

On Being and Becoming

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I belong to a group of faculty who have been sharing poems with each other. The idea is to share a sort of guiding light in what has, lately, felt like dark times. I have been fascinated by how often the poems foreground the importance of identity, ontology, and the acts of becoming and identity creation. At this moment, shaping how I view the world, I have words of poetry. I can hear Walt Whitman's words in *Song of Myself* proclaim:

Do I contradict myself?

Very well then I contradict myself,

(I am large, I contain multitudes.)¹

Or I remember Emily Dickenson's *I'm Nobody! Who are you?* Where she asks:

I'm Nobody! Who are you?

Are you—Nobody—too?²

Both of these poems highlight what it looks like to wrestle with one's identity and to proclaim one's self, in a tenuous and transitional way, as part of the ongoing process of becoming. These poems remind me of the ways that education, school, touch, history, and society shape who I am and how I have become. Perhaps it is just the influence of this poetry, but I believe the exploration of becoming and identity are some of the key themes in the articles in this issue.

Likewise, I have been touched by the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins when he writes, in *My Own Heart Let Me More Have Pity On*:

My own heart let me more have pity on; let

Me live to my sad self hereafter kind,
Charitable; not live this tormented mind
With this tormented mind tormenting yet.³

Hopkins wrestles with his own guilt and feelings of inadequacy, and he implores himself to start anew, to be kind to himself, and to move on from grievance and shame. This poem was foremost in my mind when I reread the articles in this issue that take up questions around shame, forgiveness, and mistakes. Their authors reminded me that growth only comes from a confrontation with the world as it is, and not as you wish it were.

These themes -- of identity-making, ontology, mistakes, shame, and forgiveness as a process of moral becoming -- arise over and over again in this issue. The articles guide us to consider how we might become better (better people, better societies, better educators) through a study of being and becoming.

The first theme I would like to highlight in this issue concerns the making of the moral life, and the ways that mistakes, shame, and forgiveness figure into the becoming of a moral being. Mordechai Gordon focuses on the importance of self-forgiveness. In fact, he argues that it is essential for proper moral development. Shame is important as a way of turning to a new life that begins with self-forgiveness. Gordon claims that shame is an integral process for the self and does not require anything except the self for shame to be a motivation for change. In her response, Kathleen Knight-Abowitz challenges the idea that shame can be felt or be meaningful without the judgment of society as the backdrop, and, furthermore, she challenges the idea that self-forgiveness is necessary for moral development. She theorizes that, while self-forgiveness may be a necessary experience for some, it is not a daily occurrence—the kind that leads to moral development for most humans. First name? Marshall continues the examination of shame as a tool for change. He focuses on shame as a tool often used by Socrates. He argues, counter to many Classical scholars, that for Socrates shame is the byproduct of many exchanges but that Socrates's overall goal is learning and change. Michael Katz responds

to this article by drawing on extensive knowledge of Socratic commentaries to further flesh out the notion of shame as an educational tool and a tool for moral development. John Tillson, likewise, focuses on moral development, as well as a curriculum devoted to the creation of moral people that would include religious education. Tillson argues for a strong consideration of religion, religious beliefs, and directive morality as part of the purpose of schooling. He argues that the study of religion is important for the development of both a moral and meaningful life, as well as a sort of “informed consent” for how one chooses to live one’s life. He bases his argument on the idea of pairing the “epistemic criterion” and the “momentous criterion”. These criteria, in his view, buttress the claim that religion should be taught in schools. Alexander Sidorkin responds to Tillson by taking issue with both the criteria themselves and the pairing of the criteria. Sidorkin refutes the idea of pairing the “epistemic criterion” and the “momentous criterion.” He further problematizes the idea that the epistemic criterion should be less important than the momentous criterion. Itamar Manoff examines the importance of the mistake—and making mistakes—as part of education (both formal schooling and any educative experience that is part of life). Manoff creates a phenomenology of the mistake. He wonders: if mistakes are important for human learning, then what are mistakes, and how do we learn from them? He argues that mistakes are a moment within a time and context; that they are also a process that is embedded in human action, evaluation and learning. Mistakes are a moment of confrontation between the self and another, or the empirical world, or even with the self. This confrontation produces an anxiety that is necessary for moving into a new state of knowledge and being. Darryl De Marzio responds to Manoff by buttressing the argument that mistakes demand a wrestling with an ‘other.’ De Marzio agrees that fundamental to the idea of the mistake is the confrontation with a person, idea, or moment that is ‘other’ than what was intended or first thought. De Marzio notes that it is this difference and otherness that is fundamental to being able to learn from our mistakes. The authors above foreground the experience of mistakes as fundamental to becoming someone new; mistakes are foundational to both being and evolving.

The second theme of this issue that I wish to highlight is the process of identity-making and becoming. Each of these authors, in their own way, questions what it means to create an identity, to become a subject, and to evolve and change with or against what one experiences in society. Glenn Hudak—the author of a General Session paper at PES—writes about the ways that people experience relationships and normalcy. He highlights the experience of autism, and questions whether or not autism is an identity *a priori* to society, or is, in fact, shaped by the society in which the identity exists. Hudak concludes that identity and the experience of one's self are tied up with the experience of one's society. Adam Greteman responds to Hudak by extending Hudak's argument to focus on aesthetics, and the ways that aesthetics allow us to view the world. Aesthetic moments also affect our sense of being and normalcy. Aesthetics can also act as a foundation for bridge-building as we connect to others. Sharon Todd continues the focus on being and identity-making by focusing on the process of subjectification. Central to the experience of subjectification is the phenomenon of touch. Todd theorizes the ontology of touch. She focuses on the many ways that our being is influenced by time, by presence, by touch, and by embodiment. She further connects an ontology of touch to education and to the ways that education works toward subjectification through embodiment and a sense of touching and being touched—both physical and metaphysical. Heather Greenhalgh-Spencer responds to Todd by challenging the primacy of touch as part of the educational experience. Because touch is so often shaped by power dynamics—including within the context of the school—Greenhalgh-Spencer agrees with the importance of touch and embodiment but is skeptical of the implication of a greater focus on touch within the classroom. Kelvin Beckett further focuses on identity-creation, and on subjectification as one of the purposes of schooling. Beckett wonders if we should focus so much on the subject and subjecthood or (?), instead, draw our focus to schooling as a pathway toward creating a better society. In order to flesh out Dewey's argument on the importance of orienting education toward the betterment of society, Beckett draws on the work of R.S. (?)Peters and Freire. He argues that all three theorists orient education away from the subject and toward the good society. David Meens responds to Beckett by disagreeing with

his characterizations of these theorists. Instead, he argues that Dewey must be set into contradiction with Freire's notion of the subject and purposes of education. Likewise, both Dewey and Freire, Meens argues, must be set against the work of Peters. The authors come from different standpoints, Meens argues, and should not be used as a means of fleshing out arguments about the good society. Meens argues that, contra Beckett, these theorists focus on the student as the subject of education. Steven (right?) Zhao also takes up notions of schooling and education. He argues that learning is an existential enterprise. Relationships—particularly between students and teachers—are the foundation for the existential change that is the primary aim of education. The new self emerges through the dialectical relationship between the student and the world. Underpinning this is the relationship between the student and the teacher. First name? Gibbony responds to this by focusing on the importance of teacher sacrifice as the backbone of the relationship that allows the student to experience 'becoming'. Jessica Lussier adds to this debate by foregrounding the nature of the teaching relationship. She pushes against Nodding's notions of care and points out that this "caring" relationship is undergirded by a sort of transactional enterprise: I will care for you if you also care for me. Lussier rejects Noddings's notions of care in favor of deeper theorizations of 'the offering'. Lussier wants to predicate the change and identity-making that can happen for students in school on the relationships that are built when teachers 'offer' forms of living and pathways for becoming. Mel Kutner responds with a further fleshing out of the idea of the "economies of exchange" as embedded in economics of care. All the authors above pinpoint the important ways that schooling can shape who we become and how we become.

At the end of the day, the focus on how we make ourselves, how we become, and who we become, frames a rich landscape inviting our exploration. We focus on the development of selves into moral and flourishing persons as one of the primary purposes of education. And yet, this focus on the self only makes sense when the self is also seen as a very small part of the whole. We focus on the experience of the droplet of water while also acknowledging that this droplet is part of an ocean. This idea is better expressed by another

excerpt from Whitman's *Song of Myself*:

Have you reckon'd a thousand acres much? have you reckon'd the earth much?

Have you practis'd so long to learn to read?

Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?

Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems,

You shall possess the good of the earth and sun, (there are millions of suns left,)

You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the spectres in books,

You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,

You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self.⁴

1 Whitman, W. *Song of Myself*. <https://interestingliterature.com/2018/11/song-of-myself-a-poem-by-walt-whitman/>

2 Dickenson, E. *I'm Nobody! Who are you?*. <https://poets.org/poem/im-nobody-who-are-you-260>

3 Manley Hopkins, G. *My own heart let me more have pity on*. <https://interestingliterature.com/2018/12/my-own-heart-let-me-more-have-pity-on-a-poem-by-gerard-manley-hopkins/>

4 Whitman, W. *Song of Myself*. <https://interestingliterature.com/2018/11/song-of-myself-a-poem-by-walt-whitman/>