

Present Still, the Integrity of the Educator

Paul Smeyers

Katholieke Universiteit Leuven

“The educational fixation on authority deters educators from the more important matter of empowering students,” Charles Bingham says. And above all, “authority” is enigmatic and this quality is usually ignored. I am inclined to agree with this. Whether we like it or not, its workings are not clear. Sometimes students experience the authority of the teacher though she is trying hard not to be an authority figure; in other cases her authority is questioned by parents for instance. There are many more examples that may illustrate several points that are made in the essay such as that authority is not a thing which humans can choose to use or not. However, I cannot but ask myself: How far does this go? And in what sense is it helpful to understand what is going on here to refer to Derrida?

Derrida’s deconstruction opens up an ethics sensitive to the demands, not of presence, but of absence; not of identity, but of difference. Unlike the mainstream of the metaphysics of morals, deconstruction does not invoke universal, rational, or natural laws. It does not answer to them, but assumes responsibility for them and investigates their extraordinary power to marginalize everything that seems particular, irrational, or unnatural in their light. He writes about the rights of the different and keeps alert to the call of the Other. Wondering about the origin of that which calls for a response, he practices a radical *Gelassenheit* (letting be) which is bent not on assimilating the other but on letting the other be. As the event being singular each time, to the measure of the otherness of the other, one must each time invent and reinvent the responsibilities, not without concepts, but by going beyond the concept, without any guarantee or certainty. The result of this is “justice,” the experience of aporia, of the impossible, of the undecidable, and thus deconstruction involves singularity, always demanded, never accomplished. Here, justice is the idea of a gift without exchange, of a relation to the other that is utterly irreducible to the normal rules of circulation, gratitude, recognition, or symmetry. That is why it appears to imply a certain kind of madness or mystique.

Interesting as this may be, inviting us to take a radical position — which surely can be a corrective to the normal way of dealing with responsibility — confronts us as well with problems. One of the standard criticisms is that it seems to embrace the conviction that, because we are doomed to choose, every choice will result in the omission of and harm to other values, ultimately thus of other people. Is there more than the advice of Derrida to keep the debate about ethics as fair as possible and as free as possible from manipulative interests? Is it in this sense more procedural than content oriented? But, does there not remain a need to arrive at consensus, and to institutionalize it in some sense and avoid the alternative of paralysis and despair? While we can agree that any and all structures of meaning may be deconstructed and reshaped, it is difficult to accept that we should view conceptual structure as hopelessly unjust or terroristic in itself. The poststructural critique of language and

adoption of the law of difference do not preclude the existence of the subject; it need only imply that the self is not autonomous, not wholly self-creating or single-minded and coherent. Moreover, in realizing that we are never a member of a single community, and identifying ourselves sometimes as members of marginalized communities, we can find tools to imagine a world other than that of liberalism. Recognizing each of us as potentially radically plural makes alternative discourses an open possibility, but requires no reference to some unrepresentable that makes us who we are.

A way out of this blind alley might be found if we accept the position that the educator cannot but offer the child at least a possible way of living a human life. Without the initiation into intersubjectivity, a subject cannot find identity. The illusion that this makes the subject unfree is based on a mirage of absolute freedom. The idea that intersubjectivity imposes on the other because it denies her possible radical difference, is also based on the mistaken disregard of what human beings have in common with each other — minimally, the prerequisite of being recognized as human. Finally, if one accepts that the individual is responsible for her actions — even if one assumes the subject is passive concerning her basic values — one must also accept that the subject has some ethical bedrock, some guiding criteria. How could this be denied, if the intersubjectivity is characterized not only by language but also by practices? The real violence in ethics and in education seems to be indifference toward the other, denying her any status as human. The educator is therefore not necessarily a hidden manipulator, but elicits appropriate behavior through her own integrity. She makes clear the weaknesses of her own position while making explicit what she stands for. The principles and values which, in one's own best judgment, are worthy of defending, refer to what we are interested in concerning the just and the good life; it is thus tightly connected to viewing oneself as a member of a community that makes judgments of value and to caring about what that community endorses and it includes taking seriously others' doubts about our convictions as well.

Recalling the intersubjective origin of identity, the need for recognition and the intersubjective nature of reflective judgment should dispel the impression that the resulting authenticity is yet another restatement of the philosophy of the subject. If the educator is characterized by her willingness to stand for something and simultaneously willing to care for someone, then the philosophy of authenticity, thus conceived, should also help the educator out of the problems that the Enlightenment project have pressed on her. While the integrative authenticity of the educator should rescue her from despair and immobilism, for the person receiving education, not only is there more room, there are also more rooms. Still she remains in the house of Being.

Where does this leave Bingham's discussion of authority? Maybe the example he offers has not quite the strength to make his point. Is there a confusion about what grading is? Is it not too simple to say that the teacher has no authority before the grades are given out? He does not say that he disagrees with giving out grades *per se*, yet one wonders whether he is not on the verge of saying that. Is he confusing

being an authority with being in authority, taking care of discipline and practical matters of classroom management with the credentials one has acquired in a particular subject? Are teachers not part of a community of practitioners too who have particular standards and who can be held responsible for what they teach, how they teach, and how they grade papers? Is it because doubt is possible, or that one can be mistaken that one gets this feeling of being a charlatan? Surely, something is not correct or incorrect because the teacher says so, in this sense she represents "authority." But neither is it the case that anything goes. And does getting initiated into a particular subject not require being willing to be taught, which implies that doubt must come after belief? Should we be silenced about "authority" because it is not possible to make exhaustively clear all the aspects that are implied? Perhaps what we need instead is a detailed discussion of how it is relevant for teachers and pupils in particular situations. True, the way it is represented will make clear what it stands for, true this cannot be known a priori, that is, at an abstract level, but to argue this is something different from saying that it is "completely contingent upon performances that could not be anticipated unless one could actually see the future" or that we have to become un-Enlightened.

In conclusion, I do not think that it is possible to stop talking about authority for the simple reason that the educational relationship is an ethical one. I still think it is important to practice what one preaches, but one should take the trouble not to confuse different contexts. I also hold, following Foucault, that power works in both ways and that there are always power relationships at work (and that this is his legacy, never mind whether they suppress or liberate), which implies that the various ways authority works should be looked into. Finally, I agree that it is the students who in the end will or will not recognize the authority of the teacher, and that they in this sense become authors, yet I would hesitate to add "of their own world." The shared understandings and practices this presupposes seem too often to be forgotten in the rhetoric of talking about empowerment.