

## The Gap Between Identity and Subjectivity: Philosophical Advocacy and the Question of Education

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Glenn Hudak has written a tremendously rich essay — in a sense it is so rich that the essay can only just contain all the ideas it carries. In my view, this is not a weakness of the essay, but rather one of its strengths. As I do not disagree with the main thrust of the essay — also because the essay is less written in order to defend a particular point of view, and much more as an attempt to explore an idea, that of philosophical advocacy — I would rather wish to use this response to emphasize and perhaps also amplify some of the ideas put forward by Hudak. While I will try to “cover” the main ideas and insights put forward in the essay, I will particularly focus on the importance of the distinction between identity and subjectivity — a distinction that is not only philosophically relevant but also, as I think the essay shows, educationally of the utmost importance.

The central idea in Hudak’s essay is that of *philosophical advocacy*. The notion is explored along two lines — that of socialization and that of subjectification — and in relation to the latter Hudak connects philosophical advocacy to the notion of *irony*. Hudak explains that advocacy “commonly means: to ‘represent’ another; to speak on another’s behalf [or] to ‘promote’ action on behalf of a cause.” The most “direct” meaning of advocacy can indeed be found in the idea of speaking on another’s behalf, in that advocacy contains the Latin word for voice (*vox, vocem*). It is in relation to this dimension of advocacy that Hudak’s discussion of facilitated communication gains significance, because the key issue at stake in the case of Luz P. is precisely the question of speech, that is, whether Luz P. can be seen as a subject of speech when she is unable to produce her own speech but needs someone else who adds a voice or, to be more precise, who adds a *recognizable* voice. The latter point is important here, because what the judges seem to demand is that Luz P., through her facilitator, insert herself in the existing “order of speech.” They demand, in other words, that she speak *like everyone else*. Coming to speech thus becomes a matter of *socialization*, while speech itself becomes a matter of *identity*, that is, of identifying with the existing “order of speech.”

In the context of this example, philosophical advocacy — if I have understood it correctly — is about highlighting the philosophical flaws in an argumentation that leaves Luz P. literally speechless. Or, if the notion of philosophical flaws sounds too strong, then perhaps we can say that *philosophical advocacy* — unlike, say, legal or political advocacy — is about bringing *philosophical* expertise to the situation in order to show what kind of assumptions are governing argumentation and action, in order both to question their legitimacy and to show alternative ways of seeing, thinking, and doing. Hudak particularly focuses on the question how legitimate it is to start from the assumption of *incompetence*, that is, from the assumption that Luz P. cannot speak, and not only needs to *learn* how to speak — or how to speak

*properly* — but also needs to *demonstrate* that she can speak. In this particular case the latter seems to turn into the demand that her advocate, that is, her “voice,” demonstrates that she or he can accurately and reliably represent Luz P.’s thoughts and intentions. (Putting it this way actually shows the strangeness of the demand, because how often would a judge require that the voice of a “normally” speaking person demonstrates its ability to accurately and reliably convey what goes on “inside”? Is this not precisely what a judge needs to judge rather than a voice needs to demonstrate, if a voice can speak for itself at all?)

With regard to the question of competence and incompetence, therefore, philosophical advocacy takes the form of pointing out that starting from the assumption of incompetence is just one of the ways in which we can understand what it means to speak and to come to speech, and that a radically different line of thought and action opens up if, instead, we start from the assumption of *competence*. This would require that we start from the assumption that Luz P. — or for that matter anyone — *is always already speaking* and therefore *is already a subject of speech*, and that the onus is on *us*, as listeners or, as I prefer to put it, as those “being addressed”,<sup>1</sup> to “figure out” what to do with this, rather than to demand that others speak *in* our terms and *on* our terms.

I use the phrase “figuring out” quite deliberately here, partly in order to highlight the messy character of such experiences, that is, the fact that they create a predicament and even a burden, and that we need to find our way “out” experimentally rather than that the road is always already clear, and partly in order *not* to bring in lofty philosophical concepts too soon, concepts that also run the risk of moving us away too quickly from the difficulty and the burden of the situation we find ourselves in. By which I am also trying to say that we should perhaps not immediately use the word “responsibility” to “cover” or “cover up” such cases, not because responsibility may have no role to play here, but perhaps because there is more at stake than just that.

This connects to two important points Hudak makes. One has to do with two different conceptions of inclusion that are at play in the discussion. One sees inclusion as a process of adaptation to an existing order — and more specifically to an existing order of speech — so that speech becomes a matter of socialization. Here the philosophical advocate becomes an agent of socialization, handing out identities to those who seek to come to speech. The other starts from the assumption that there is already a speaking subject and a subject of speech, so that inclusion — if we still wish to use the term — becomes a process of transformation of the existing order of speech so that new and different ways of speaking and thus of being-subject become possible. It might be tempting to suggest that in this configuration the philosophical advocate becomes the one who brings about the transformation of the order of speech and thus becomes an agent of subjectification, handing out subjectivities to those who seek to come to speech. But this would keep all the power relationships in place and would just stick different labels onto what is going on. (The point here is not dissimilar to Paulo Freire’s insistence that banking education can never be a methodology for emancipation.)

This is where I see the importance of Hudak's discussion of irony, in that irony gives a name to the experience of being "out of position," of *not* being an agent of socialization, of *not* being a representative of and being in command of the existing "order of speech." That does not mean, as Hudak correctly argues, that irony implies a total detachment from such order, but rather hints at a "detached attachment" (rather than an "attached detachment"), where the "radical doubt about one's practical identity" tries to keep open a "space" — for lack of a better word — where one can be addressed by the other so that the other can appear as a subject of speech, rather than always already knowing what it is that the other will say before he or she has spoken. Irony thus works as a moment of dis-identification which always carries with it the possibility of subjectification, that is, of speaking in a singular way, outside of any order — which also means speaking "out of order." (Note, by the way, that what opens up here is the *possibility* of subjectification, not its *certainty*.)

Hudak refers to this space as a "strange 'autistic' space [where] the philosophical advocate re-attaches to their commitments by bringing to life the decomposed material of previously held social roles available to one, their practical identity, such as being an advocate." By referring to this space as "autistic" Hudak highlights that in this space one is ultimately alone, even if one is *alone in the presence of others*. To be alone in the presence of others is therefore not to highlight that one is without others but that, whilst in the presence of others, one is also *with oneself*, which means that one not only carries the burden of being with others — which always runs the risk of turning into an act of powerful benevolence or false generosity, as Freire calls it — but also carries *the burden of being with oneself* in one's unique singularity (which is all very well captured in the fascinating and challenging notion of "contiguous autism"). It is this double burden that, in my view, lies at the heart of what Hudak teaches us in this great essay about philosophical advocacy, and, more importantly, about the dangerous "pretense" of philosophical advocacy.

Finally: is this just a lesson for philosophers who seek to be advocates? Is, in other words, the predicament that Hudak makes visible in his essay first and foremost a *philosophical* predicament and a predicament for *philosophers*? If I were to disagree with Hudak — although I do not think that there is a need to do so — I would suggest that what Hudak has shown us is first and foremost an *educational* predicament and a predicament for those educators who do not seek to work (just) as agents of socialization — handing out identities to their students — but who continue to be moved by the "impossible" pretense of education orientated toward subjectification, that is, toward the impossible possibility of the "being subject" of both the educator and the one being educated.

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1. On this distinction, see Gert J.J. Biesta, "No Education Without Hesitation: Thinking Differently About Educational Relations," in *Philosophy of Education 2012*, ed. Claudia Ruitenberg (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2013), 1-13.