

Transcending “Transcendence”: From Freedom to Fidelity, from *Adios* to *A Dios*

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Deus est qui Deum dat.

— Augustine, *The Trinity*

Rabbi, we know that you as a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do, unless God is with him.

— John 3:2

Gert Biesta is right. We need to “make some room for the idea of ‘transcendence’ within the conversation of philosophy of education.” Biesta is also wrong. His idea of “transcendence” treats transcendence as a term instead of a reality. This is not to say that terms are not realities or vice-versa. It is simply to distinguish between two possible ways of envisioning and performing “transcendence” (by this I mean “transcendence” and transcendence). In reply, I would like to suggest that Biesta rightly points us in the general direction of “transcendence” and that he has yet to describe what this thing, transcendence, might be (or, following Jean-Luc Marion: what it might give before Being).

To support these claims, I will point to two performative approaches to the notion of “transcendence” in Biesta’s essay. I do this to say that there are at least two sorts of “transcendence” to be considered. The first (“transcendence”) is an idolatrous, instrumentalized, and repressed rhetorical device; the second (transcendence) is an iconic and imposing religious reality that calls philosophy of education to again invoke the name of God, to show reverence to the excessive event of a being beyond Being, to the givenness of the Gift that gives and is given. In doing so — that is to say: by performing a religious act of reverence — education might demonstrate fidelity to itself, to the orthopraxy concealed within the Rabbinic event of teaching.

To put it another way: I will argue that insofar as Biesta’s “transcendence” is couched within a secular and Socratic sentiment and rhetoric, “praise” and “teaching” — and certainly “praise of teaching” — are impossible. They are present, to be sure, but beyond the horizon of the (neo)liberal subject. For transcendence to become possible, we will need to pass through the Enlightenment and begin to imagine a second, altogether different kind of enlightenment: from the modern/liberal trust in reason and freedom to a postmodern (re)turn to fidelity-to-the-unknown;¹ from the simplistic *adios* (goodbye) given to God by the idolatrous, freedom-obsessed “Secular Age” (as Charles Taylor puts it) of early and late modernity, into a new/ancient, and iconic *a Dios* (toward God) that is given-in and dwells within the concealed excess of revelation, desirous of a radical fidelity — literally, faithfulness to the root (radix) — to what Plato called “the good beyond Being” and what Marion, both following and critiquing Emmanuel Levinas, calls God Without Being. This radical fidelity would begin with the recognition that, as Abraham Heschel put it, “The statement ‘God is’ is an understatement.”²

Until we transcend a secular discourse of “transcendence” — the liberal reaction to the political alterity of religious phenomena — the performance (of the discourse) belies the content; the term “transcendence” simply becomes another antiquated, albeit revisited, religious term (like the onetime religious term “teacher”), objectified by language and put to the impossible and disfiguring task of preventing and disciplining any elevation of the heart and mind *a Dios*, and, in the process, carving “education” into an idol (“education”) instead of the iconic gift of education that remains. As Marion put it in *God Without Being*, “In the idol, the gaze of man is frozen in its mirror; in the icon, the gaze of man is lost in the invisible gaze that visibly envisages him.”³

One can begin to see the attempt to discipline transcendence in Biesta’s apologetic justification of a (mild) theological turn:

I do not wish to dismiss the reasons that have led to the construction of this set up [that is, the aforementioned “othering” of religion], not least because much that has happened in the name of religion is indeed deeply problematic. But that does not mean that everything that has happened in the name of religion is automatically bad, just as not everything that has happened in the name of such notions as “democracy” or “humanity” is automatically and unequivocally good.

This careful proviso begins to illuminate the reality of what Biesta is rightfully pointing us toward, but the performance of the passage says much more. I can think of others who have made similarly couched points, yet did not perform them with so much trepidation. For instance, William James, in a letter discussing his preparation for the upcoming Gifford Lectures (what would become *The Varieties of Religious Experience*), expressed a similar sentiment — with one key difference. James wrote:

The problem I have set myself is a hard one: first, to defend (against all prejudices of my class), experience against philosophy as being the real backbone of the world’s religious life — I mean prayer, guidance, and all that sort of thing immediately and privately felt ... and second to make the hearer or reader believe, what I myself invincibly do believe, that, although all the special manifestations of religion may have been absurd (I mean its creeds and theories), yet the life of it as a whole is mankind’s most important function.⁴

While Biesta and James similarly point out the potential problem and absurdity of “religion,” James moves from a defensive position to an offensive one, stating plainly his invincible belief in transcendence, while Biesta remains in a careful, calculating position, defending the potential for redeeming the “transcendent” as a matter of fair treatment. The key difference, as I see it, between these two positions is the possible motivation for raising the religious question in the first place. For James, the transcendent is a reality whereas for Biesta “transcendence” is a way of speaking and thinking that has been marginalized by the predominantly secular tenor of the discussion. James surely has some concern about Biesta’s worry and I suspect that Biesta has some of James’ sentiment about this too, but there is a serious difference between the two. James has what he would call a “dumb” concern for religious life and this invincible, dumb belief is the motor behind his project. Biesta, on the other hand, seems to have at least two different things in mind. First of all, Biesta borders on instrumentalizing “transcendence” for the sake of preserving the identity and postionality of the teacher and the very idea of teaching, which reverses

the polarity between the teacher and iconic reality of God and puts the idolized language of “transcendence” at the service of a similarly idolized teacher. Secondly, Biesta is interested in the repressed notion of “transcendence,” “lurking behind the scenes of many recent discussions in our field.”

One of those discussions, presumably, would include the passages on Plato quoted from Sharon Todd’s book, *Learning From the Other*. Here, again, the performance belies the content. First of all, the idea that Socratic method is “contained within the I,” that Platonic learning is somehow antithetical to the radical exteriority of Levinasian teaching, is to misunderstand and misrepresent both the centrality of paradox within the *Meno* (the aporia caused by the Socratic torpedofish) and the metaphysics of Platonic epistemology that is precisely about how to transcend the I (the body, and even the soul), to be faithful to the divinity of Nous — something that, for Plato, “comes from the exterior and brings me more than I contain.”⁵ But this is an exegetical argument, not a performative one, although it does begin to explain my second, and final, remark that lends credence to the idea that Biesta’s sense of “transcendence” is actually secular and in need of transcendence.

It is interesting to me that the discussions of philosophy of education in general, and especially the ones following Levinas, are very comfortable within a Socratic discourse of teaching; yet, even when critical of this discourse, philosophers of education are hesitant or incapable of recalling the Rabbinic reality of teaching: a kind teaching that is hardwired to take transcendence seriously. Philosophy of education has been monopolized by dialectic of secular Greeks and moderns with little to no regard for the ancient Hebrew or the postmodern Christian. We think of elenchus and ignore midrash. For me, this is not primarily about the politics of recognition or alterity: it is about the possibility of moving from freedom to fidelity, from *adios* to a *Dios*.

In short, it is about taking Biesta’s essay seriously enough to transcend it.

1. By “postmodern” I am referring to what is often referred to as “postmodern theology.” See Dominique Janicaud, *Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn:” The French Debate*, trans. Bernard G. Prusak (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000); and John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon, eds., *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

2. Abraham Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 121.

3. Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 47.

4. William James, *William James: Selected Unpublished Correspondence 1885–1910*, ed. Frederick J. Down Scott (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1986), 211 (parenthesis in original).

5. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 51.