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Freedom, Authority, and the Experience of the Pathos:

A Response to Gert Biesta's "The Rediscovery of Teaching"

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Introduction

First, please allow me to share a personal recollection. The first time I ever saw the name of Gert Biesta was in the book *Derrida & Education* (Routledge, 2001), which he edited with Denise Egéa-Kuehne. Ever since 1997, when I was a Bachelor student, I have worked on the philosophy of Lévinas, and for the past twenty years have focused on the following two tasks. First, understanding, from a perspective that examines the Enlightenment and Romanticism as its criticism, the philosophy of the Frankfurt school (Adorno, Benjamin etc.) and Hannah Arendt as well as the philosophical endeavors of so-called post-structuralist philosophers. Second, genealogically re-interpreting twentieth century post-modern thought by connecting it historically and theoretically with German philosophy and educational thought at the turn of the nineteenth century (Kant, Schelling, Herder etc.).

Based on these interests I was engaging in a continual trial-and-error process of attempting to understand the possibilities of Lévinasian philosophy, particularly how to discuss his thought in the context of pedagogical problematics. However, Lévinas was not a very popular object of study for scholars of education at the time. Those who did focus on Lévinas understood his thought based on specific *biases*. There was therefore no research on "Lévinas and education" that could satisfy my interest, excluding Michael Wimmer's work *Der Andere und die Sprache*. It was in this context that *Derrida & Education* appeared before my eyes. This was the year after I wrote my Master's thesis on the realization of ethical subjectivity in the work of Emmanuel Lévinas and Martin Buber. Derridean philosophy is, of course, deeply related to that of Lévinas. At the time I thought that Derrida's thought was an *ill fit* for pedagogy to the same extent as that of Lévinas, and this book boldly showed the possibilities of discussing Derrida's thought as

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pedagogical problematics, giving me the courage to continue my somewhat stumbling research on Lévinas. In this sense, I am indebted to Biesta and his work, and while many years have passed, I am very happy that I can finally share my gratitude with him in person.

Here I have been assigned the task of responding to Biesta's paper on Lévinasian philosophy-inspired pedagogy. While I would like to repay my academic debt to him, from a Lévinasian perspective, this is not possible. Even so, I would like to respond to his paper by offering some comments and raising a few questions.

1. The Meaning of Rediscovering Teaching in the Age of Learning

Biesta discussed "the need for a recovery and the rediscovery of teaching" in his paper. When doing so, Biesta criticized the unfruitful binary that serves as the premise of discussions surrounding education: *either* so-called 'traditional' teaching and authoritarian forms of teaching *or* the abolition of teaching and 'autonomous' learning process. In his book *The Rediscovery of Teaching*, Biesta repeatedly makes clear that "teaching is not a limitation of the freedom of the student, but the very way through which the student-as-subject may emerge" (Biesta 2017: 41). Using the idea of "the experience of being addressed," he attempts to overcome an 'egological worldview' and places at the center of our understanding of teaching the awakening of students and children as subjects living in a creative relationship with the world.

I agree with this idea, and think that it provides for us philosophers of education a fundamental yet very fresh perspective on the understanding of teaching and education. I am also sure that the various ideas ushered in by his research provide courage and encouragement to parents and teachers who are struggling with difficulties related to teaching and education on a daily basis. Below, I would like to comment on aspects of his paper by which I was particularly inspired.

Biesta provides a diagnosis: autonomous learning is increasingly being strengthened while teaching is backgrounded. However, he also states, "to establish a more general case for the recovery and rediscovery of teaching is fraught with difficulties." This is because in many cases the emphasis on teaching comes "from the conservative end of the political spectrum" (ibid.: 42).

These diagnosis and assessment are very useful when thinking about contemporary Japan. For example, a Central Education Council report entitled "Improving the Quality and Abilities of School Education Teachers" (No. 184), emphasizes that teachers should

continually and autonomously learn, using phrases like "an autonomous learning orientation" and "qualities and abilities demanded by the changing times and their own career stages." It appears that this increasing emphasis on learning can be found not only in the case of students but teachers as well. These assertions are in and of themselves certainly important—the kind of things that therefore no one would argue against. However, it appears that the spirit and principles orienting this report do not really respect teachers' autonomous learning or creative activities.

For example, while the report highlights the need to adapt to an era of globalization, English-language education is basically the only proposed method of doing so. One does not really find any mention of addressing global problems, such as those related to poverty and the environment, or war, violence, nationalism, and colonialism. Also, judging from the report's content, its phrase "changing times" appears to only refer to things related to new technologies: research on AI, the use of big data and ICT, and so on. What does this mean? It appears that the report's ideal image of a teacher is one who quickly attunes themself and adapts to societal changes. The report expects an ironic outcome: school education and teachers' *unidirectional technical adaptation* to 'external' changes leading to an "autonomous learning orientation." What is lacking is respect for the fact that schools and teachers are actors with subjectivity that produce change—that they are the source, along with students and children, of creative activities that gives rise to the new.

As we can see, it appears that it is not the case that "learning" is simply emphasized and "teaching" being done away with. A situation has emerged in which, while on the surface one finds terms related to "learning" and an emphasis on its strengthening, for all intents and purposes schools and teachers are increasingly expected to be technically attuned to the times and teaching is being further used as a method of control. While my example was about the learning of teachers, the same kind of spirit and principles are dominating student learning. In this context Biesta's attempt to rediscover teaching shows us *what is wrong* with the spirit and principles dominating contemporary Japanese education.

2. Freedom as Responsibility and Relationships

There are several important points of inquiry when understanding Biesta's idea of teaching, particularly regarding the nature of freedom and of authority. He points out the following regarding them:

> "Such teaching is not authoritarian because it does not reduce the student to an object but rather has an interest in the student's subject-ness. But it does not overcome authoritarianism by *opposing* it […]. It does so by establishing an entirely different relationship. This is a relationship of authority, because in moving from what we desire to what we can consider desirable, we give authority to what and who is other or, with a slightly different word, we *authorize* what and who is other by letting it be an author, that is, a subject that speaks and addresses *us*" (Biesta 2017: 56).

Here, Biesta says that teaching "does not overcome authoritarianism by *opposing* it." This follows his basic orientation of not overcoming traditional teaching by placing autonomous learning in *opposition to* it. Such a relationship would impoverish both teaching and learning and ends up reproducing an oppositional schema that is not beneficial.

Such a criticism appears to overlap with the criticism of German anti-education movement (*Antipädagogik*). The anti-pedagogical position is based on a certain mistaken understanding of the concept of freedom. In its place he proposes a third option regarding freedom: "It is in this third option — an option which relies on the idea that freedom is not the opposite of authority or an escape from authority, but has to do with establishing a "grown-up" relationship with what may have authority in our lives" (ibid.: 42).

This way of thinking is similar to the understanding of freedom that Martin Buber expressed around ninety years ago at a presentation at the New Education Fellowship (Buber, "Rede über das Erzieherische," 1926). Buber criticized a mistaken conception of freedom that places 'compulsion' and 'non-interference' in opposition to each other based on a dualistic schema between old and new education, and said that the polar opposite of compulsion is not freedom (in the sense of non-interference or leaving alone) but rather "communion" (*Verbundenheit*). In other words, compulsion in education means "disunion" (*das Nichtverbundensein*) with others and the world, and freedom in education is the "possibility of communion" *(das Verbundenwerdenkönnen*) with others and the world (Buber 1962: 795). Here "communion" means having the responsibility to the addresses of others and devoting oneself completely to them, while working together to create reality with them. Freedom is not realized simply by being liberated from something. Rather, freedom is fully realized in accordance with how one relates to others and the kinds of relationships created in the process. Buber's idea of freedom as communion shares aspects in common with Lévinas's idea of "invested freedom" (*la liberté investie*) and "questioned freedom" (*la liberté mise en question*) (Lévinas 1990).

Of course, at the root of this we find traditional Jewish dialogical thought about being in a relationship in which one responds to God's call, as well as about the subject and its freedom being formed as responsibility to others. However, this is not a tradition that is the sole property of Judaism; as Biesta convincingly argues, it is an idea open to education in general that also enriches one's understanding of education.

3. Authority as the Capacity to "Newly Bring into Existence"

The nature of authority is just important as—and also deeply related to—the question of freedom.

As we saw in the previous quote, Biesta chooses the path of investigating a third "entirely different relationship" that deconstructs a non-beneficial binary opposition schema. Why, though, is this an "entirely different relationship"? Of course, he explains that this is because it is characterized by treating students as not objects but subjects. However, why and how do freedom and authority connect amidst relationships with subjects?

Émile Benveniste's famous etymological research provides an answer to this (Benveniste 1969). Benveniste points out that both "authority" and "author" are derived from the Latin *auctor* (creator, ancestor) and *auctoritas* (support, influence, authority), and that this etymology is normally explained in connection to *augeo* (increase). However, Benveniste continues, "increase" is "a secondary and weakened sense of *augeo*" and has the more fundamental meaning of men who can "cause something to come into being and can literally 'bring into existence'" (Benveniste 1969: 151). While "increase" means to "make something *which existed before* bigger (rendre plus grand *quelque chose qui existe déjà*)," Benveniste says that "*augeo* denotes […] the act of producing from within itself (l'acte de produire hors de son propre sein)" (ibid.: 149).

> "The primary sense of *augeo* is discovered in *auctoritas* with the help of the basic term *auctor*. Every word pronounced with *authority* determines a change in the world; it creates something. This mysterious quality is what *augeo* expresses, the power which causes plants to grow and brings a law into existence" (ibid.: 150f.).

This point—that the original meaning of "authority" and "author" is not "to increase something that already exists" but "the ability to bring something into existence"—is very important for differentiating between authoritarianism and authority; the goal of

authoritarianism is to increase something that already exists. This perspective also shows the rich possibilities of Biesta's "pedagogy of interruption" (Biesta 2010) that tries to construct free subjects that open up to the outside (in contrast to education that, based on the principle of increasing what already exists, boils down to *qualification* and *socialization*).

At the root of the concepts of "authority" and the "author" Benveniste found what we could also perhaps call the capacity to newly bring things into existence. This is related to Arendt's attempt to give significance humans and education by updating the meaning of public realm and "the in-between" (*der weltliche Zwischenraum*) (Arendt 1967: 309) based on the concept of "the capacity of beginning something anew" (*die Fähigkeit, selbst einen neuen Anfang zu machen*) (ibid.: 18). Being free is to exist in relation to others and the world and is connected to creating the new. Due to this creative power of relationships, being free is connected to authority.

4. Facilitators vs. Teachers?

There is still a large set of difficult problems in education related to freedom and authority. Biesta began his paper (and book) with a criticism of the position that the only meaningful response to authoritarian teaching is the abolition of teaching and a turn towards learning. While I also agree with this criticism, at the same time I do not think that things end here.

For example, consider "free schools" or "alternative schools." There, there are "staff members" that call themselves facilitators. It may be true that those who claim to be facilitators unjustifiably lower the value of teaching. However, such critical position might be criticized on the grounds that it unfairly underestimates the unique importance at times of facilitators for children who have been harmed and disappointed by, and therefore runaway from, studying at school. Or, it could also be criticized for weakening, although not intentionally, the unique importance that autonomous learning can have.

Rediscovering teaching is important. However, is there not a need to also look into the more positive meaning of *another* form of "teaching" for people who favor facilitators? Their activities are not a simple rejection of teaching. It surely is important to also understand the meaning of "teaching" in a form that is on the surface "not teaching" has for them. As I think Biesta will agree, the meaning of this "teaching by not-teaching" is related to the content of his "rediscovered teaching."

5. Experience, Ethics of the Weak, and Pathos

In closing let us turn to the Japanese pedagogical context. In 1988 'Clinical Pedagogy' (*Rinsho-Kyoikugaku*) appeared in Japan, and since then has continued to play a role to some content in the country. The education scholar Shuji Wada (1932-) and Analytical and Clinical Psychologist Hayao Kawai (1928-2007) collaborated to create Clinical Pedagogy. However, the Dutch education scholar Martinus Jan Langeveld (1905-1989) played a decisive role in its birth, serving as an intellectual backbone. In Clinical Pedagogy, teaching is understood as a dual activity comprised of 'pedagogical' and 'therapeutic' elements. Perhaps these could also be described as 'promotive' and 'receptive' elements. At the foundation of the position assumed by Clinical Pedagogy is the approach of "facing the deathbed," an idea connected to the etymology of the word "clinical." In this approach existed a deep understanding of the "helpless" nature of humans, the tragedy of life, and the world of the weak (Wada & Sumeragi eds. 1996; Sumeragi 2018). We can interpret it as the logic not of the strong but the weak, or as an attempt to understand education from the ethics of the weak and then produce a new educational theory and practice (Ono 2015; Ono 2017).

Drawing from Lévinas, Biesta points out that subjects arise after being addressed by the other.

> "Levinas puts forward the view that sense-making does not come *before* our encounter with the other but actually only arises *as a result of* the encounter with the other or, to be even more precise: as a result of the "experience" of being addressed by another (human) being" (Biesta 2017: 5).

Also, in closing his lecture Biesta emphasized the following:

> "Such a world-centered approach to education can never guarantee that students will encounter an address, nor can it predict where the address may come from" (Biesta 2018: 11).

Here Biesta points to very important ideas: (1) passive experience, or the passivity of experience, (2) the relationship of experience to the formation of meaning (meaning cannot be formed without a relationship with the other or the world), (3) the retrospectiveness of experience acquiring meaning (meaning can only be spoken of as a result), and (4) helplessness, beyond-one's-control-ness, fragility, and logics and ethics of

the weak.

If we trace the etymology of "experience," that is, "ex-periri," we find that it means "to try to do something," "to go through perils," and "suffering." Therefore, in the first place we cannot establish the meaning of experience in advance, namely, we cannot "guarantee" nor "predict" anything. Lévinas suggested that, in contrast to knowledge which gives preference to certainty or experience before living (éprouver avant de livre) and turns experience into something quantifiable, experience is a passive event in which one is subjected to or "caught up in the world" (s'engager dans le monde) (Lévinas 2005: 75f.). Michel Foucault, in his later years, was also interested in the genealogy of "experiences of spiritualité," which cannot be reduced to *scientia* or knowledge, such as "the trials in one's own life" and "the form one's life takes" (Foucault 2001; Foucault 2009). Modern science replaces this natural form of experience with knowledge of things that are certain or knowledge that is predictable. However, experience is, as Giorgio Agamben suggested, essentially, *pathei mathos* (πάθει μάθος); that is, the essence of human experience is "to learn through *pathos*" (Agamben 2001; Ono 2018a; Ono 2018b; Ono 2018c).

Along with deeply understanding the unique significance of humans' passivity, beyond-one's-control-ness, and weakness, thought must be created that gives full attention to the possibility of human co-existence, cooperativity, communality and community; the existential condition of human beings with com-passion. With such thought we can criticize education that encloses students in a shut-off autonomous world as well as education that quantifies experience and only emphasizes knowledge based on that which can be said in advance with certainty (Ono 2018e). Also, we can open up a path that updates understandings of education and provides a vision of education that includes its diverse potential. We are attempting to do this in our joint research project entitled "The Patho-logical Turn of Education" (Okabe & Ono eds. 2019), and the above-discussed four perspectives in Biesta's research provide us with inspiration and encouragement—probably in ways that we have not even yet become aware of.

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