 1998, p. 150).

That is, for ethics to ‘begin’ in teaching, the teacher, the I, ‘apprehends’ the value of the student, of the You. This value of the You comes to the fore within the immediacy of the relation, the dialogue without any general principle for determining the meaning of the student. Determining the meaning of the student would slip the teacher out of an ethical relation and into the comfort of having knowledge about the student. Thus the relation would no longer be immediate but distanced, and the student turned into an object of the teacher’s knowledge.

The dialogue, according to Levinas, involves a saying, which goes beyond and comes before the said. The saying is an approach to the other that lies in the immediacy of the dialogical relation in which the activity of the saying also is the passivity of listening. The saying is not about presenting essence or entities, or objectified knowledge of the other, rather as an orientation to the other it makes an ethical relation to the other possible. The saying is the “risky uncovering of oneself, in sincerity, the breaking up of inwardness and the abandon of all shelter, exposure to traumas, vulnerability” (Levinas, 1994, p. 48). It is the exposure to the other in which a risk is taken, a risk to suffer without reason, for nothing.

Without this risk, according to Levinas, the self could easily slip into being for oneself in reason, into the comfort of holding on to oneself in order to reinstall essence (cf. Levinas, 1994).

To teach in the comfort of knowing the other, of relating to the student through knowledge of her/him, would be for the teacher a slipping into oneself whereby one's Ego is reinforced, an Ego which is already inscribed within the humanistic discourses of education. In order to enter into an ethical relation with the student, the risk embedded in the saying is an inevitable one; it is an uncertainty and vulnerability of uncovering oneself for the student. This risk, contrary to being on the safe side of knowledge, is a necessary condition for an ethical relation to the other, it makes the welcoming of the other possible.

Ethical moments in teaching occur when the teacher's self is fully present as unique and chosen through the dialogue with the student. The teacher responds through an orientation of openness to the student as a saying: "Saying is a denuding, of the unqualifiable one, the pure someone, unique and chosen; that is an exposedness to the other where no slipping away is possible" (Levinas, 1994, p. 50). So the Ego inscribed in what I have been calling 'humanistic discourses' on teaching, and which is sustained through the force of the same, is now turned into a singular responsible self, who is oriented towards the other, for the other, and is always already responsible for the other (cf. Levinas, 1994, p. 50). This approach to the other is what Levinas calls proximity: "Proximity is quite distinct from every other relationship, and has to be conceived as a responsibility for the other; it might be called humanity, or subjectivity, or self" (Levinas, 1994, p. 46).

The said is *the already* said, it proclaims and establishes this as that; it is the tale, the epos in which the given is held in its theme (cf. Levinas, 1994). That is, the student formed within 'humanistic' discourses on education is that which is already said; s/he is already given meaning, is someone who is known or can be known, and through this becomes a substantive. However, being cannot be reduced to a substantive. Instead, being is a verb which is always on "the verge of lapsing into [a] substantive" in the said (Levinas, 1994, p. 40). The verb is not a name of being, "but in the predicative proposition it is the very resonance of being understood as being" (Levinas, 1994, p. 40). This verb, this being, this student, are welcomed through the saying in the self's very exposure to the other, *for* the other. Teaching understood in this way is an ethical relation where being, where the student, is prevented from lapsing into a substantive. The teacher's being *for* the other, however, is not to be understood as a negation of essence "but a disinterestedness, an 'otherwise than being' which turns

into a ‘for the other’, burning for the other, consuming the bases of any position for oneself” as an Ego (Levinas, 1994, p. 50).

Beyond the distancing that violent knowledge of the other carries with it, there is also a response to an other, understood as responsibility for the other. This is a move away from the idealistic understanding of knowledge founded in its suppression of the singular through its generalisations: “Knowing is always convertible into creation and annihilation; its object lends itself to a concept, is a result” (Levinas, 1994, p. 87). The self is neither a concept nor a result, but is constituted by its being for the other. This responsibility is the very moment whereby the saying opens up the possibility of a future, which is not a repetition of that which is already said, but where the self is uniquely chosen in the flow of time. Teaching can then be understood as an ethical relation through which moral subjects come into being. In this view, teaching is a saying, is a disposition towards the other as a welcoming of the other, is a responsibility for the other, and is an activity which also requires the passivity of listening. Passivity and activity here are not mutually exclusive; rather, passivity becomes the condition for responsive/responsible action.

Such action, based on passivity, takes the form of non-indifference and answerability. As Levinas writes,

Difference – a non-in-difference in which the other – though absolutely other, ‘more other’, so to speak, than are the individuals with respect to one another within the ‘same species’ from which the I has freed itself – in which the other ‘regards’ me, not in order to ‘perceive’ me, but in ‘concerning me’, in ‘mattering to me as someone for whom I am answerable’ (Levinas, 1993, p. 124).

ANSWERABILITY AND THE RIGHTS OF THE OTHER

Respons(e)ability for the other is related to the right of the other human being to exist, and not merely as a thing or substantive. To respond to the other is not to ask the meaning of the other, but to exercise a certain kind of freedom in answering for the other’s right to exist: “This is a goodness in peace, which is also the exercise of a freedom, and in which the I frees itself from its ‘return to self’, from its auto-affirmation, from its egotism of a being preserving in its being, to answer for the other, precisely to defend the rights of the other man” (Levinas, 1993, p. 125).

Defending the rights of the other to exist as a human being, which constitutes responsibility for the other, becomes a question of being itself, “not the ontological meaning of the comprehension of this extraordinary verb, but the ethical meaning of the justice of being” (Levinas, 1998,

p. 171). Thus in our answerability for the other, we are compelled to ask a new question: “The question *par excellence*, or the first question, is not ‘why is there being rather than nothing?’ but ‘have I the right to be?’ This is a question of meaning that does not turn toward any natural finality, yet it is perpetuated in our strange human discourses on the meaning of life, wherein life awakens to humanity” (Levinas, 1998, p. 171).

Thus, an awakening to humanity requires a question that does not turn toward any natural pre-given end. Not only does answerability mean that there is no comfort in knowing the meaning of the other, but for teachers this question wrenches them from the safety of even knowledge about themselves as they are already represented in humanistic discourses on education in the image of the all-knowing ego. To respond to the student is to be answerable to the student and defend the rights of the student from a position of vulnerability. It is the individual uniqueness of the student that exists beyond his/her institutional position *as* student, which teachers meet – and defend – in their answerability and self-questioning.

TEACHING OTHERWISE

When teaching is framed within such an ethical understanding of human relations, as explored above, the question *par excellence* for a teacher, any teacher, becomes: Have I the right to teach? Such a question does not turn toward any “natural finality,” but is continuously answered within the teaching that actually takes place, within the dialogue where response to the other becomes possible. In the concrete terms of the student-teacher encounter the question can only be answered by the student with respect to whether the student has been given the right to exist in his/her “original sociality-goodness” (Levinas, 1998, p. 124). Posing this question opens up the possibility for teaching otherwise, understood as a process in which an ego is sobering up from its being for itself and awakens to humanity, as a being for the other.

The very relation of teaching becomes ethically significant insofar as worth is attached to the other for whom I am responsible. The relation of the self-other signifies a continuous series of responses, and teaching has to be understood as a history of responses to another, as a history of responsibility for the other. The temporality of teaching is linked to the temporality in which a person becomes someone, within the contexts of the said and the saying, of passivity and activity. As we have seen, this requires that teachers give up their position on the safe side of knowledge and participate in the time of risk. And it is precisely because of this risk that teaching as an ethical relation is possible and where it begins

to resound with poetry: “the search for new forms, from which all art lives, keeps awake everywhere the verbs that are on the verge of lapsing into substantives” (Levinas, 1994, p. 40). Consequently, teaching can become otherwise than teaching when it is not repressive and directed to the self-same. Teaching otherwise is an endlessly open exposure, an unfolding of sincerity in welcoming the other in which no slipping away is possible; teaching otherwise is an art when it “keeps awake” being as a verb.

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