

Good Vibrations? An Educational Critique

Gert Biesta

Brunel University London

There is one particular reason why it is quite difficult to respond to Walter Gershon's essay, "An Educational Philosophy of Resonance: Theoretical and Material Possibilities and Consequences." It has to do with the fact that he articulates his own criterion for how one might, or perhaps ought to, engage with a piece like this: "It is by giving a person the trust and dignity to enunciate in some fashion (intention, action, verbalization, and so on) what they find to be resonant that a given resonance can be strongly critiqued." Or: "Only when a resonance is respected can it be fully engaged." It is this respect for the resonance "as it is," "as it comes" — and perhaps we should also add "as it sounds" — which, according to Gershon, provides "an ethical foundation for strong critique."

I was drawn to this passage because it raises the question of critique, which Gershon does in response to a question raised earlier in the essay, namely the question, "what isn't resonance?" I find this an important question because one way in which I read the key message of the essay is indeed as the claim that "everything is resonance." There are two aspects to this claim. One is the suggestion that everything is *in* resonance with everything else — which then makes it difficult to claim that at some level things are, can be, or ought to be disconnected or separated. The other is the suggestion that everything is constantly *resonating*, that is, in constant flux and motion — which, according to Gershon, means that any attempt to pin something down, to limit or channel it, goes against this ontological flux and is, therefore, ethically problematic. This is what I think lies behind his critique of learning objectives, lesson plans, the requirement that students sit, or the suggestion that schools can and ought to be separated from the world "outside":

According to a philosophy of resonance, measuring people and systems according to static goals, objectives, and standards in equally static ways is inaccurate and unethical. Because nothing is still, regarding any-thing [*sic*] as static is asking the impossible. Evaluating anyone, particularly children and youth for whom change is learning at an accelerated rate (and what we want from educational processes, according to what they cannot possibly do (be still) is unethical.

"Asking the impossible" I will come back to this below, but let me first say more about the issue of critique. As mentioned, Gershon argues that respect needs to come first and that critique should "arrive" after that. The point is also made in the discussion about consensus, dissonance and relevance, where Gershon writes that resonance, unlike consensus, "accepts that all ... ideas are possible" and that it is from this acceptance that a "space for critique" is provided. I find this a valuable insight because we do indeed need to make sure that everything can "arrive," or again, in a more aural language, that everything can be heard, before we start critiquing. Yet one issue that in my view is not satisfactorily resolved in this essay is what the act of critique entails.

One way to think about (the point of) critique is to consider it an act of disagreement or, if I try to be as precise as possible, an act of *condemnation*. Here, critique takes the form of a (moral) judgment, as in “This is wrong!” or “This is bad!” or “This is unethical!” — to use Gershon’s own word. I tend to think that critique often operates in this way, and there may well be moments when this is the right thing to do, although what concerns me is the destructive impetus, which is why I am taken by Gershon’s reference to the idea of respect.

The other way to think about critique is to see it as an instance of judgment. It is a moment of trying to engage with the question, *What is to be done?* Here, critique is perhaps a little less destructive than when it functions as condemnation. I say “a little less” because critique still requires that we come to a decision about a way forward, and going forward means that we pursue some possibilities and not others. Critique here is about introducing a distinction so as to indicate what might matter (which is connected to Gershon’s question of *relevance*). Is this a more respectful way to engage with the idea of “critique”? I am inclined to think so, but this would be a good point for the discussion.

Irrespective of whether we think of critique as condemnation or as an answer to the question of what is to be done, critique always needs a *criterion* (critique and criterion actually go back to the same Greek root of *krinein*). I wish to take up the question of the criterion in two ways, first, with regard to the issue of critique and then with regard to the issue of education where, in my view, the question of the criterion is really critical.

I do not have the space here to go into the intricacies of the question of critique, so let me do approach the question by way of describing how the author “performs” his critique of education — a “performance,” if that’s the right word, that is quite central because, if I see it correctly, it is in the application of the general philosophy of resonance to education that it transforms into what the author describes as an “*educational* philosophy of resonance” (emphasis added). I am sure that the philosophical literature has quite accurate categories for the mode of critique deployed by the author, but, in my own language, I would call it an ontological mode of critique. Simply put (for the sake of brevity): the argument starts from a claim that reality is really like this (in this case, everything is resonance), from which it is then argued that everything that tries to go *against* how reality is is problematic — or in Gershon’s terms, unethical. I think that this is indeed what informs his mode of critique, as he writes, for example, that “a philosophy of educational resonance is therefore *an ontological challenge* to the linear and sequential educational epistemologies that serve as the foundation for contemporary American education in both theory and practice” (emphasis added).

I am not entirely sure about this “style” of critique. I am first of all surprised that ontology is being used as the basis for critique because I had thought that we — and “we” is of course a difficult word that needs further unpacking — had come to the insight that “doing ontology” tends to create *more* problems rather than fewer and that it is therefore generally advisable to be a bit more relaxed, a bit more gentle, a

bit more modest, and perhaps a bit more pragmatic with our claims about “what is.” This is also important because “doing ontology” can easily backfire and, before we know it, we are destroying each other because of our (investment in our) different ontologies.

This is not to suggest that a turn away from the visible to the aural is not without merit, but I think the merit lies somewhere else (and I will conclude with some suggestions about that). I think that I’m also not entirely sure about this style of critique because in its particular effects — that is, the way contemporary practices of schooling¹ are criticized — Gershon articulates very clear preferences about what is considered bad schooling. I personally think that we do not need ontology in order to do this and that it is actually a detour. In my view, it would be better to remain in the axiological field where we can engage directly with questions about what desirable and undesirable forms and modes of schooling and education might be.

And, here, I move to the second area where the question of the criterion plays a role, as I am quite curious about the criterion Gershon utilizes to come to a judgment about what education ought to be. What I found rather lacking in the essay is an appreciation of the teleological structure of education, that is, the fact that education always raises the question of purpose, the question of what it is that we want our students to achieve (in the broadest sense of the word, which should also include the question of how we hope that our students might “become”). From this angle, there is little in education that is desirable in itself, as such a judgment can only ever be made in relation to what it is we seek (our students) to achieve.

So, whereas I could agree with most of the criticism the author levels at contemporary practices of schooling, I also strongly disagree with most points. The reason is that I can imagine situations where it is, for example, very important that students get it right (learning to fly a Boeing Dreamliner, for example), where the curriculum is linear and structured so that everything is covered and nothing forgotten (learning to extract a tooth, for example), where it is important to sit and sit still (in order to be able to pay attention and perhaps even respect something), or where there is a clear separation between school and the world outside (when the world outside tries to colonize the school by bringing the logic of the economy into the classroom, for example).

Are all such maneuvers unethical because they seek to bring structure to what is in flux, because they try to slow down what is in motion, because they try to separate what appears to be connected? I actually don’t think so because, for me, the educational challenge — and perhaps we can also call it the educational task or responsibility — is not to keep everything in motion, flux, or vibration, but to engage with the far more difficult question of figuring out what the “good vibrations” are. While sometimes this may mean that we ask our students to do what is possible, in other cases the most important educational gesture would precisely be to ask them to do the impossible — particularly if, after Jacques Derrida, we see the impossible not as what is *not* possible, but as that which cannot be *foreseen* as a possibility.

This brings me to a final observation, which has to do with what I would like to refer to as the as-yet unfulfilled potential of this essay. If I were to formulate it in the mode of critique-as-condemnation, I would say that the essay starts out with a discussion about sound, vibration, and resonance but, after a couple of pages, turns it into something that, after John Dewey and Arthur Bentley, I would call a transactional ontology. There is, of course, much that can be done with such an ontology, and this is how I have engaged with the essay, but I think that questions of sound, vibration, and resonance — and particularly sound and resonance — actually point in a very different direction from what was pursued in the essay, and it would be very important for Gershon to explore in this direction as well. This is not the direction of the materiality of vibration but what we perhaps could call the “aurality” of being-in-the-world (or the phenomenology of an aural way of being-in-the-world). From here, I am particularly intrigued by the “re” of “resonance,” because the question as to what it might mean that sounds sound *again* (for example, “in” another human being) may well provide us with a completely different avenue towards grasping te complexities — and perhaps, I may add, the mystery — of education.

1. I would say that the critique is mainly focused on schooling, not education.