

Why Whitehead? Toward a Pedagogy of the Truly Personal

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I begin my response to Morgan by acknowledging what might be characterized as the elephant sitting in the corner. Why Whitehead? Morgan tells us that she has recently revisited Whitehead but does not tell us why. It is puzzling. Whitehead has not been a prominent figure of late in the pages of *Philosophy of Education* or *Educational Theory*. I am not sure I have ever seen another feminist educator invoke Whitehead. So what is Morgan up to? Who or what brought Whitehead to her attention? Why did his thinking resonate? She does not tell us. She spends more time in her essay differentiating Whitehead from feminist perspectives—a task that most readers would find unnecessary—than offering an affirmative case for “dialectical collaboration” with Whitehead and his ideas. Her differentiation is, in the main, accurate but perhaps beside her own point. I want Morgan to tell us why Whitehead. I want her to tell us how she stumbled upon this or who (re)introduced her to him. I want her to highlight the passages that provoked her to write this essay. I think that in the process she would make a stronger case for the value of Whitehead’s process philosophy to the feminist effort to construct a viable pedagogy of the personal. My purpose here is to lure Morgan back to the point I think she is trying to make, a point that is well worth our time and attention.

I should first rehearse how I read Morgan as she takes us “Desperately Seeking Evelyn.” Her organizing point seems to be that feminist educators share with Whitehead an interest in what Morgan calls “pedagogies of the personal.” For Whitehead, the personal is metaphysical; for feminists, the personal is political. Nonetheless, each is decidedly rooted in conceptions of human persons who are concrete and active in the construction of their own futures. Still, Whitehead’s metaphysics results in a kind of idealism that renders material and ideological limitations on choice and action invisible. Morgan describes Whitehead’s acknowledgment of his wife, Evelyn, as a metaphor for the disconnect that seems inherent in his view. While he recognizes that Evelyn has played a significant role in the development of his thinking, he does not even name her in his acknowledgment, describing her only in reference to him, that is, as his wife. Her choice, her action, her personhood is constrained in a way that his is not.

Morgan lays out two particular “problematic dimensions” in Whitehead’s thinking (from a feminist point of view): his assumption of affective naturalism and his theory of generic privatized individualism. Regarding the first, she distinguishes the feminist view of a “colonized subjectivity...constrained by structures of privilege and oppression” from Whitehead’s view that a person/learner’s interests, needs, and curiosity are naturally given. Morgan argues that the educator cannot take interests and needs for granted as Whitehead urges, but must subject them to political interrogation and recognize them as a site of struggle.

Regarding the second, Morgan suggests that “Whitehead is committed to a theory of generic, privatized individualism” because he privileges the transcendent in conceptualizing subjectivity, and because he maintains a sharp public/personal dualism. The concrete, embodied, intense, focused love of the mother does not transcend the specificity of the moment, rendering it “dangerously defective and extreme.” Whitehead rejects, on metaphysical grounds, precisely that which much feminist analysis seeks to re-center. Where he seems to join company with modern feminist analysis, in the refutation of dualism, he is unable to perform that refutation regarding public and private life. This is seen in his references to Evelyn who is an unidentified wife; his private personal relationship with her is cordoned off from and subordinate to his public achievement.

In the end, Morgan leaves us with the suggestion that feminists and other critical educators might want to pay some attention to Whitehead despite spending most of her time and attention rightly telling us about the elements of Whitehead’s thinking that are problematic. There is one sentence, however, where Morgan opens the door in a significant way. She says, “Many feminists reject this picture of generic concrete subjectivity even while *they might be sympathetic to an underlying ontology of temporal process and nonsubstantiality* [emphasis added].”

Before taking up what is of value in an ontology of temporal process, I would like to raise two questions that might be considered in rereading and rethinking Morgan’s essay. First, Morgan tells us that the “Whitehead person” is “an anonymous actual occasion.” This is a far stretch from the view of “person” that animates feminist conceptions of education. Given this stretch, does it make sense to suggest that both Whitehead and feminists articulate “pedagogies of the personal?” In what sense, recognizable to feminists, is Whitehead’s philosophy of education accurately described as “personal?”

Second, Morgan chooses to characterize her position as feminist, a characterization that works for me at least. Still, it is worth asking in what sense does she speak for—does her analysis apply for—all feminists? Her endnotes mention several feminists of “first world” and “third world” locations, white women and women of color, many well-known and often cited in PES circles. Morgan makes no claim that she represents all feminists, but it is useful to avoid essentializing feminist positions and to interrogate the construction of the position Morgan offers.

In the remainder of this response, I would like to make clear what I think Morgan is quite right about: Evelyn is depersonalized and it matters. Despite that, Whitehead’s process philosophy does open a space for persons-in-relation. This space is complementary, though clearly not identical, to feminist interests in the particularity of the politically situated, non-fungible person.

Whitehead’s ontology of process is sophisticated and embedded in his mathematical and scientific understanding. Nonetheless, it can be adequately if simplistically captured for our purposes by saying that Aristotle’s category of substance as the basic ontological building block is replaced by relation in Whitehead’s philosophy. The metaphysician asks, “Of course there are persons (or chairs or trees or), but are there *really* persons (or chairs or trees or...)? This question from Aristotle to

Whitehead was typically unpacked with reference to some version of substance, though in wildly disparate forms. Whitehead substituted events for substance, conceiving events as necessary connections over time and space. Just as a point is nested in time and space, so are the events that are persons and their predicates nested in all reality (including, though Whitehead apparently did not recognize this, the political, social, cultural, and economic determinants that feminists and other critical educators take seriously). Any point makes no sense, has no existence, except in connection to the points and other parameters that designate and define it. Any person makes no sense, has no existence, except as acting in relation to the Others and other discursive parameters that usher him or her into existence. Ontology in Whitehead's hands is a matter of verbs rather than nouns, of relation rather than substance. Clearly, an ontological shift of this magnitude requires a reconceptualization of every other category of human existence and the activity we call education. Does such work have appeal for feminists? Morgan suggests it might and I think she might be right. She has articulated neatly the concerns that ought to make feminists approach Whitehead with caution. Nonetheless, she recommends approach over avoidance.

As I noted above, I am not aware of any feminist work in education that is grounded explicitly in Whitehead's theorizing. I am aware, however, of much work in Christian theology, including feminist work, that takes Whitehead's process philosophy as its starting point and comes to conclusions that I believe would be appealing to many feminists.¹ John Cobb, Jr., a Christian theologian who identifies Whitehead as his mentor, is a case in point. Cobb has authored a long list of books that take a perspective on "process and faith" and develop that into particular positions related to religious, political, social, and economic issues.² In his 1994 monograph, *Sustaining the Common Good: A Christian Perspective on Global Economy*, Cobb articulates a vision of persons-in-communities that allows for non-fungible, concrete persons who are nonetheless essentially interdependent and connected. He cites Whitehead in criticizing contemporary global economic policies for their "misplaced concreteness," arguing that any theory based on a view of humans as *homo economicus* (that is, as motivated by the self-interested pursuit of goods and service) fails to fully recognize and theorize other human motivations (for example, sympathy or a desire for relatedness).

Cobb's work is an example of the kind of theorizing that Whitehead's philosophy apparently supports. It is concrete and concerned with recognizable persons; it is steeped in socio-political realities and constraints; it responds to real issues of choice and action. While it is a stretch for me to link Whitehead's metaphysically grounded "pedagogy of the personal" to what I understand as the feminist pursuit of a pedagogy similarly named, it is no stretch at all to imagine how Whitehead's replacement of substance with relation as ontologically prior might animate feminist educators' efforts to take politically conditioned relation seriously. As I pursue my own work along the lines of a pedagogy of relation, I am personally moved by Morgan's effort to look more deeply at Whitehead's work.³

As I have read and considered and responded to Morgan's essay into pedagogies of the personal, I have been thinking of poet Galway Kinnell's distinction between

the merely personal and the truly personal (though I confess to being unable to locate the appropriate reference at this time). The merely personal describes and addresses the concrete descriptors of my life in a way that leaves it as *my* life, not taken up in relation to the lives of others, not located in relation to the world in and with which I live, not laid out in a way that might express and constitute the Life in which all participate. The truly personal accomplishes what the merely personal cannot, opening us to that which makes us persons at all. Morgan cautiously invites us to consider Whitehead as opening a space to the truly personal.

1. See, for example, Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

2. John B. Cobb, Jr., *Sustaining the Common Good: A Christian Perspective on the Global Economy* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1994), 25. To get a sense of the range and temper of Cobb's work, see <<http://www.processandfaith.org/>> a website linked to Cobb's wide-ranging effort to link process philosophy, Christian faith, and social justice action.

3. This terminology is utilized by Alexander Sidorkin and Charles Bingham who are leading a collaborative effort involving at least a dozen philosophers of education to develop a pedagogical theory that places relation at the center of educational understanding, deliberation and action. That work is currently taking shape as an edited volume to be submitted for review in the summer of 2002.