Education and the Self

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This short paper falls into three parts:

I) a brief introduction that sketches a traditional view of the self;

II) an outline of a view that rejects this understanding of the self and that, in very general terms, is taken to exemplify a growing strand in current thinking;

III) a list of comments and questions that this view provokes.

I

Education is of necessity concerned with individual selves, but not necessarily respectfully. One reading of much contemporary educational practice is that its chief concern is to shape the selves of its learners in accordance with what are perceived to be current economic imperatives rather than, say, with what arises from their sense of their own existence. And whether or not this is true, much education is heavily conditioned by sets of standards and objectives determined quite independently of individual learners, and indeed, their teachers. With regard to respecting the self, this is not a promising situation.

But what is the self? What, if anything is its value? And what would be involved in respecting it?

I will begin by giving a characterisation of such matters drawn from English literature and that I take to convey something of our everyday view. In the novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* Thomas Hardy tells the story of the developing and ultimately tragic relationship of the young parson's son Angel Clare and a farm-girl, Tess Durbeyfield. As their acquaintanceship grows, Clare is brought to consider the situation that is arising:

> Despite his heterodoxy, faults and weaknesses, Clare was a man with a conscience. Tess was no insignificant creature to toy with and dismiss; but a woman living her precious life—a life which to herself who endured or enjoyed it, possessed as great a dimension as the life of the mightiest to himself. Upon her sensations the whole world depended to Tess; through her existence all her fellow creatures existed, to her. The universe itself only came into being for Tess on the particular day in the particular year in which she was born.

> This consciousness upon which he had intruded was the single opportunity of existence ever vouchsafed to Tess by an unsympathetic First Cause—her all; her

> every and only chance. How then should he look upon her as of less consequence
> than himself; as a pretty trifle to caress and grow weary of; and not deal with the
> greatest seriousness with the affection which he knew that he had awakened in her—
> so fervid and impressionable as she was under her reserve; in order that it might not
> agonize and wreck her? (Hardy, 1992, pp. 178-179)

Here we have an eloquent expression of a sense of the self of another and the
responsibilities it entails. The self portrayed here has a number of salient interrelated
features:

> it is enduring, having its own life, identity;

> while shaped by its environment, it is not simply some sort of concrescence of that
> environment—it has an internal unity of its own and therefore a perspective on the
> world that is unique;

> it has feelings and a basic apprehension of its own existence—its experiences have
> the quality of 'mineness' and of privacy;

> it is finite, having only one life to live and this life is the sum of all that is possible for
> that individual;

> in these regards it is therefore worthy of a respect that cannot simply be trumped by
> the desires of another;

> a sense of responsibility pervades the self and it relationships.

The conception of self portrayed here sits loosely in the tradition of liberal-humanist
theory of an on-going pre-existing self that lies at the centre of its world. And
this shares something of a Cartesian turn in that the direction of movement for
meaning-giving and for the disclosure of the self is from the inner to the outer, from the
private to the public. While this conception has had a strong following in educational
debate (e.g. notably in strands influenced by Romanticism), it is periodically challenged
—often in ways that essentially seek to reverse this flow of meaning-giving from inner
to outer.
    It is just such a current challenge that I wish to discuss today.

II

In a number of recent educational texts we are invited to see the self as constituted
by factors that are external to it, and as possessing little or no internally maintained
steady identity. For example there are those influenced by Michel Foucault and Judith
Butler who see individual subjectivities as heavily and continuously constituted by
discourse and the performative utterances and gestures of others, or who, influenced
by Hannah Arendt and Emmanuel Levinas, see us as constantly entering the world by
the grace of others who give us meaning. Here the direction of flow of meaning-giving
and disclosure is from the outer to the inner. It is the 'other' that lies at the centre. It
is my intention in this short paper to begin to open up some of the issues raised by
such a flow reversal by referring to one well worked through example of its portrayal

in an educational context: the book recently published by professor Gert Biesta called *Beyond Learning: Democratic Education for a Human Future*. Here, in the context of education, Biesta asks how we should conceive the subjectivity of the learner.

In what initially one might judge to be a rather Heideggerian stance, he expresses an interest in the opportunities that educational institutions offer for individuals to 'come into presence' and sets out as his central premise that this coming into presence occurs when we initiate actions that are taken up by others who are capable of initiating their own actions. 'Action' here is meant in a particular sense taken from Hannah Arendt: namely as 'the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter' —and through which by taking the initiative, beginning something anew, we reveal our unique personal identities (p. 47).

But it must be noted that this is not the revelation of some *pre-existing* identity—the self only becomes clear for the other and for the self *in* the action. This makes the domain of action—and therefore coming into presence—boundless and inherently unpredictable. It always entails risk. We come into presence in a world of ever-arising beginnings and beginners. To initiate or pursue our own beginnings we always have to rely on the actions of these other beginners. Hence, coming into presence means coming into a world of plurality and difference. Although, in a sense, this situation frustrates the 'purity' of our beginning, following Arendt, this 'impossibility to remain unique masters of what [we] do' is at the very same time the condition—and the only condition—under which our beginnings can ever come into the world. Action, as distinguished from fabrication, is never possible in isolation. Arendt argues that 'to be isolated is to be deprived of the capacity to act . . .' (p. 84).

The concern throughout is with the coming into the world of unique, singular beings. This however should not be confused with mere self-expression, for our coming into the world is thoroughly relational. It involves entering the social fabric and thus responding to—and being responsible for—what and who is other, the question of the other *and the other as a question*. Overall this entails elements of passivity such as listening and attentiveness on the part of the learner and a certain violation of the sovereignty of the learner as they are challenged by difficult questions and difficult encounters entailed in entering a community of, as Biesta puts it, 'those who have nothing in common'. That is to say, those of whom one is to assume nothing, can know nothing, for presuming to anticipate others' beginnings would be to reify them and is necessarily hegemonic. This all means that education—along with all other genuine human interaction—is *inherently difficult* and at times discomforting. And for the teacher there is the additional challenge of responsibility without knowledge, for she must take responsibility for the subjectivity of a learner that she does not and, indeed, cannot know.

In general, the educational response has to be one of openness to different ways of being human; it therefore has to be *experimental* and *experiential*. The question of the humanity of human beings has to be taken up as a *practical* question, a question that requires a response with every new manifestation of subjectivity (p. 106). It is not something to be determined by some pre-existing notion of human essence that posits a norm of humanness. The key question in genuinely human encounters is not what is present but who is present. It requires the maintenance of what Biesta calls a 'worldly space' through which new beginnings can come into presence. We always act upon beings who are not only capable of their own actions but whose coming into the world depends as much on our response as our coming into the world depends on their responses (p. 107). For, to quote Biesta:

> If I would begin something, but no one would respond, nothing would follow from my initiative, and, as a result, my beginnings would not come into the world and I would not be a subject. I would not come into the world. When, on the other hand, I begin something and others do take up my beginnings, I do come into the world, and in precisely this moment I am a subject (p. 133).

Here we have a way of thinking about our being with others in which plurality is not conceived as something to be overcome so that common action can become possible, but that makes our own being and our being with others possible and real in the first place.

> Our coming into the world structurally relies on the activities of others to take up our beginnings, yet others will always do so in their own, unpredictable ways (p. 92).

Such occurrences are stymied by participating in 'strong (i.e. norm-governed) communities' such as a rational community, for here one slips into becoming a mere representative of its categories and norms rather than being a unique individual.

On this view, then, our being-with-others is primordial in that we are with others before we are with ourselves and it is ethical in that (following Levinas) it is characterized by a primordial responsibility—a responsibility that is older than the ego and that is not a matter of our choice, but is already identified from outside: we are called to be a responsible self. And the call is not to human being in general, it is *me* who is called by the other. The subject as a unique and singular being, as a 'oneself', comes into presence because it finds itself in a situation where it cannot be replaced by anyone else (Levinas). As Adrian Peperzak puts it: 'I am hostage to the other and nobody can replace me in this service'. My subjectivity is a subjection to the other: for Levinas, 'the subject is subject' (p. 52).

While certainly it is not the sole task of education to maintain a space where freedom to come into presence can occur; it is one central task. This space will need to be one of encounter and difference—the ideal educational space will have the *urban qualities* found in Herman Hertzberger's conception of the 'city'—a space where we 'are continually preoccupied with measuring, mirroring and pitting ourselves against each other' because 'it is not we that determine who we are, but mainly others'. The 'aim' of the city is therefore 'to provide the opportunity for us to inspect, assess, keep an eye on and bump into one another' (p. 112). On this view we need schools built to facilitate such encounters that constitute the 'worldly space' in which we can come to presence as unique individuals.

III

It seems to me that the idea of a self as a coming to presence through initiating action taken up by others is seminal in a number of respects.

It emphasises the relational nature of subjectivity and how growing as a subject is enriched by diversity of encounter, disruption and difficulty. True education is not a comfortable business. It is not about indulging the proclivities of some pre-existing fixed self. And I heartily agree that the role of educational institutions is not to determine individual selves through some heavily prescribed curriculum, but to create a space where, indeed, in some sense they can come into presence (See Bonnett, 1976, 1978).

It also addresses a very pressing question: *How to live with others who, in many significant respects, are not like us?* Clearly this is an issue of ever-growing importance as societies become more multi-cultural, and in the context of the evermore significant global society where we constantly encounter difference and the need to work with it. Biesta's account seems to provide a rather neat response by claiming that the other is a necessary condition of our own coming into the world and that we have a non self-chosen fundamental responsibility to respect the other, enable it to come into the world. Though the subjectivity of the other is something essentially unpredictable and beyond our control, we depend upon it for our own subjectivity. Hence, essentially education is imbued with a sense of the unknown rather than the known. Again, this latter seems to me to be very healthy attitude.

And certainly there is something highly persuasive about the key notion that takes seriously that human existence is 'being-with' and that the significance of our selves must at least in part be the product of the diversity of ways in which our initiations are taken up by others. Indeed, there would appear to be something stultifying about a life in which ones intentions ruled absolutely, ones plans were never disrupted, ones expectations never confounded, where routine ruled supreme, no difference or disruption ever occurring. A life insulated from all contingency, unpredicatability and uncertainty—a life devoid of risk—would be a severely impoverished life.—Perhaps no life at all.

But what is it to come into the world—to 'come into presence'? Does it simply mean to have ones actions taken up by other agents? Are there not other ways in which ones subjectivity can receive recognition? And does the account say enough about the *way* in which others take up ones beginnings, from what perspective? Furthermore, exactly what is one to be open to in responding to another if the meaning of any action is in such a strong sense always deferred? Let me refine these concerns through a series of more specific points.

On the point of what is necessary for us to come into presence: can I not come into presence for myself in moments of self-awareness, and if so, in what sense do I require the otherness of others? It is one thing to make this requirement a *formal* one in the sense that in principle the recognition of myself—me—requires a public language and culturally produced horizons of significance, and these are the product of others. It is quite another thing to make it an empirical or occurent requirement—empirically my actions must be recognized by others on every occasion for me to come into presence on that occasion, as Biesta does.

And regarding this latter, while it is certainly true that one may experience a heightened sense of self-awareness when one feels oneself to be in the presence of others—one might indeed become, as we say, 'self-conscious'—equally there can be occasions when for some at least, solitude is as, if not more, effective in this regard. This also invites the question as to whether the other in its otherness is always engendering of self-revealing rather than self-concealment—even when the other does not seek domination, but is simply making its own responsive 'beginning', but which might be experienced as in some sense threatening.

Furthermore, are there not experiences of coming into presence in relation to the natural world—both in terms of a certain quality of being that can be experienced by the individual, and the quality of the entry into the world of nature as *quintessentially* 'other'? A towering anthropocentrism seems to run through the account.

Such considerations lead to the question: Is Biesta privileging the perspective of a particular 'cosmopolitan', 'urban', perhaps, 'extroverted' personality type in his account? A thought lent weight by the characteristics of Hertzberger's city that he uses

to exemplify the qualities of a worldly space.

In what sense can the stranger's recognition bring one into presence in a fuller way than one's neighbour or friend—i.e. subjectivities characterized by what they share with you, what they have in common with you? Perhaps the stranger sees a new 'angle', but what of depth and intensity? Might not one who, say, is understood as having shared a traumatic experience with you, be able to recognize and respond to aspects of you—affirm you—in a way that 'those who have nothing in common' cannot. Of course it would be presumptuous, and seriously limiting of subjectivity, if others attempt to define one by such things that they think they share with you. But this is not what is being said. The point is that someone characterized as friend *may* be better able to recognize your action for what it is than those with whom you have 'nothing in common'.

Or is the idea of identifying an action for 'what it is' one of the ideas that this view wants to challenge on the ground that its meaning is always deferred? Certainly there are references to 'the death of the author' in this regard. But surely what the initiator intended by her action is not to be completely dismissed in characterizing it? What it meant to her, is an important aspect of its being *her* action, an act of unique self-expression, having the quality of 'mineness'.

But perhaps an even more fundamental question is now raised: To what extent is 'everyday phenomenology' of the above kind relevant to the argument? Does its claim to be deeply structural (say on a par with Heidegger's ontological existentials of *Being and Time*?) render it immune to such criticisms? Just how plausible it for the view to claim such a position? In *Being and Time*, Heidegger shows how his ontology accommodates such considerations—indeed, that it is a necessary condition of such everyday phenomenology. Such a demonstration is not in evidence in Biesta's book.

My overall point is that we need to look very carefully at the nature of the argument concerning the relationship between coming into presence and a world of otherness and difference if its potential insights are not to be vitiated by potential distortions.

Then there is the intimately related matter of banishing the idea of a human essence. This now is an oft-encountered sentiment. But should the quarrel be not so much with the idea of a human essence *per se* as with totalizing versions of what this might be? And does not Biesta's account of humanness itself assume or extol a particular version of human essence?—As at the least, initiator of action? And I suspect rather more if one scratches its surface.

Of course, this query might tempt the rejoinder that we are straying into empty semantics: he is using the term 'essence' in one way and I another. But there is something substantive at stake here: either it is legitimate to say that when we speak of a human being we refer to an entity that, for example, is capable of thought and feeling, has some sense of self-awareness and responsibility for its actions, or it is not. If it is not, how in the first place do we set about identifying those entities that we encounter in the world that are deserving of the particular responsiveness that we should extend to human beings? (Should we extend it to robots that might simulate the overt behaviours we normally associate with human beings?)

Does the displacement of the idea of a grounding identity from the idea of subjectivity by a focus on spontaneity and openness to the other raise issues for the idea of authenticity? How is *my* openness to be distinguished from that of someone else? Are we in danger of being left with a sea of essentially ephemeral, un-rooted, actions? Sober reflection on ones history—the sediments of ones previous experiences and ones track record concerning particular issues—may play an important role in becoming an authentic subject.

What, too, of the possibility that what one takes to be one's openness—one's spontaneous action—is little more than a reflection of what Heidegger (1973) has called the 'they-self'? A danger enhanced by an encouragement to read oneself off from the ways ones actions are taken up by others at large, which might in fact be 'crowd' responses? Heidegger provides an array of cautions concerning being grounded in such publicness. Overall, does Biesta's account, with its eschewal of the idea of identity, render redundant all such issues of being true to one's self?

Biesta criticizes humanism for having too limiting (i.e. reifying) an understanding of what it is to be human, but does not his view result in a very *thin* conception of subjectivity, attenuated, strung out across the myriad beginnings of others? Plurality in those who take up one's beginnings will mean that they will get taken up in a wider range of ways—that one comes into presence more richly in the sense of more diversely—but also perhaps thereby more superficially. And ultimately what is the point of it?—Of becoming *dispersed* in such a way? What regard would and should we have for the 'other' conceived merely as passing actions rather than someone with an enduring identity? What are we to make of an individual whose existence is conceived only in terms of what we and others attribute to her actions and how we take them up—i.e. has no identity independently of this?

Furthermore, is not an individual's recognition of another's action as one that does indeed take up *her* beginning an issue? *What counts as taking up someone else's beginning?* How are we to know when it has or hasn't (perhaps, despite appearances) happened? Whose story is to be privileged? And if none is, if ultimately anything can count as taking up someone's action, does not the idea become vacuous? Talk of 'responsibility' for the other, listening to them responsively, similarly eddies off into a disconnected circularity if the 'meaning' of the action amounts to no more than how a stranger takes it (up), however sincerely.

Returning now to the specifically educational context. Doesn't education need to have aims—a sense of what it is worthwhile introducing pupils to—inviting them to participate in—and what counts as their development as person? That is, doesn't it involve a sense of '*strong community*'? Participation in such worthwhile activities is not something to be juxtaposed to coming into presence, but rather something to be understood as an essential part of it. I have in mind here Michael Oakeshott's (1972) claim that self-disclosure and self-enactment occur through engagement with a civilised inheritance of enduring traditions of thinking. A view that separates development of self—coming into presence—from initiation into a strong community of cultural discourse would seem to herald a certain solipsism of its own.

Finally, a summative comment: in its emphasis on the diffuseness, transience, ephemeralism and sheer contingency of the occurrence of subjectivity through initiating action taken up by others, I wonder if its dismissal of reification and essentialism is achieved at the expense of anything sufficiently centred to be intelligible as a 'self'.

NOTE

Unless otherwise stated, all page references are to Biesta, 2006.

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