

Don't Stand So Close to Me: Relational Distance Between Teachers and Students

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“Why do schools remain if not for meeting?”¹ The manifesto of pedagogical relation uses this question to emphasize the human connectedness of teachers and students as the *sine qua non* of teaching and learning. In doing so, its authors make use of spatial metaphors of proximity in order to frame their concept of educational relationships. On the one hand, relational pedagogy seeks to overcome the “exclusion,” “isolation,” “alienation,” and “frustration” that are often experienced as a result of bureaucratized systems of education.² On the other, it holds that, in all forms of education, it is the relationship, more than anything else, that is taught.³ But theories of pedagogical relationship need not focus solely on meetings, or connections, between teachers and students. Gert Biesta’s essay “‘Mind the Gap!’ Communication and the Educational Relation,” while principally concerned with establishing the epistemological conditions for learning in the space between teachers and students, has a significant ethical message as its consequence; namely, that a relation between two subjects is defined by distance as well as proximity.⁴ Biesta’s essay reminds us that to do away with the gap or disconnect between teachers and students would be to reduce relation to identity, where no teaching or learning can take place. The distance between teachers and students establishes the respective roles that define what they do collectively as education. In other words, being attentive to teaching and learning as a kind of relation might mean keeping our distance.

In this essay, I look at two ways of envisioning the significance of distance in teacher-student relationships — Søren Kierkegaard’s *Philosophical Fragments* and Jacques Lacan’s seminar on transference — both of which make use of the relationship between Alcibiades and Socrates to illustrate their respective ideas.⁵ Both emphasize the significance of desire, an attraction caused by an awareness of one’s own lack, and a draw toward proximity, as the basis of educational relation. At the same time, both argue unequivocally for distance to be maintained between teachers and students. Søren Kierkegaard’s *Philosophical Fragments* — the meditation on teacher distance *par excellence* — shows us how this distance is a definitive mark of the teacher-student relationship, or how the roles of teacher and student are abandoned when this distance falls apart. Jacques Lacan’s seminar on transference shows the importance of distance from another angle, that of student and teacher motivations. In a discussion of Plato’s *Symposium* that founds pedagogical relation on the reversal of traditional pederastic roles, Lacan’s position suggests that the student’s desire is maintained through a misrecognition of the teacher that can only be maintained if the two remain at a distance.

KIERKEGAARD’S EROTICS OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

In chapter two of *Philosophical Fragments*, “The God as Teacher and Savior,” Kierkegaard, in the guise of Johannes Climacus, examines the paradoxical position

of the god incarnate taking on the role of teacher through the question of how a god would establish and maintain an educative relationship with a human being. What are the conditions of the relationship between the divine and the human, if not domination? Kierkegaard develops some possible approaches to this problem throughout his text, but in order to make his contrast with our everyday understanding of a teacher more distinctly, he first provides the reader with an exemplar of human teaching in the character of Socrates. The contrast between the human and the divine teacher is achieved by juxtaposing the two in terms of the type of love expressed by each. Agapeic love, derived from a source of fullness or superiority and associated with the god is made more alienating, more problematic, by its comparison with the erotic character of Socrates's love, derived from emptiness and lack, and far more familiar to human experience. While Kierkegaard spends less than two pages describing Socrates as the model of the human teacher, the image we receive of this human teacher's erotic motivations is so compelling that we ourselves might be left with an empty space, a new set of questions that draw us away from the intended focus on the god as a teacher. The juxtaposition of the human and the divine reflects back on Socrates as well, and reveals questions about teacher-student relationship in turn (*PF*, 23–26).

Kierkegaard reveals the erotic quality of Socrates' identity as a teacher through an examination of his relationship to his students and to Athenian society as a whole, focusing on Socrates's identity, not as a universal image of the teacher, but in the particularity of the "specific situation" into which Socrates was born, and from which he felt a "call and a prompting": "Himself influenced by circumstances, he in turn exerted an influence upon them" (*PF*, 23). According to Kierkegaard, Socrates's motivations expose his identity as tied from the start to the specific nature of his community. Because the singularity of human identity comes into being subject to the linguistic practices, questions and problems that exist before its arrival upon the scene, a self already belongs to a place in the world before it has the chance to make any decisions about it. For Kierkegaard's Socrates, the needs he felt as a member of Athenian society were without question related to the purposes of Athenian society: "In accomplishing his task, he satisfied the claims within himself just as much as he satisfied the claims other people might have on him" (*PF*, 23). As the values and morals of Athenian society formed Socrates, so his action within society must fulfill the needs of both in order to fulfill either.

The erotic, formative interplay that Kierkegaard establishes between self and society acting as the means of one another's fulfillment in the first paragraphs of the chapter is sharpened in the relationship between the teacher and society expressed in Socrates's refusal of payment or gifts for his teaching: "His relation, therefore, is at all times marked by autopathy just as much as by sympathy" (*PF*, 23). The reciprocal nature of teaching as an abstract exchange between the teacher and the social order realizes itself in the concrete relation of teacher and student, "in which [Socrates] loved the divine. Between one human being and another, this is highest: the pupil is the occasion for the teacher to understand himself; the teacher is the occasion for the pupil to understand himself" (*PF*, 24).

Teacher and student, each an aspect of the social element that shapes the other, maintain one another in a process of mutual self-becoming. Kierkegaard draws us to a point of connectedness between teacher and student that celebrates the mutuality of their relation, but stops short of letting them connect.

In a reverie that places Kierkegaard (as Johannes Climacus) as one of Socrates's students, he wonders what would happen if he were to fall in love with Socrates, and like Alcibiades, try to make Socrates his lover. In response to his amorous advances, Socrates's response is clear:

My dear fellow, you certainly are a deceitful lover, for you want to idolize me because of my wisdom, and then you yourself want to be the one person who understands me best and the one from whose admiring embrace I would be unable to tear away — are you not really a seducer? (*PF*, 24)

Two points should be raised with regard to Socrates's response to Climacus. From the perspective of the teacher's identity, if Socrates were to devote his energies and his self-becoming to his connection with Climacus, his identity as Climacus's teacher upon which the relationship is based would be lost. As Kierkegaard has developed his character, Socrates is a teacher by virtue of his relationship to Athenian society as a whole, a relationship which manifests itself concretely in dialogue with individuals. Yet, Socrates has nothing to teach Climacus if the two are to be lovers, as the two would share the radically foreshortened worldview of their own intimacy, in which neither would be endowed with superior knowledge or greater experience because they would enter into this "world" of romantic involvement at the same time. In order to remain a teacher, Socrates must remain distanced from his students at the measure of the shared questions and practices, the curriculum that is the focus of his teaching.

From the perspective of student self-realization and growth, erotic striving would come to an end if it were satisfied. The student who seeks to win the love of the teacher by personal means rather than through an engagement with the larger world for which he is preparing is unaware that it is not the teacher's approval but the student's continued self-realization that is at stake in education. The teacher awakens the interests and desire of self-becoming in the student by presenting the world as a compelling set of questions within which the teacher is already engaged, but ensures that the student remains a student by ensuring that the primary relation is with the infinite pursuit of the questions rather than the finite pursuit of the teacher.

A standard is set, then, for the place of *eros*, as a desire for connectedness in teaching and learning: it is necessary, but equally necessary that it not be fulfilled, if the teacher-student relation is to be maintained as a pedagogical relation. At the core of the relation that defines what teachers and students do is a fundamental disconnect, a missing rather than a meeting, or — as Biesta would have it — a gap, which both separates and connects teachers and students as it defines educational practices.⁶ While Kierkegaard's examination of the relation of Alcibiades and Socrates sets this disconnect as a limit to the possible encounter of teacher and student, Lacan's use of the same relation as an illustration of transference shows the

generative force of the disconnect, suggesting that it is the distance between teachers and students that makes the pedagogical relationship possible.

LACAN ON TRANSFERENCE: PEDAGOGY AND THE REVERSAL OF PEDERASTY

For Jacques Lacan, transference is a product of the unequal relationships between human beings. The early part of our lives is maintained and controlled by those with more power and greater experience in linguistic practices than we have: authority and the word coincide, so it is no wonder that the drive toward self-realization is tied up with the acquisition of language.⁷ According to Lacan,

The transference is an essential phenomenon, bound up with desire as the nodal phenomenon of the human being — and it was discovered long before Freud. It was perfectly articulated...with the most extreme rigour, in a text in which the subject of love is discussed, namely, Plato's *Symposium*.⁸

The key to the *Symposium's* lesson on transference is in the relationship between Socrates and Alcibiades, described in the latter's drunken speech as his pursuit of some reserved beauty, some hidden and divine image, within Socrates's ugly outward appearance (215a–b).⁹ Lacan insists that Alcibiades's love for Socrates is no mere crush, nor can it be located on the level of an intersubjective relation between equals. The desire that draws Alcibiades into relation with Socrates is that of the *erastes*, or lover, who pursues the beloved in an attempt to be completed by the beloved's divine beauty.¹⁰ The deliberate reversal of pederastic roles that Plato uses to found the pedagogical relationship sets the student in pursuit of his teacher, but toward an uncertain goal. The distance between teacher and student is defined by some internal divinity, some beauty held by the teacher. In striving to close the gap between himself and his teacher, the student strives to make himself whole.

The reversal of lover and beloved Lacan identifies as the central movement of the *Symposium* is present from the early part of the dialogue. In the first exchange between Socrates and Agathon, Agathon asks Socrates to sit beside him so that he may benefit from proximity to the philosopher whose head is filled with a newly acquired idea (175c). The reversal of lover and beloved is equally present in the speeches in praise of love that make up the greater part of the dialogue. Phaedrus, a beloved like Alcibiades, praises the god Eros for his ability to motivate lovers to do great things for those they love (178c–e). His aim in praising Eros this way is to be the beneficiary of the great actions undertaken by those lovers who are inspired by his beauty. The reversal in Phaedrus's account takes place in the examples he chooses to illustrate his point. The first examples he gives are of Alcestis and Eurydice, both of whom give up their lives in order that their husbands may live (179b–d). Although their acts are great, and done for the sake of love, it is not possible to describe either Alcestis or Eurydice in the lover's role because both are women.¹¹

Phaedrus seems to do better with his third example, that of Patroclus and Achilles, as they clearly fit the roles of lover and beloved, respectively (179e). In this case, however, the roles are reversed with respect to their proper behavior. Rather than the lover undertaking great acts for the sake of the beloved, as Phaedrus would have it, it is Achilles, the beloved, who undertakes the revenge of his lover, even as

it means his own death. It is not a confusion of lover and beloved that brings Phaedrus to speak this way: he insists that it was Achilles who was the younger and more beautiful and therefore the beloved between the two. He equally insists that Achilles was borne off to great reward and divinized in the afterlife, because the gods look with greater wonder and grant greater favor upon those beloved figures who become like lovers in the great actions and sacrifices they undertake for those they love (179e–180b). Having no clear motive of personal gain from the relationship, the beloved who behaves like a lover inspires wonder in the divine because he acts selflessly.

But, if Achilles's actions are as out of character for the beloved as they are awe-inspiring even to the gods, what is it that makes them possible? According to the definition of Eros developed in Socrates's dialogue with Diotima, in which Eros is characterized by awareness of one's own lack (202d), it would mean that the beloved would have to be convinced that he is lacking in something in order to be moved toward another by this lack in the same way that older men are moved by the youth and beauty of boys. In Socrates's brief dialogue with Agathon following Agathon's speech, he sets the groundwork for this movement, using Agathon as an example of the lesson he teaches.

Like Phaedrus's, Agathon's speech is directed toward the interests of the beloved, concerned with establishing an identity between himself as a beloved and Eros. In Agathon's speech, Eros is understood to be all-beautiful, all-good, and all-knowing, as an extension of the attributes of youth and beauty associated with the beloved (196–197). Socrates dismantles this concept of Eros by establishing a simple, fairly obvious point. All love is the love *of* something; love is a relative term. It is as impossible to be a lover without loving something as it is to be a father without being the father of someone (199e). Agathon's acceptance of this point allows Socrates to further question whether the thing we desire is that which we have or that which we lack. Again, the obviousness of the answer leaves Agathon no choice but to accede to the point that desire is bound up with lack rather than with possession (201a–c).

Socrates's question to Agathon is put in the following way: "Try to speak Love also. Is Love of something or of nothing?" Agathon's response is, "Yes, indeed it is." Alfred Geier argues that Agathon's answer intentionally leaves out the word "something" included in Socrates's question, showing that in order to speak Love (that is, to speak from the perspective of Love rather than speak about Love) Agathon's answer must begin from a point of lack, leaving out the very something after which Eros strives. This lack in Agathon's ability to answer *is* Eros, an awareness of his own lack that provides the possibility for the educational moment that Socrates orchestrates.¹² Geier emphasizes the significance of this lack that is at the center of learning by drawing upon an image of love from the *Phaedrus*: "it loves indeed, but *whatever* it loves, it is at a loss" (255d3). Socrates's brief dialogue with Agathon establishes lack, including its relation to otherness, as a central attribute of erotic striving, and properly aligns the role of the learner with that of the lover. It is in combining the role of the learner as lover with the awe-inspiring example of

Achilles acting as lover that the significance of Alcibiades's pursuit of Socrates comes to light.

Alcibiades's drunken entrance into the *Symposium* disrupts the sober order of the party and the order of the speeches in praise of Eros. Alcibiades's speech, which consists of a complaint that Socrates's is not the *erastes* he pretends to be (216e) and a confession that Alcibiades instead has taken on the role of *erastes* in pursuing Socrates (217c), also seems to disrupt the very order of pederasty that has been the topic of conversation throughout. By the time we have arrived at this point in the dialogue, however, we have already received two profound examples of *eromenon* turned *erastes*, namely Achilles and Agathon, and have seen the significance in each case: Achilles becomes a wonder to the gods; Agathon, however temporarily, is broken from his egocentric focus and receives the possibility of learning something beyond the experience of himself. With these examples highlighted, the traditional roles of pederasty have been problematized, and we are prepared for the story of reversal that Alcibiades tells.

The attraction Alcibiades feels for Socrates is based upon a feeling of inferiority or lack when in Socrates's presence. Alcibiades states that Socrates "often left me in such a state of mind that I've felt I couldn't go on living the way I did" (216a) and that the glimpses of "the little images (*agalma*) inside...[were] so godlike, so golden, so beautiful and so utterly amazing," that they inspired shame in him (217a). Alcibiades's attraction is that of the lover, who has become aware of his own lack through the presence of another's beauty, and he behaves in a manner appropriate to the role. In traditional pederastic relations, the lover overcomes his lack of beauty by physically breaking down the distance between himself and the beautiful beloved. Alcibiades, the student lover, believes he can do the same by being close to Socrates. But, unlike the lover in the pederastic relation, what Alcibiades is after is not a beauty that is manifest in a beautiful body. What he believes he sees in Socrates he refers to as beautiful because it fills him with desire. What he has missed in arriving late to the party is Socrates's retelling of his dialogue with Diotima, in which we learn that desire can also be for wisdom or for the divine (205b). Further, he has missed Socrates's first exchange with Agathon, in which we learn that wisdom is not "the kind of thing one could share by sitting next to someone...like the water in two cups finding its level through a piece of wood" (175d).

But what of the divine images inside Socrates that Alcibiades is after? Socrates warns that they may not be there, and if we equate those beautiful images with wisdom we can be sure that they are not, based upon Socrates's own admission in the *Apology*.¹³ If this is the case, Alcibiades will surely gain nothing by getting close to Socrates. If, however, we take Socrates's claim to ignorance in the *Apology* in conjunction with his claim in the beginning of the *Symposium* to know something about desire (177d), we might say that the gap or emptiness in the place where Alcibiades believes images of the gods reside is precisely what Socrates knows about. It is Socrates's self-knowledge regarding his own lack that fills Alcibiades with a feeling of inferiority, and it is this that Alcibiades mistakes as some substantial thing that can be gained by being close to his teacher.

Like Agathon, Alcibiades gives up on his pursuit of the divine images in Socrates because of a confusion between the object of his desire, namely, the *agalma*, and the teacher who inspires that desire. Also like Agathon, however, Alcibiades experiences a moment in which his own desire is awakened and he is brought out of the passive role of beloved and into the active role of the lover, undertaking the same role-reversal that Phaedrus claims inspired awe in the gods and fulfilled Achilles's divinity. The divinity that Alcibiades sought within Socrates was the divinity of Eros, the *daimon* who mediates between heaven and earth (202e) and in which both Agathon and Alcibiades participated insofar as their desire was educed by the distance at which Socrates stood.

CONCLUSION

Pedagogies of relation often focus on connections between teachers and students in order to emphasize the significance of human relations in educative practices. As Biesta shows us in his essay on the significance of relation in educational epistemology, however, the pedagogy of relation comprises an understanding of the place of disconnects and distance in relationships as well as meetings. In this essay I have explored two avenues of interest that emphasize the significance of distance in teacher-student relationships through two reflections on the relationship between Alcibiades and Socrates. Through Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments* I have inquired into the role that distance plays in maintaining the relationships between teachers and students as functional roles, in other words, in maintaining a relationship as educative. Through Lacan's treatment of the *Symposium* in his seminar on transference, I have sought to deepen the understanding of the roles of teacher and student as defined by distance by maintaining that the distance or disconnect between teacher and student places the student in the active role that drives and supports learning. Like Alcibiades, in our identification of the teacher as a subject who stands in the place of wisdom, we strive to occupy that same space, and align our desires with those we believe our teacher to have. If relation is the principle thing we teach in educational relationships, it is not only our relation to students but to ourselves and the world around us. If we have something to teach with regard to these relationships, perhaps these lessons can better be learned if we keep our distance, showing our students that there is something to strive for.

1. Charles Bingham and Alexander Sidorkin, eds., *No Education Without Relation* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 5.

2. *Ibid.*, 6.

3. *Ibid.*, 5,7.

4. *Ibid.*, 11–22. Other essays in the same volume that recognize the significance of a disconnect or lapse in describing the teacher-student relationship are Cris Mayo's "Relations are Difficult" (121–135) and Barbara S. Stengel's "Knowing is Response-able Relation" (139–152).

5. Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, in *Kierkegaard's Writings*, vol. VII, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985); Jacques Lacan, *Transference 1960–1961*, in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, vol. VIII, trans. Cormac Gallagher (2002). This work will be cited as *PF* in the text for all subsequent references.

6. See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 52: "[T]he world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time."

7. Lacan, *Transference 1960–1961*, I.11: “I intend to begin from the extremes of what I am supposing: to isolate oneself with another to teach him what? What he is lacking!”; “By the very nature of transference “what he is lacking” is going to be learned by him as a lover.”

8. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1981), 231

9. This and all further references to Plato, unless otherwise noted, are to Plato, “Symposium,” in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989).

10. Lacan, *Transference 1960–1961*, I.1.

11. The indeterminacy we experience in trying to place Alcestis does not only stem from the exclusion of women from the lover-beloved dyad, but equally from the contradictory qualities that women have been believed to embody throughout much of Western history. While the quality of lacking, perceived from the perspective of the ancients, might identify Alcestis as a lover through desire, the passivity and powerlessness commonly assigned to women would exclude her from this category.

12. Alfred Geier, *Plato's Erotic Thought: The Tree of the Unknown*, in *Rochester Studies in Philosophy*, vol. 3, ed. Wade L. Robison (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2002), 5–6, 10.

13. “I am only too conscious that I have no claim to wisdom, great or small” (21b). Plato, “Socrates’ Defense (Apology),” in Hamilton and Cairns, eds., *Plato: Collected Dialogues*.