

On the Weakness of Education

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There is a substantial amount of “strong language” in education. By “strong language,” I mean to refer to language that depicts education as something that is, or has the potential to be, secure and effective — for example, where the aim is to establish a strong and secure connection between educational “inputs” and educational “outcomes.” This is, for example, the language of educational effectiveness: the language of effective schools, effective teaching, strong leadership, and teacher-proof curricula. It is also the language that can be found in the ambition to turn education into an evidence-based profession that is based upon definite knowledge about “what works.”

The desire for strong education is not without reason. As a lot of time, effort, and resources are being invested in education, there are at least good pragmatic reasons for wanting to make sure that this has some discernable effect. Moreover, education always involves intentions, purposes, aims, and objectives — it is, in other words, a *teleological* practice — which is another reason for wanting to make sure that at least some of what is aimed for is actually achieved. It is, however, the experience of many educators that education is not simply a technology, that is, that despite attempts to get it “right,” the outcomes of education are never totally predictable, and success can never be totally guaranteed. This is not only because there are many factors involved in the interactions between teachers and students. It is, first and foremost, because the interactions between teaching and learning are not of a physical nature, but are instead fundamentally *hermeneutic* in character. If teaching is going to have any impact on learning, it is because of the fact that students interpret and try to make sense of what they are being taught; not because teaching simply flows into their minds and bodies. The key factor in educational communication is *interpretation*, and because interpretation is a fundamentally open process, the link between teaching and learning can never be “perfect.”

This may well have been the reason why Sigmund Freud identified education as one of the three “impossible professions” — the other two being government and psychoanalysis — “in which one can be sure beforehand of achieving unsatisfying results.”¹ But whereas some would see the weakness of education as something that ought to be overcome, I wish to argue that the weakness of education is actually something that belongs to education and is proper to it. This means that, if we fail to acknowledge the fundamental weakness of education, we run the risk of forgetting what may well matter most in our educational endeavors.

In this essay, I therefore wish to make a case for the weakness of education. I will do so in relation to one particular function of education, to which I will refer as *subjectification*, which has to do with the ways in which education contributes to the “emergence” of human subjectivity. I will argue that, as long as we think of

subjectification as a modification in the realm of being — a modification of the individual's psychical or bodily “make up” — we reduce subjectification to socialization, that is, to the production of “specimens” of a more encompassing “order.” The problem with this is that it precludes us from acknowledging the singularity or uniqueness of each individual human being. If this is what matters in education — and I will argue that this is what ought to matter in education — then we need to think of education differently. Whereas strong education operates in the realm of being — the realm, so we might say, in which force matters and matter is forced — weak education operates in a realm which is, as Emmanuel Levinas has put it, “otherwise than being” and “beyond essence.”² It operates in the realm of existence, rather than in the realm of essence. It is only in this other realm that the human subject can manifest itself in its uniqueness, and it is because of this that the weakness of education matters and, in a sense, matters most.

My argument is structured in the following way: I will first indicate how we might understand the subjectification function of education, and how this function relates to other functions of education. I will then provide a brief overview of the history of the idea that subjectification is a separate and genuine educational concern. I will point out that the origins of this idea can be found in the Enlightenment, and I will focus on Immanuel Kant's particular contribution to the development of this line of thinking. Whereas Kant's work can be seen as the inauguration of modern education, his particular approach led to a way of thinking that eventually reduced the question of human subjectivity to the question of the rational nature of the human being. I will then turn to Levinas's “ethics of subjectivity” in order to articulate a different way to approach the question of the uniqueness of the human being, one which focuses on the *existence* of the human being, rather than its essence. In the final section, I will return to the idea of weak education, *not* in order to speak the final word about the weakness of education, but rather to highlight where and how this idea might matter.

THE THREE FUNCTIONS OF EDUCATION

Although the everyday use of the word “education” often gives the impression that it refers to a single reality, “education” is actually a composite concept. This becomes clear when we ask what education is *for*. One important function of education has to do with *qualification*, that is, with the ways in which education contributes to the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and dispositions that qualify us for doing something — a “doing” which can range from the very specific (such as the training for a particular job) to the very general (such as in the case of liberal education). A second function of education has to do with the ways in which, through education, individuals become part of existing sociocultural, political, and moral orders. This is the *socialization* function of education. Schools partly engage in socialization deliberately, for example, in the form of values education, character education, or citizenship education, or in relation to professional socialization. Socialization also happens in less visible ways, as has been made clear in the literature on both the hidden curriculum and the role of education in the reproduction of social inequality. Whereas some would argue that education should only focus on

qualification, and others defend the important role that education has to play in the socialization of children and young people, there is a third function of education, which is different from both qualification and socialization. This function has to do with the ways in which education contributes to the individuation or, as I prefer to call it, the *subjectification* of children and young people. The subjectification function might perhaps best be understood as the opposite of the socialization function. It is *not* about the insertion of “newcomers” into existing orders, but about ways of being that hint at independence from such orders; ways of being in which the individual is not simply a “specimen” of a more encompassing order.

THE OPENING OF MODERN EDUCATION

The idea of the human subject as an independent, post-traditional center of being and action can be traced back at least to the Enlightenment.³ Kant defined Enlightenment as the release of the human being “from his self-incurred tutelage,” and defined tutelage as the inability of the human being “to make use of his understanding without the direction from another.”⁴ This immaturity is self-incurred, according to Kant, “when its cause lies not in lack of reason but in lack of resolution and courage.”⁵ This is why he argued that human beings should have the courage to use their own understanding — something which Kant saw as “the motto of Enlightenment.”⁶

Philosophically, the most important aspect of Kant’s conception of “rational autonomy” — autonomy based upon reason — was that he did *not* conceive of this as a contingent historical possibility, but as something that is an inherent part of human nature. Kant described the “propensity and vocation to free thinking” as the “ultimate destination” of the human being and as the “aim of his existence.”⁷ To block progress toward enlightenment would therefore be “a crime against human nature.”⁸ Kant also argued that the “propensity to free thinking” could *only* be brought about through education.⁹ Kant not only wrote that the human being “is the only creature that has to be educated.”¹⁰ He also argued that the human being can only become human — that is, a rational autonomous being — “through education.”¹¹

With Kant, the rationale for education became founded on the idea “of a certain kind of subject who has the inherent potential to become self-motivated and self-directing,” while the task of education became one of bringing about or releasing this potential “so that subjects become fully autonomous and capable of exercising their individual and intentional agency.”¹² Modern education thus became based upon a truth about the nature and ultimate destination of the human being, while the connection between rationality, autonomy, and education became the “Holy Trinity” of modern education. This was the case not only in approaches that followed more or less directly from the Kantian framework, such as educational approaches based on the work of Jean Piaget or Lawrence Kohlberg. The idea of rational autonomy also became a cornerstone in critical approaches to education that took inspiration from G.W.F. Hegel, Karl Marx, and Neo-Marxism, such as the work of Paulo Freire and Continental and North American versions of critical pedagogy.

What is most significant about Kant's intervention — and this is why we can say that his work marks the transition to *modern* education — is that he established a link between education and human freedom. Kant made the question of human freedom the central issue for modern education by making a distinction between heteronomous determination and self-determination, and by arguing that education ultimately has to do with the latter. We can say, therefore, that it is only after Kant that it became possible to distinguish between socialization and education, and to claim that subjectification is a — and perhaps even *the* — proper interest of education.

THE CLOSURE OF MODERN EDUCATION

Whereas, on the one hand, Kant opened up a whole new realm for educational thought and practice — and the idea that education should bring about rational autonomy has remained central to many educational theories and practices up to the present day — on the other hand, he closed off this opening almost before it could start. This happened along two, related lines. It happened, first of all, because Kant allowed for only *one* definition of what it meant to be human. With Kant, “rational autonomy” became the marker of humanity — which left those who were considered to be not or not-yet rational, including children, in a difficult position. It happened also because, for Kant, rational autonomy was *not* understood as a contingent historical possibility, but as a necessity firmly rooted in the nature of the human being. This meant that education became founded upon a particular *truth* about the nature and destiny of the human being.

For a long time, the closure entailed in the Kantian articulation of the foundations of modern education went unnoticed. This was partly because there was widespread support for the underlying belief that human beings ultimately are rational beings who strive for autonomy. This, after all, was very much the “agenda” of the French, German, and Scottish Enlightenments. More importantly, the closure in Kant's articulation of the foundations of modern education went unnoticed also because those who were excluded from this definition of the human being — those who were deemed to be irrational or prerational (such as children) — lacked a voice to protest against their own exclusion. And they lacked this voice precisely because of the particular definition of what it meant to be human. They were excluded, in other words, before they could even speak, or before they could even be acknowledged as capable of speaking.¹³

THE PROBLEM WITH HUMANISM

Philosophically, one way of exposing what is problematic about the way in which the modern educational project was inaugurated is by focusing on its humanist foundations. I use “humanism” here in the philosophical sense of the word, that is, as the idea that (1) it is possible to know and express the essence or nature of the human being, and also that (2) it is possible to use this knowledge as the foundation for subsequent action — not only in the sphere of education but also, for example, in the sphere of politics. Humanism, as Levinas has put it, entails “the recognition of an invariable essence named ‘Man,’ the affirmation of his central place in the economy of the Real and of his value which [engenders] all values.”¹⁴

Modern education in its Kantian form is clearly humanistic, since it is founded upon a particular *truth* about the nature of the human being.

In twentieth-century philosophy, humanism has been challenged for, basically, two reasons. On the one hand, questions have been raised about the *possibility* of humanism, that is, about the possibility for human beings to define their own essence and origin. Here we can think of the work of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, both of whom have exposed the impossibility of capturing the essence and origin of the human being. On the other hand, questions have been raised about the *desirability* of humanism, a line of thinking that has been developed particularly by Martin Heidegger and Levinas. For Levinas, the “crisis of humanism in our society” began with the “inhuman events of recent history.”¹⁵ Yet, for Levinas, the crisis of humanism is not simply located in these inhumanities as such, but first and foremost in humanism’s inability to effectively counter such inhumanities, and also in the fact that many of the inhumanities of the twentieth century — “the 1914 War, the Russian Revolution refuting itself in Stalinism, fascism, Hitlerism, the 1939–45 War, atomic bombings, genocide and uninterrupted war” — were actually based upon and motivated by particular definitions of what it means to be human.¹⁶ This is why Levinas concludes — with a phrase reminiscent of Heidegger — that “humanism has to be denounced...because it is not sufficiently human” (*OTB*, 128). The problem with humanism, in short, is that it posits a *norm* of “humanness,” a norm of what it means to be human, and in doing so excludes all those who do not live up to, or are unable to live up to, this norm — and at the dawn of the twenty-first century, it is clear that this is not simply a theoretical possibility.

Yet the point is not simply a general and philosophical one; it also has important educational ramifications. From an educational point of view, the problem with humanism is that it specifies a norm of what it means to be human *before* the actual manifestation of “instances” of humanity. Humanism specifies what the child, student, or newcomer *must* become before giving persons an opportunity to show who they are and who they will be. Humanism thus seems unable to be open to the possibility that newcomers might radically alter our understandings of what it means to be human. This means — and this is a central step in my argument — that, at a very fundamental level, humanism can only think of education as a form of socialization. It can only think of each “newcomer” as an instance of a human essence that has already been specified and is already known in advance, and it is therefore unable to grasp the uniqueness of each individual human being.

As long as we see education through the lens of socialization, all this is, of course, not really a problem. Yet it is here that Kant remains important because he has left us with the idea that it might be — and in a sense *ought to be* — possible to make a meaningful distinction between education and socialization. If we are committed to this distinction, if we are committed to what Foucault has so aptly referred to as the Enlightenment’s “undefined work of freedom,”¹⁷ then it becomes important to think again about ways in which we might be able to distinguish education from socialization, both in theory and in practice, and moreover to do so in a way that does not bring us back to humanism.

EMMANUEL LEVINAS: AN ETHICS OF SUBJECTIVITY

One thinker who has made a crucial contribution to this discussion is Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas's work is uniquely concerned with the question of subjectivity and the process of subjectification. Yet, instead of offering us a new theory or truth about the human subject, Levinas has articulated a completely different "avenue" toward the question of human subjectivity, one in which an ethical category — responsibility — is singled out as "the essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity."¹⁸ Levinas is not interested in the human subject in general, that is, as an abstract philosophical category. Instead, he is interested in the question of the uniqueness of each individual human being, that is, in the way in which human subjects are precisely *not* specimens of a wider order. However, for Levinas, the question of uniqueness is not a question that can be answered by looking at the characteristics that make me different from everyone else, which is the question of identity. Instead, Levinas focuses on the characteristics of *situations* in which it matters that I am I, and not someone else. He looks for situations, in other words, in which I cannot be replaced by someone else, but where my uniqueness matters. Uniqueness, for Levinas, is therefore a question of my existence — it has to do with the way in which I exist with (or, as Levinas would say, *for*) others. It is not a question of my essence or being.

Levinas's thinking thus poses a challenge to the "wisdom of the Western tradition," in which it is assumed that human individuals "are human through consciousness."¹⁹ It challenges the idea of the subject as a substantial center of meaning and initiative, as a *cogito* who is first of all concerned with itself and only then, perhaps, if he or she decides to do so, with the other. Levinas has argued, instead, that the subject is always already engaged in a relationship that is "older than the ego, prior to principles" (*OTB*, 117). This relationship is neither a knowledge relationship nor a willful act of the ego. It is an *ethical* relationship, a relationship of infinite responsibility for the Other. Levinas stresses that this responsibility for the Other is not a responsibility that we can choose to take upon us, since this would only be possible if we were an ego or a consciousness *before* we were "inscribed" in this relationship. The responsibility that is the "essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity" is a responsibility "that is justified by no prior commitment."²⁰ It is "an obligation, anachronously prior to any commitment," an "anteriority" that is "older than the a priori... , older than the time of consciousness that is accessible to memory" (*AFP*, 90, 96). It is a "passion" that is absolute, in that it takes hold "without any a priori" (*AFP*, 96).

By identifying responsibility as the "essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity," Levinas tries to get away from the idea that the human subject has some kind of essence or nature. Levinas acknowledges that he describes subjectivity in ethical terms, but he hastens to add that "ethics, here, does not supplement a preceding existential base" (*AFP*, 95). This is why I suggest that Levinas does not provide us with a new theory of subjectivity — a theory that would claim, for example, that the subject is a being endowed with certain moral qualities or capacities — but rather with an *ethics* of subjectivity. He urges us to "approach"

(rather than to understand) the question of subjectivity through ethics, bearing in mind that the meaning of ethics itself has changed in the process. Levinas thus responds to the problems of humanism not by asking *what* the subject is, but by asking how subjectivity is possible, or how subjectivity *exists*. Levinas emphasizes, however, that subjectivity-as-responsibility is *not* a different or other way of being, because “being otherwise is still being” (*EFP*, 100). In order to safeguard the uniqueness of the subject, Levinas thus has to go “beyond essence,” to a “mode” that is *otherwise than being*.

Going beyond essence brings one to a place — or better a non-place, a “null-site” (*OTB*, 8) — where the first question is not that of the being of the subject but of “my *right* to be” (*EFP*, 86, emphasis added). It is only in the “very crisis of the being of a being” (*EFP*, 85), in the *interruption* of its being, that the uniqueness of the subject first acquires meaning (see *OTB*, 13). This interruption constitutes the relationship of responsibility, which is a responsibility of “being-in-question” (*OTB*, 11). It is this being-in-question, this “assignation to answer without evasions,” that “assigns the self to be a self,” and thus constitutes me as this unique individual. This is why Levinas describes the “oneself,” the unique individual, as the “not-being-able-to-slip-away-from an assignation,” an assignation that does not aim at any generality but is aimed at me (*EFP*, 116). The oneself, therefore, “does not coincide with the identifying of truth, is not storable in terms of consciousness, discourse and intentionality” (*EFP*, 96). The oneself is a singularity “prior to the distinction between the particular and the universal,” and is therefore both unsayable and unjustifiable (*EFP*, 97). The oneself is not a being but is “beyond the normal play of action and passion in which the identity of a being is maintained, in which it *is*” (*EFP*, 104, emphasis in original).

CONCLUSIONS: THE WEAKNESS OF EDUCATION

In this essay, I have made a (first) attempt to explore the idea of the weakness of education in relation to one of the functions of education, to which I have referred as the subjectification function. I have shown how subjectification became a major concern of modern education, and I have positioned myself within this tradition by arguing that it is only through the interest in subjectification that education can be more than just socialization. Central to my argument has been the claim that as long as we understand subjectivity in humanistic terms — that is, as something that is definable in its nature and destiny — we are unable to distinguish subjectification from socialization. This is why I have argued, with Levinas, that we should approach the question of human subjectivity — and, more specifically, the question of the singularity or uniqueness of the human subject — in a different way. The crucial choice is whether we understand human subjectivity as an attribute of the *nature or essence* of human beings or whether we understand it in terms of the *existence* of the human being. I have argued that it is only when we take the question of the uniqueness of the human being away from the realm of being and move it to the realm of existence — a realm “otherwise than being” and “beyond essence” — that it becomes possible to account for the uniqueness of the human being. Uniqueness here is no longer a matter of attributes or characteristics of an underlying

“substratum” — it is no longer a matter, therefore, of identity. With Levinas, I have suggested that we should approach the question of uniqueness in *existential* terms, that is, in terms of the question of when it matters that I am I, and that I cannot be replaced by anyone else. My uniqueness, therefore, is not a matter of my *being* but of my “*being-in-question*,” as it is only in those situations — situations to which Levinas refers with the term “responsibility” — that the self is assigned to be a self, that the self is *singularized*. Since uniqueness “occurs” in a domain that is otherwise than being, strong education has no role to play here because, in a sense, it cannot “reach” the singularity of the subject.

This, then, is one reason — and perhaps it is the most important reason — why the weakness of education matters. But this does, of course, raise a further important question, which is the question, “So what do we do?” Let me, in conclusion, give two brief answers to this question. The first is to remind ourselves that the question of *doing* — the question of intervening, steering, and changing — is actually a question that belongs to the domain (or “paradigm”) of strong education. That, after all, is the domain where there are actions and consequences, where there is influence and impact. In the domain of weak education, there is, therefore, in this specific sense, nothing to *do*, as the singularity of the subject cannot be “forced” or “produced.” In this regard, weak education leaves us, as educators, empty-handed. But this does not mean that we, as educators, should just sit back and do nothing. The question we should ask about our educational arrangements — our curricula, our pedagogies, our activity plans, and the ways in which we run, design, and build schools — is whether they would preclude any encounters or experiences that have the potential for singularization. The question, in other words, is whether, in our educational actions, we can at least make it not *impossible* for such experiences to happen — without knowing, without being able to know, and, in a sense, without even *wanting* to know what the impact of such experiences might be. Weak education thus “works” from the opposite end of where strong education operates, and it is there, so I wish to suggest, that the ontological weakness of education might find its existential strength.

1. Sigmund Freud, “Analysis, Terminable and Interminable,” in vol. 23 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1968), 248.

2. See Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981). This work will be cited as *OTB* in the text for all subsequent references.

3. See Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?” trans. Catherine Porter, in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984).

4. Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question ‘What is Enlightenment?’” (1784), trans. Lewis White Beck and Patricia Waugh, in *Post-Modernism: A Reader*, ed. Patricia Waugh (London: Edward Arnold, 1992), 90. Please note that, in the original German text, Kant uses the word “*Mensch*,” which is closer in English to “human being” than to “man.”

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*

7. Immanuel Kant, “Über Pädagogik” [“On Education”], in Immanuel Kant, *Schriften zur Anthropologie, Geschichtsphilosophie, Politik und Pädagogik* [Writings on Anthropology, History of Philosophy, Politics, and Education] (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1982), 701 (translation mine).

8. Kant, "What is Enlightenment?" 93.
9. Kant, "Über Pädagogik," 710 (translation mine).
10. Ibid., 697 (translation mine).
11. Ibid., 699 (translation mine).
12. Robin Usher and Richard Edwards, *Postmodernism and Education* (London: Routledge, 1994), 24–25.
13. See also Jacques Rancière, *La Méésentente* [Disagreement] (Paris: Gallilée, 1995).
14. Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).
15. Ibid., 279.
16. Ibid.
17. Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" 46.
18. Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 95.
19. Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 190.
20. Emmanuel Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy," in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Seán Hand (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 92. This work will be cited as *EFP* in the text for all subsequent references.