

Ethical Intersubjectivity as Ground for Teacher Self-care

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There is too much I agree with in Cara Furman's thoughtful essay to spend much time criticizing it. Her main claim is that "our daily work as teachers can be a means to realizing the good life." My response is more hermeneutical than critical of her important insight that teachers ought to care for their selves. I interpret Furman's claims through Chris Higgins' insight "intersubjectivity is actually more fundamental than subjectivity," making explicit how Furman's care for self is rooted in the teacher-to-student intersubjective relation.¹

Furman begins with a story. A young boy (Reuben) falls out of line, another (Julian) sees this and steps out of line to help him. Furman states that Julian's ethical action is the result of "differences in perception." She says, "Julian *saw* a moral *choice* and *acted on* it." The three terms—*saw*, *choice*, *acted on*—suggest an emergent ethical subject who, as an autonomous individual, is the origin point of his seeing, choosing, and acting. Subjective agency seems fundamental.

Consider three other terms: *being-touched*, *exposure*, *responding*. Perhaps Julian was *touched* by Reuben's fall, *exposing* him to a felt call for help, to which he *responded*. Rather than autonomous subjective agency, these terms indicate intersubjectivity. Julian's emergent ethical agency is perhaps grounded in these intersubjective relations. His ethical subjectivity might have been formed through an unwilling *exposure* to being ethically *touched* by Reuben's fall, felt as an ethical call. The intersubjective terms are not so much *alternatives* to "seeing," "choice," and "acting-on," as groundings for them; his agentive ethical subjectivity is grounded in an ethical intersubjectivity. What Furman calls his "seeing differently" involves an inescapable exposure to an incoming ethical call, embedded *in* the percept, as a trace, that in Julian's case deeply affected him ethically, prior to his agentive *cognitively-based* recognition and action. This trace carried an *imperative*, an inescapably felt *ethical* call, coming from Reuben in his falling out of line. There is then the trace of a fundamental intersubjectivity implicit in Furman's

claim, “Julian *saw* an ethical *choice* and *acted* on it,” namely, “Julian *felt* an ethical *call* and *responded* to Reuben.”

Furman’s project is about care for *self*, how “stopping time” as a “spiritual exercise” helps create habits of self-care through being “attentive to the students.” Before we turn to that, I want to suggest that even in their harriedness, teachers are not inattentive. Yes, hurried routines shape profoundly teacherly perceptions of students, but they still attend to their students. Such attending can be called instrumental, not as an end but as part of a function. In such perceptions, the student’s self is instrumentalized, interpreted as a function of school policies and harried teaching practices. Julian’s teacher had a functionalized perception of the “falling out” event, and thus an instrumentalized view of Julian’s studently self, namely, Julian as an impediment to the efficiency of the fast-paced orderliness of the day. This also suggests the teacher implicitly understood their own teacherly self instrumentally, perhaps as a teacher-as-guardian-self of good rules, ones ensuring efficient transitions in the school day. As a function of rule compliance, Julian’s teacher still saw Julian as a student, albeit instrumentally rather than “differently,” i.e., as an end in himself. Simultaneously, the teacher also saw themselves instrumentally, as a means rather than an end.

But, in the teacher’s instrumentalized perception of Julian, there was a trace of something *non-instrumentalized*. In the teacher’s instrumentalized seeing of Julian, there was a standing possibility of “seeing differently.” There was an incoming trace to which the teacher was exposed, embedded in the instrumentalized perception of Julian’s action, something that might have *touched* the teacher, *evoking* the teacher to hold back from applying the line rule. This trace may well have actually escaped the harried teacher’s *cognitive* processing, but it was still present, as a trace, calling for a different response from the teacher. And in that same perception, there might be a trace of a non-instrumentalized self of the teacher as well. Julian’s teacher might have “seen differently”: seeing Julian as an end rather than a means, and obliquely seeing also themselves as an end. But, as Furman suggests, they might need to be given time to attend to this.

Furman rightly emphasizes that (teacherly) selves are molded by daily actions, but I’m suggesting that their hurriedness can create habits of a *certain*

kind of inattention to students and their self. This sort of inattention amounts to not being aware of a “difference,” the student as an end and, obliquely, the teacher also as an end. Furman introduces Stopping Time to “better equip the teacher to attend to the child.” In particular, “Stopping Time helps the teacher slow down and see the student in the midst of the daily shuffle.” Slowing down gives time to attend to this difference, attending to students and self differently, as ends.

Furman marks “seeing differently” with intersubjective words: “our attention is *seized* when we are *exposed* to something unusual or *unexpected*.” Our attention is *seized*. We are *exposed*. To something *unexpected*. These are passive words, as if in the reverse direction of the instrumental action words. Slowing down then is an exercise in readying ourselves for something *incoming*, an *exposure*, to the *unexpected*. Something unknown may be in-coming, as traces in perception, which opens up teachers to seeing their students (and self) differently. Slowing down gives time to be exposed to children as *ends*, selves who are making sense of the world around them. As harried selves, teachers don’t have time to notice these traces of difference in their perceptions as they actively see students as functions of something else. Furman’s spiritual exercises readies the teacher for reversing this intentionality—to attend, through the incoming traces, to a *different* self of the student. Slowing down reverses something (hence the passive words), allowing Julian’s teacher to be seized by Julian as an *end*: an interpretive self, trying to make sense of the world.

The reversal that “spiritual exercises” of slowing down make possible is exposure to something *ethical*, the student-as-*end*. If Julian’s teacher had the time to attend to Julian differently, they might have been seized by something unexpected, and this reverse arrow exposes attending to Julian as an end, an interpretive self. The passivity of such attention reveals an *ethical* subject: a being worthy of being seen as a *sense-making* self, whose meanings of the world are worthy of consideration. This reversal of the “intentional arrow,” indicating something fundamentally intersubjective, reveals an *ethical* relation.

Ethical intersubjectivity grounds the possibility for self-care. Being seized by the student as an ethical subject grounds the possibility of self-care by the

teacherly self. The ethical nature of this intersubjective relation to the student, is what uncovers an ethical self in the *teacher*. To be seized by the student as an ethical subject—as an interpretive self—simultaneously uncovers the ethical subjectivity of the teacher. It reveals to the teacher a different subjectivity (self), one of ethical responsibility to the student-as-end, a self-as-responding to a call from the student ‘do me good.’ In Julian’s case, the teacher would have been seized by Julian as an *ethical* sense-maker. If Julian’s teacher had not been so much in a hurry, they might have been exposed to Julian’s ethical interpretation of Reuben’s fall, one that called to Julian, ‘help me.’ Being seized by Julian as ethical subject is a relation to the teacher-as-ethical-self. The teacher is *touched* by Julian’s action, *exposing* them to a felt ethical call coming from Julian, to which the teacher might have *responded* by suspending the rule about falling out of line.

The student’s sense-making invokes in the teacher a felt call to care for students as ethical selves. The felt ethical call from the student as interpretive self invites the teacher to see themselves differently as well, as an ethical subject. Slowing down as readying themselves for this incoming call can be viewed as the “ethical cultivation” that Furman names as the key to self-care. An intersubjective ethical relation grounds this change in self, towards self-revealing an ethical subjectivity that is attentive to the student as ethical subject. An ethical relation to the student grounds the teacher as ethical subject, and thus is what “supports our quest to live the good life.” Because the sort of subject that attends ethically to students is desirable as ethical subjectivity, then the intersubjective ethical relation to the student is simultaneously a kind of self-care for the flourishing of the self that is the teacher. The intersubjectivity that reveals the ethical appeal coming from that student-as-end does double duty, by indirectly also nurturing the ethical subjectivity of the teacher, so that the teacher, too, might flourish. Furman makes a good case that slowing down is the key to such care, self-care grounded in ethical intersubjectivity.

1 Chris Higgins, *The Good Life of Teaching: An Ethics of Professional Practice* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 168.1 edition (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011)