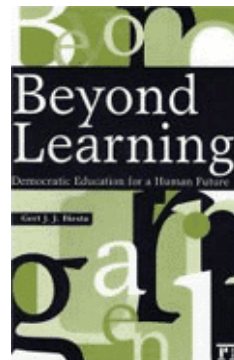


Education and the Possibility of Being Human in a World of Plurality and Difference:

A Review of Gert Biesta's Beyond Learning: Democratic Education for a Human Future

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Review

What does it mean to be human? How do we live with others who are not like us? How do we respond responsibly to the difference of the other? These questions have far-reaching practical, ethical and political consequences, but are first of all educational questions, Biesta claims. Education always in some way or another is for "newcomers" and the purposes of education inevitably focus on how the new beginning represented by each and every individual may somehow come into presence in a world of plurality and difference, a world populated by others who are not like us. Grounded in Continental philosophy, in particular the philosophy of Hannah Arendt, Emmanuel Levinas, Michel Foucault and Zygmunt Bauman, Biesta suggests a reversal of thinking about education; from giving students the answers, to asking students (and ourselves) difficult questions about what it means to be human and how to lead a human life.

Educational responsibility for the coming into being of a "newcomer" as a unique, singular being entails claiming responsibility for the human qualities of the world, or the "worldliness of the world" as well as a radical openness to what it means to be human. What was once a widely adopted view that teachers (and educators of all kinds) should try to produce a particular kind of human being according to a predefined ideal needs to be replaced, says Biesta, with a willingness to be responsible for the unique subjectivity of each student, a responsibility for the coming into being of the subject, without determining beforehand what the outcome will be. The teacher is responsible for what and who is to come, but without knowledge of what and who is to come. This is precisely why the current language of learning is not a language of education. The language of learning, which Biesta sees as "the unintended outcome of a range of different developments" (p. 31), is too well-suited to neo-liberal economic priorities and paradigms, where the teacher is the provider of goods and the student, or the "learner," is the consumer. Learning is practiced as an economic transaction, where the relation between teacher

and students is no longer predominantly a human relation, but a transaction in which both are accountable, a question of inputs and outputs. Some ways of thinking and doing are obviously possible using the language of learning, however, existential and ethical questions concerning the content and purpose of education, as well as questions concerning humanness and the subject's responsibility for the other require a different lexicon. This would be an educational language of disjunctions and interruptions, a language of human possibilities and difficulties.

What would education be like if what it means to be human was a radically open question? If it was a question that could only be answered by engaging in education, rather than a question that needs to be answered before we can educate? How would we educate without assuming that we knew the essence and nature of the human being? What would education be like if what a human being is were an open-ended question? Being a good pedagogue and thinker, Biesta does not give a direct answer to the questions he poses, but he leads us along a line of thinking that helps us see the possibility of a new and more human approach to education.

Plurality and difference are inseparable from the human condition. Democracy is in itself a commitment to a world of difference and plurality and presupposes a certain understanding of the "violation of the sovereignty of the autonomous subject" (p. 28). Paradoxically however, the modern project to provide a common definition of our humanity has been upheld and is still seen as the basic condition of living together in a world of difference. Referencing Bauman and Foucault's discussions of "the human," Biesta argues that modernity has dealt with outsiders or strangers in two ways: either by assimilating or by excluding them. A third possibility—peaceful co-existence—is rarely considered. The modern notion of the rational and self-governing human being, based on a predefined metaphysical idea of humanity, has been strongly challenged by Heidegger, Levinas and Foucault. The modern human being is a conceptualization of "man"—a "what" rather than a subjective "who." Levinas considers this kind of humanism to be insufficiently human, as it sees the individual in terms of an instance of a more general human essence and not in terms of uniqueness and singularity. This is also why Levinas claims that, "to be human means to live as if one were not a being among beings" (Levinas 1985, p.100). Foucault sees the need of a new approach to human subjectivity rather than a new theory. He suggests a philosophical ethos, which searches for a new way of formulating the question, rather than a new answer to the same old question. Biesta himself suggests a "shift from the question of what the subject is to *where the human being as a unique individual comes into presence*" (p. 41; author's italics).

The search for a new approach to the question of subjectivity includes the recognition that the human being cannot come into presence as a unique individual in predefined or educationally fixed situations. The space of personally responsible responses cannot be controlled and is of necessity something that interrupts and disturbs any educational program. Moreover, the coming into unique presence of the subject depends on the fact that there is another out there to take up that subject's initiative. This "other" is not a mirror of me but an-other beginner that takes up my initiative in his or her own spontaneous ways. The space of our subjective beginnings thus is the space of unpredictable intersubjectivity. Taking a Levinasian stance, Biesta suggests that the fundamental ethical qualities of the encounter lies in the fact that I am responsible for the other and cannot escape this responsibility. This world of responsibility for the other's otherness, which is always a world of difference and plurality, is the space where education is to be practiced.

What makes us unique is not our identity or a universal concept of humanity but our ethical response to the other in his or her alterity. It is our "response-ability" to the call made upon us by another human being. Thus, Biesta suggests that the most appropriate way to address the otherness of the student both responsibly and pedagogically is to ask educational questions of the student, like: "Where are you in this?" or "How will you respond?"

The difficulty of education is not derivative of some other area of complexity, such as psychology or communicative dynamics, but it is inherently difficult because our being with others, our "connections-in-difference" is always a "beginning" to which we must respond, without simplification or predetermination. Plurality and difference is not a problem that can be overcome; it is, as Arendt shows us, inseparable from the human condition. We are dependant on others to take up our "beginnings" and others will always do this in their own unpredictable ways. Our opportunity to act upon others "who are capable of their own actions" disturbs the "purity of our beginning, but is at the same time the only condition under which our beginnings can come into the world" (Arendt 1977b, p. 220). This space where newcomers may come into the world is, according to Arendt, the space of possible freedom. To her, freedom is not a freedom of will, but a freedom for action-with-others, a political act that needs a worldly, public space in order to "call something into being which did not exist before" (1977a, p. 151). Freedom-in-action is risky and can never be reduced to predictable techniques. Moreover, without freedom, plurality and difference, education would turn into predictable and instrumental socialization. This is how it is frequently constructed in the "language of learning." But this would be to escape the responsibility that Biesta and Levinas before him has already defined as "inescapable." The task and responsibility of education is to "keep in existence a space in which freedom can appear, a space in which unique, singular individuals can come into the world" (p. 95). Disruptions or interruptions of the educational process are not undesirable, Biesta reminds us. Rather these are the very realization of the premise that students act responsively to difference and otherness and that they thereby become aware of their own personal and unique responsibility to the other.

Democratic education, Biesta argues, is not about educating rational democratic individuals or preparing students for future democratic actions. Democratic subjects cannot be educated in schools alone but are ultimately the responsibility of society generally. Democratic education is about helping children and young people to reflect upon the "fragile conditions under which all people can act, under which all people can be a subject" (p. 145), while again and again asking the difficult questions of what it means to be human and to lead a human life.

Reading Biesta's complex and captivatingly written book, however, gives rise to a question that appears insufficiently addressed. Biesta describes the human being in terms of a democratic individual, an "other," a beginner and a newcomer. In doing so, he obscures, perhaps accidentally, what it might mean if such an individual were to be a child or a young person. It has been a constant theme in the Continental tradition in educational thought that a pedagogical relation between adult and child is dependent on certain qualities being upheld by the adult. Biesta suggests that such a pedagogical relation should be a relation based on "trust without ground, transcendental violence and responsibility without knowledge" (p. 24). However, when this relation is between an adult and a child (and it is often a relationship of this kind), this characterization requires further qualification and explanation to support pedagogical practice and praxis. Such a pedagogical relation is based on an irreducible asymmetry. The adult's trust

and un-knowing responsibility has a particularly unilateral character and this is an unavoidable part of realizing that which is good for the person, the life and the education of the child. If this unilateral and asymmetrical dimension of the pedagogical relationship is not recognized and emphasized, the relation between adult and child loses its pedagogical character. In this sense, the pedagogical relation, as Biesta describes it, is not pedagogical enough.

Any review of this book would be incomplete without mention of some of its outstanding literary qualities. The coherence of its content and form belies the complexity of its subject matter. It makes the book much more readily available to the reader's head and heart without making its underlying meaning any less challenging. The reader's reflection is prompted and cultivated very carefully throughout the text. For example, on those occasions where Biesta provides us with the same quotes and reminds us of important foci, he is careful to present these in different discourses and contexts. This thoughtful guidance is generous, helpful and for readers who find philosophy challenging, it is also necessary.

Biesta concludes with a quote from Hannah Arendt's book *Between Past and Future*, because as he says, it "captures in such a succinct manner, some of the central ideas" (p. 147) he has put forward:

Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token to save it from that ruin which, except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and young, would be inevitable. And education, too, is where we decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices, nor to strike from their hands their changes of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us. (1977a, p. 196)

This quotation from Arendt also provides a fitting conclusion for this review. It captures the challenging thematic core of Biesta's book and also demonstrates how the text itself enacts the democratic multivocality and humanity that it calls upon education to cultivate. Only through such cultivation and attendance to questions of the human and democratic is it possible to move, as Biesta urges us, beyond the instrumentality of learning to the responsibilities of education.

References

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