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Touch and Force: On the Ambivalence of Touching as a Possible Theme in the Philosophy of Education

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Abstract

The impacts of COVID19 have led to major changes in the social lives of people on a global scale in the years since 2020. This has provided an opportunity to rethink the fundamental issues of various social activities. Education is one such activity. During the pandemic, human contact was severely restricted to prevent infection. Education has traditionally been seen as inherently based on the premise of "touching," both literally and figuratively. One of the questions that arose in the era of "social distancing" was what touching means for education. In this essay, I draw on the theories of asylum and the sacred to focus on the view that touching has an ambivalence that gives rise to both the power to protect and the power to exclude. According to such a view, the pandemic may have endangered the protected status of individuals and at the same time made it possible for us to distance ourselves from the forces of exclusion. This essay explores the implications of such a hypothesis for the field of education.

Key words: force, touching, asylum, power, violence, human transformation

The Emerging Issue of "Touching"

What would happen if the element of "touch" were removed from human lives? Due to the outbreak of COVID19, we have inevitably become involved in such an "experiment" on a global scale. Avoidance of direct touching has been universally recommended, and "social distancing" has become the catchphrase of our time. This so-called 'new lifestyle'[1] has impacted all cultural spheres, including that of education.

[1] The "new lifestyle" is an action guideline published by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare to prevent the spread of novel coronavirus infection. In layman's terms, it refers to a lifestyle that incorporates measures

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In its 122nd number (November 2020), the editorial board of *Studies in the Philosophy of Education* (『教育哲学研究』), in the *Journal of the Philosophy of Education Society of Japan* (PESJ), announced a special issue on "*Fureru* (Touch) and the Philosophy of Education", and called for submissions (SPE 2020: 119). In the end, a total of nine essays were published in a special issue, the 124th number of the journal,[2] indicating the importance of this theme for contemporary educational philosophers.

As the Editor-in-Chief at that time, I was responsible for this initiative. In soliciting papers for the special issue, the editorial committee envisioned several specific topics; for example, attachment and physical contact, the significance of touching in schooling, the possibility of education being paradoxically enhanced by non-touching situations, and the problem of the binary thinking that makes a hard distinction between "online" and "offline" (i.e., in-person) contact. As it turned out, however, the contributed articles dealt with a wider variety of topics, and considered the relation between a broader range of philosophical perspectives on "touching", than the editorial board had expected. In my own case, the keyword "touching" prompted consideration of the relationship between touch and force. The philosophy of "touch" turns out to be dizzyingly complex; and in this brief paper, I will explore the reasons for this complexity.

Power and Asylum for Protection through Touching

The relationship between touching and power is also of profound significance to education, especially through its connection to the element of protection in the concept of asylum. The term "asylum" (*Asyl* in German, *asile* in French) derives from the Greek *asylos*, meaning "inviolable," which in turn suggests "shelter" or "refuge." The monograph *Formen des Asylrechts und ihre Verbreitung bei den Germanen* (*Forms of the Right of Asylum and Their Connection with the Germanic Peoples*) (1954), by Ortwin Henssler (1923- 2017), which focuses on the history of legal systems, describes the evolution of asylum law.[3] The theoretical potential of his thought has been more appreciated, accepted, and developed in Japan, mainly in the context of historiography, than in his native Germany (see Yamana 2021 for an overview of the process of acceptance of his theory).

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against novel coronavirus infection in daily life.

[2] The call for papers for the special issue is in Japanese; however, the special issue includes a table of contents and abstracts of the essays in English at its end (SPE 124 2021: 276-284 and back cover of the journal).

[3] The following summary of Henssler's asylum theory is based on my previous paper (Yamana 2021).

Henssler's account of the essential logic of asylum is the most important feature of the monograph for our purposes. In his view, in the primitive "sacred-magical stage," the "constant crisis of survival" (Henssler 1954: 23) - the human struggle with other humans, animals, nature, and even ghosts - is a prerequisite for the emergence of place of asylum. Such a critical state triggers the fundamental emotions of "fear and anxiety" (*ibid* 14) and "the search for a protective principle" (*ibid* 15). One becomes an object of magical awe when he or she is in *touch* with an "orenda" (sacred power).[4] Thus, "in order not to disturb the harmony with the transcendent, the community must refrain from any further action against such an orendized person, at least as long as the orendization continues" (*ibid* 18 f.). This is the source of the power to create a space and time of protection.

In Henssler's view, the thesis that the sacred touch exerts a protective effect is itself a finding of religious anthropology; the importance of Henssler's approach lies in his historical and systematic thesis regarding the evolution of asylum culture from the religious phase to the phase of secularization and modernization. On the basis of his analysis of the example of asylum law, he proposes a historical-stage theory of asylum, arguing that asylum culture is still present, in an evolved form.

In Japan, Henssler's theory of asylum attracted especial attention from the late 1970s to the 1990s. The Japanese historian Kinya Abe (1979), for example, examined Henssler's theory more closely from a historical perspective, and discussed the German medieval culture of asylum; while another Japanese historian, Yoshihiko Amino (1978), using Henssler's thesis as a theoretical foundation, argued that asylum culture also existed in Japan. He notes that Japanese temples were referred to as *muen-jo* (無縁所) , places where one can be in touch with the gods; and at the same time, spaces severed from the domain of secular power, which may thus also serve as places of escape. Amino notes that, in Japan, the "unattached culture (無縁文化)" symbolized by temples "has taken extremely diverse forms and permeates every area of people's lives in minute detail" (Amino 1978: 255).

Inspired by Abe's and Amino's studies, sociology and other fields in Japan have also discussed asylum culture in the modern era, but the theory of asylum has never been fully accepted in the field of educational sciences, including the philosophy of education. However, given the fundamental vulnerability of children and their need for

[4] Henssler calls the sacred power, "orendism," recalling the Iroquois belief in the existence of strong, tangible and intangible forces and spirits (Henssler 1954: 16).

protection, the possibility of asylum being created through touching offers a suggestive locus for discussion of protective space for children.[5]

Forced Exclusion through Touching

It is a curious fact of cultural history that the sacred touch can also be a source of impurity, and thus an occasion for prompting forced exclusion. French thinkers such as Georges Bataille and Roger Caillois drew attention to this point, which Henssler rarely emphasized. They talked about the issue philosophically. Caillois, for example, writes in his book, *L'homme et le sacré (Man and the Sacred)* (1939), "Even in the most advanced civilizations, a certain word very often means both 'impurity' and 'holiness'. The Greek word *asylos* also means 'impurity' and 'the sacrifice to remove it" (Caillois 1994: 47). The exclusion from the community of a person who has come in touch with the overwhelming force of the sacred, and the protection of that person, are here regarded as inseparable. As aforementioned, the Greek word *asylos*, which means purifying sacrifice as well as impurity, is also the root of the word "asylum".

Caillois draws attention to those, such as the clergy, who can transform impurity into "blessing," exercising a cleansing force (*ibid* 62). The modern state system has sought to expunge the force of the sacred, with its mixture of the pure and the impure, and has questioned, even to the point of undermining, the authority of religion. Returning to Henssler's argument, focusing on legal history, he advances the thesis that the area of asylum generated by the sacred has shrunk in the modern era. "The state, he writes, monopolizes all coercive power and law" (Henssler 1954: 37), and "increasing differentiation of the individual areas of life takes place." The events of life, once governed by religion, are subjugated to a more rational order in modern times, and the asylum laws become not only "superfluous, but hostile to the legal system" (*ibid* 37). This is because, in the increasingly complex legal system, "asylum granted nevertheless brings uncertainty and arbitrariness into the organizing principle of law" (*ibid* 37). In this era, "the right of asylum loses its function and sinks to form without content" (*ibid* 38).

Nonetheless, every culture needs a time and space of protection - both from the

[5] The pedagogical objects of consideration as potential spaces of asylum could be established in a variety of ways. As examples, we may think of the "child-centered" spaces in the new education movement at the beginning of the 20th century, or the institutions that rescue children from abuse or bullying in the modern era. Alternatively, schools themselves can be interpreted as a kind of asylum for children. See Yamana 2015 and 2021 for discussion of education and space from the viewpoint of asylum theory.

standpoint of vulnerable individuals and from the communal standpoint for the maintenance of collective order. Nowadays, the clergy and religious organizations generating asylum have largely been replaced by modern institutions such as nation states. The mixed energies of protective and exclusionary forces are divided into two types. One is the power that governs the community, and the other is the violence that threatens the "security" of the community. However, the power of modern institutions, which are supposed to provide protection, can itself be violent, stigmatizing as "heretics" those who threaten the institutions, and marginalizing or excluding them from the community. Walter Benjamin's essay, *Zur Kiritik der Gewalt* (1920/21), emphasizes this point. *Gewalt* is a German concept that can originally mean both "power" and "violence" (Waldenfels 1990). The young Benjamin argues for a distinction between power through human institutions ("*die mytische Gewalt*") and power beyond them ("*die göttliche Gewalt*"); and attempts to justify revolutions by placing them in the latter category. The creaking of the modern system, dividing inherently ambivalent forces into two, seems to be alluded to his theory. What is power? What is violence? The answer ultimately depends on the standpoint of the individual who experiences the force.

I might summarize the essential lineaments of my approach here in the following manner. According to the asylum theory, the force generated by the sacred touch can create a space-time of protection. However, that same force can also evoke the violence of exclusion, based on the notion of sacrificial purification. The modern system tries to avoid such complications and ambiguities inherent in such force. However, the system is itself caught up in the ambiguity of the force in other ways. How, then, can we best approach the question of human transformation and education with respect to the relationship between touch and force outlined above?

Dealing with Force and Human Transformation

Japanese researchers on asylums often allude to a prototypical children's game called *engacho,* based on an old folk custom, a form of play that is unusually suggestive to anyone interested in human transformation. The "play" starts suddenly. Children abruptly begin teasing one child, saying "*engacho*". The child is considered to be "impure" and becomes untouchable by the other children. In order to be cleansed of the impurity, he/she needs to touch someone, and thus the child chases after other children who are running away to escape from his/her touching. There is, however, a spell which can break the cycle of the impurity transfer. If you make a circle with your thumb and forefinger,

and ask someone to cut the circle with their hand, the child will no longer be affected by the impurity. According to Amino, the *en* in *engacho* means "impurity (穢)", but can also signify "connection (縁)"; *cho* signifies "cutting" (Amino 1978: 13).

There are two elements of touch at work in this play: one that transfers the impurity, and the other that halts its spread. In light of our discussion above, the *engacho* game can, I think, be understood as a kind of lesson in dealing with the complex relationship between touch and force, already in childhood. Of course, this play is not without its problems, at least from the perspective of modern society; for example, the play may turn into bullying, and we can imagine a case in which the child who intervenes to save a child from a bullying situation can themselves become the next target. Through touching, the forces of exclusion and protection can alternate in complex ways, as the sacrificial cleansing viewpoint on bullying suggests (Sugano 1997). Bataille and Caillois' understanding of the violence of exclusion has evolved into the ritual theory, which also interprets such force positively, as an aspect of the death and rebirth of a community. However, when the focus is on the excluded, especially when children are assumed to be the object of exclusion, such force may be decidedly negative in nature.

In order to spare children such complexities of force, the Act for the Promotion of Measures to Prevent Bullying (2013) was enacted in Japan, according to which a "school bullying task force" should be established within a given school when bullying occurs, and the school board is required to intervene more proactively. In light of the seriousness of the problems surrounding bullying, the establishment of such a law is certainly to be commended as an improvement in society's response. However, given the problem of the complexities of force that persists in the modern state, are we right in viewing such institutional measures as sufficient to address the many difficulties presented by bullying? Moreover, the problematic relationship between touch and force extends well beyond bullying behavior. The complexities of force at work in such cases lie buried also in the depths of education, as modern anxieties regarding the growth of children and youth.

At the beginning of this paper, I noted that we have been forced by the pandemic to participate in a grand experiment in non-touching. Of course, this is an unfavorable situation; however, I sometimes wonder if it might actually conceal an opportunity for a temporary escape from the complicated influence of the forces associated with touching. I may be the only one who feels this way. What about children and students? I wonder if, when the world of touching is restored, some of them will feel uncomfortable with this influence, which had been accepted as "normal" before the pandemic. Has the Internet space become their new asylum? Or might it be the case that even in the online world, where there is no direct touching at the physical level, a shadow of the problematics of

force may persist, in the metaphorical role of digital "touching"? It is far from easy to come to terms with the ambiguous yet compelling forces associated with touching; and this is a major reason why, as I said at the outset, the philosophy of touch is dizzyingly complex.

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