

Relational Distance Between Teachers and Students: What's the Problem?

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In his essay “Don’t Stand So Close to Me: Relational Distance Between Teachers and Students,” James Stillwaggon has entered the educational relation discussion from a provocative direction. His argument makes the claim that awareness of distance, and presumably the adequate maintenance thereof, should define the teaching and learning relation rather than the notion of connection, which could reduce the relation to one of identity and, in the extreme, lead to erotic malfeasance. In order to make his case Stillwaggon has used two works, one by Søren Kierkegaard and one by Jacques Lacan, both of which discuss Plato’s *Symposium* and the changing relationship, teacher-student, lover-beloved, between Socrates and Alcibiades.

It is impossible in a short response to attempt any full-scale analysis, so I shall restrict my comments to three issues. First, I wish to take minor issue with Stillwaggon’s interpretation of Kierkegaard. Second, I want to question Lacan’s idea that learning arises from a sense of lacking. And third, I shall question the premise upon which the need for this “relational distance” is built: whose are those windmills against which Stillwaggon is tilting?

KIERKEGAARD AND THE TEACHER/STUDENT RELATIONSHIP: THE UNBRIDGABLE GAP

Interpreting Kierkegaard — or, in this particular case, Johannes Climacus — is always a challenge. There is a danger that no matter what we understand him to be saying we are always on the edge of discovering it has all been done with tongue firmly in cheek. Stillwaggon argues correctly that Kierkegaard requires a disconnect between the teacher and student in order for the teaching relation to exist. However, this disconnect is not one we have any choice about in the first place. For Kierkegaard, the ultimate teacher is not Socrates but God and, thus, the disconnect between teacher and student, is between an infinite, omniscient creator and a finite, fallible human. Socrates becomes, for Kierkegaard, an example of a human teacher doing an admirable job. The reason for admiration is due to Socrates’s dedication to fulfilling his task of detaching himself from the limitations and deceptions of the finite and, in existential parlance, becoming Socrates. Each individual is born into a finite situation and must overcome that situation in order to enter more fully into relation with the infinite. The Socratic act of becoming a teacher is not dependent on the student so much as it is a fulfillment of the path upon which Socrates must walk in order to self-become. When Stillwaggon states that “if Socrates were to devote his energies and his self-becoming to his connection with Climacus, his identity as Climacus’s teacher upon which the relationship is based would be lost” he is correct, but not for the reasons he gives. Were Socrates to devote his self-becoming to his connection with Climacus he would be leaving his path, he would be in danger of being deceived and seduced by the finite. The relationship that is lost,

if Socrates is no longer teacher, is the relationship of himself with the path, the task upon which his potential to reach the infinite is based. Socrates's focus on the finite would cause the loss of relation with his teacher, the infinite knower of the path, the God who will "draw the learner up toward himself, exalt him, divert him with joy lasting a thousand years..."¹ As Stillwaggon points out, Alcibiades's attempts to "seduce" Socrates are dangerous to the educational relationship, but not the one between Socrates and Alcibiades. Rather the danger is to the relation between Socrates, his path, and God. Thus, for Climacus, the teacher is at a distance from the student for two reasons, first because there is no other possibility, and second because to choose to try and self-become through a finite other is to commit the sin of self-deception and to turn away from God. My sense is that neither of these disconnects, complete inequality in power or the one exclusive relation at the expense of all others, is the one that Stillwaggon is proposing.

LACAN AND THE DESIRE TO LEARN

Stillwaggon, in search of a means to define this distance between teacher and student, turns to Lacan's discussion on transference that includes a particular focus on the *Symposium*. The argument, according to Lacan, is that the *Symposium* is in fact an interesting reversal of the "traditional" pederastic roles in which the lover, an older, wiser, and presumably uglier man took it upon himself to seduce the beloved, the younger more beautiful boy in order to regain his own lost beauty. Thus, in the traditional situation we have an active, dominant lover and a passive, submissive beloved. The pay-off is that the beloved learns about being a man and discovers something in the way of wisdom, virtue, and inner beauty, whilst the lover receives proximity to physical beauty and a malleable recipient.

Lacan's argument is that the *Symposium* is not as clear-cut as this, and that in several cases the passive beloved has in fact become the active lover, deliberately seducing the older man to gain his wisdom, virtue, or beauty of mind. This then becomes a metaphor for the process of the learner/teacher, where the student finds himself too "lacking," and this recognition leads to a desire to be "filled." That desire is directed towards the teacher in the hope that, by drawing close to him, the learner will receive that which is desired.

Now, Stillwaggon seems to find this description, up to the seduction of the teacher, an adequate description of the process of learning, and I am not sure that I can agree. Are those things we desire really only things that we lack? Does all learning, not to mention erotic desire, come from a sense of something missing? Martin Buber argues that learning happens because of the necessary pre-requisite instincts of origination and communion.² It is not a sense of lacking that drives us to learn, but our innate creativity and need for relationship. This not a negative situation in which the learner is filling a void, but a positive act whereby she or he is fulfilling what it is to be human.

RELATIONAL DISTANCE: WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

In his essay *Education*, Buber, the philosopher of relation *par excellence*, posits something he calls the asymmetrical relation as being the teacher/student relation. Buber then situates this asymmetrical relation on a continuum between the twofold

relations of I/It and I/Thou. The I/It is the relation of the monologue, the relation in which the other is an object for use by I. I/Thou, on the other hand, is the relation of dialogue, a relation Buber refers to as friendship, which can result from the “bursting asunder” of the educational, asymmetrical relationship.³ Buber is here explicitly making the claim of distance Stillwaggon wants to assert. The asymmetrical relation is limited by the abilities of the teacher and, more importantly, by those of the student to encounter the other. This kind of discussion is not unusual in most of the literature pertaining to the educational relation, and there is none that I know of that would condone the dangerously close relationship that seems to worry Stillwaggon.

One comment I would add is that Buber does make allowances for what might be considered the changeable nature of this gap between teacher and student. Stillwaggon has not addressed the question of whether the gap between teacher and student is in fact static and, once established, can be maintained no matter what the circumstances. Changing relationship is surely what teaching and learning is about.

CONCLUSION

In his essay Stillwaggon has provided some interesting questions for us to ponder. In this response I have questioned two somewhat concealed premises; that learning requires a lack and that those who advocate for the educational relationship are blind to the dangers of ignoring the gap between teacher and student. Furthermore, I have disagreed with his interpretation of Kierkegaard’s view of the teaching/learning relationship. However, in the final analysis, Stillwaggon’s argument that teachers must maintain a sense of distance from the student is an important one. This distance, which allows the learner to directly engage the subject matter as an end and not as a means to becoming lover and beloved of the teacher, is arguably the goal of every teaching project: to allow for the emergence of an independent learner and permit oneself to disappear.

1. Soren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985) 29.

2. Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, trans. Maurice Friedman (New York: Macmillan Co., 1968) 83–103.

3. *Ibid.*, 83–103.