

Approaching Thing-Centeredness Ecologically

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This reply to Jessica Davis's contribution will consist of two parts. First, I want to take issue with some of the assumptions behind Davis's analysis which, I believe, are rather alien to, if not in strong opposition to the main course of thought of the book I recently wrote together with Piotr Zamojski, *Towards an Ontology of Teaching*. Then, I will go on to argue that the alternative idea of thing-centeredness that Davis endorses is actually very close to the way we have tried to define this term. Furthermore, I will argue why Davis is completely right in calling for a post-humanist turn, although I would prefer to call this new approach ecological. Before doing so, let me add that the ideas I will present here are actually based on discussions I have had with my co-author, and in a sense this text can be read as "our" text.

FROM LOOKING FOR GROUNDS TO PAINTING A RICH PHENOMENOLOGICAL ACCOUNT

So first, I would like to question the way in which Davis frames and, hence, problematizes one of the book's central themes. Her principal concern is whether it presents a correct ontological picture of the teacher and of the world. She does this by assessing the kind of "basis" or "grounds" that we set out in our argument. This is clear from the language of "grounding" she uses throughout her analysis, or from comments such as: "It is not clear, however, that [Vlieghe and Zamojski] have provided a basis for claiming an objectivity to the world." Otherwise stated, what we supposedly are after in the book is to find a foundation in reality—in the things themselves—that allows us in a second step to go beyond the sterile discussion between teacher- and

student-centered positions, and to conceive of educational equality in a fresh way.

Given that we call our project “ontological,” one might be easily tempted to represent our work in this vein, but this—as we try to make clear in the book—is nevertheless not the case. Our attempt to flesh out an ontological account of the teacher has nothing to do whatsoever with identifying conditions of possibility that might explain what teaching is, or that dictate how it should be conducted. This would entail a search for the “archè” of teaching. Instead, we start from experiences we—as students and as teachers—have with teaching, attempting to elucidate this phenomenon from the inside out: taking something that is *already* meaningful at face value, and trying to come up with a rich and detailed description, which hopefully speaks to the experience of our readers. Such a description, however, seeks to do more than talking about particular teachers and their teachings—the ontic level—so as to capture *what teaching is all about*—the ontological level.¹ What we are after is an immanent and phenomenological account of what it means to be a teacher: showing that teaching is a meaningful practice in and of itself.

Hence, we are not interested in justifying that teaching is important in view of certain (ontic) features of reality or in view of (psychological, societal, or political) goals that need to be found outside of the practice of teaching itself. For instance, bringing about more equality is not an ideal to be set out as a goal to be achieved, which then calls for a teacher or for a particular kind of teaching (be it student- or thing-centered). Instead, we argue that when we teach—as in, when we try and show to the new generation that something is worthwhile, out of love for this very thing—we just perform equality, because our act of showing, drawing attention, and sharing is *itself* a verification of

equality of intelligence; any student can see, understand, appreciate and love what the teacher sees, understands, appreciates and loves. What happens, then, is a gathering around a thing of study that gains *itself* authority. Equality (just like our notion of love or affirmation) is not a precondition or a goal, but a way of relating to others and the world, and more exactly a properly *educational* way of doing so.

EDUCATION: TAKING THE WORLD AND THE SUBJECT MATTER FULLY AS THING

These things said, I believe that the language of radical materialism which Davis brings forward in her article is extremely apt for developing an immanent ontology of teaching. She calls for taking seriously and literally the terms “world” and “thing” that are indeed so central in our argument. However, Davis suggests that we confuse *thing* with *subject matter* (and, more precisely, with a socially and culturally contingent construction of subject matter), and likewise that we mistake the *world* in its full material existence for a world given shape by the *conventions* inherent to an existing discourse or supporting a power apparatus. This is clear from her saying that our definition of teaching in terms of love for the world and passing it on boils down to love for the way the world is contingently given now (rather than love for the world *per se*). This would imply that we defend a purely conservative and protectionist view.

However, when we use the words “thing” and “world,” we always take these in a strong ontological manner. We do not refer to societal constructions (the ontic level), which is also why we don’t use the notion “curriculum.” Rather, what we hint at is the radical *exteriority* of something next to or outside of ourselves: there is something “there” that exists independently of ourselves (and of what we think and desire). It is this exteriority that can surprise us, that is meaningful in and

of itself, and that forces us to be attentive to it, to care for it, and—indeed—to study it. To be clear, this does not imply the acceptance of any form of (Levinasian) transcendence: we precisely hold that this exteriority is fully part of our immanent experience of the world—that there are things in the world is part of our “being-thrown” (*Geworfenheit*), to speak once more with Heidegger.²

Hence, thingness (like love or equality) can be seen as an immanent criterium to define education as such. Hence, when Arendt tries to define the essence of education and comes up with the idea that there is only one world, she exactly points at the “thingly” character of the world.³ One reason behind the educational crisis she diagnoses is exactly that the world has lost this character; we are all locked up in many different “worlds” that we have constructed based on different historical and cultural perspectives and personal interests—an issue which is highly topical in a post-truth era. Hence the true educational gesture consists of showing that, in spite of this diversity, there is only one world that we share, and that is our responsibility.

So, the question is whether we regard the world as a thing in its own right or merely as relative to our particular interests and perspectives—the world as mere “object,” to use once more a Heideggerian vocabulary. The same can be said about how we relate to subject matters: they can either be taken as *mere objects* or as *true things*, and only in the latter case are they educationally relevant. Again, another reason behind the crisis, Arendt holds, is that teachers are increasingly trained to become specialists in learning and teaching, and not in a discipline. Hence, they are supposed to be able to teach *anything*, as the “thing” doesn’t matter for them. The same holds, I would add, when teachers want to impose their private views onto students about their discipline; then their doings are no longer about a truthfulness to the thing they

love. Thing-centeredness exactly means that people—teachers and students—submit themselves to the exigencies of a discipline that forces them to be attentive to, to care for, and to study particular things. Calling their discipline, then, a subject *matter* is exactly meant to stress that both are under the authority of a thing.

Precisely for this reason the reference to the work of Karen Barad is well received. Again, not in the sense that her new materialist metaphysics has finally given us a ground to conceive coherently of thing-centeredness, but because Barad offers a language that can account for thing-centered education and teaching *at an experiential level, with great precision and in a fully immanent way*. When she says that “we know because we are *of* the world,” this can be taken as a most accurate description of a transformative experience in which particular pedagogical material, or a broader discipline, becomes a thing of study.⁴ Then, we might undergo the “unique pedagogical agency of things to suspend human-centered worldliness” that Tyson Lewis hints at.⁵ If we really want to approach our world as thing instead of turning it into an object tamed by our own human-centered perspective, we certainly do better to fully stress our entanglement with the world in its full materiality. In line with what another new materialist scholar, Isabelle Stengers, suggests, this could be called, after the Ancient Greek word *oikos* (a place to live and dwell), an *ecological* approach towards teaching.⁶

1 Compare with Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962).

2 Heidegger, *Being and Time*.

3 Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New

York: The Viking Press, 1961).

4 Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 185

5 Tyson Lewis, “The Pedagogical Power of Things: Towards a Post-Intentional Phenomenology of Learning,” *Cultural Critique* 98 (2018), 127.

6 Isabelle Stengers, “Introductory Note on an Ecology of Practices,” *Cultural Studies Review* 11, no. 1 (2005): 183-196.