

Engaging with Others: *Philosophy of Education 2009*

Deborah Kerdeman
University of Washington, Seattle

It is my pleasure to introduce the Presidential Essay, the Kneller Lecture, the refereed essays, and the invited responses that comprise *Philosophy of Education 2009*. The papers included in this volume sparked lively conversations when they were presented at the 65th Annual Meeting of the Philosophy of Education Society in Montréal. The high quality of these essays, the thoughtfulness of the responses, and the skill with which session chairs facilitated exchanges between authors, respondents, and conference participants all contributed to the dynamism of the Montréal conference. What are the issues that these essays examine?

To answer this question, I turn first to the 27 “Essays” in the “Table of Contents” for this volume. Seven of these essays discuss aesthetic theories and artistic media. René Arcilla contends that, because abstract art highlights the indeterminate and experimental nature of cultural self-understanding, it can productively reframe what he calls the “historicist” focus of multicultural education. Darryl De Marzio turns to Michel Foucault’s aesthetics of existence to demonstrate how self-sacrifice paradoxically supports the flourishing of teachers. Jon Fennell draws on the work of Charles Sanders Peirce to argue that the life of reason and the life of revealed religion represent opposing aesthetic visions, the full nature of which becomes apparent in Leo Strauss’s “theologico-political problem.” Megan Laverty develops a robust conception of civility in order to establish the aesthetic and ethical significance of civility for moral education. Naoko Saito analyzes the film *Stella Dallas* to support her claim that Emersonian moral perfectionism is an important model for educating self-reliant individuals. Michael Surbaugh explores the role that pleasure should play in educating persons with disabilities. Finally, Joris Vlieghe, Maarten Simons, and Jan Masschelein undertake a phenomenological analysis to reveal how laughter is a corporeal experience that can illuminate nonhierarchical democratic relationships in classrooms. While Vlieghe et al. do not discuss aesthetic theories, their argument resonates with Surbaugh’s claim that aesthetic experience includes an important corporeal dimension.

Six of the 27 “Essay” authors employ moral and political theories to interrogate educational policies. Christopher Martin develops a notion of “thin universalizability” to justify the kinds of moral obligations that he believes educational policies should assume in pluralistic democracies. Michele Moses assesses the impact of ballot initiatives, particularly on the rights of underrepresented minority students. Andrew Stables examines four criteria for judging compulsory education and concludes that none of these criteria provides a moral justification for this policy. Judith Suissa makes the case that policy discourse about home-school relations simplifies the complex and inherently educational nature of parenting. Clifton Tanabe explains why legal opinions pertaining to affirmative action in higher education admissions have become less persuasive among policymakers. He urges

supporters of affirmative action to craft political arguments on behalf of this policy and not rely exclusively on the courts. Analyzing a principle of curricular fairness, Bryan Warnick argues that, when evolution and creationist theories are taught in public school biology classes, each viewpoint must be presented in its strongest possible form. A seventh essay by Alexander Sidorkin can also be included in this group. Although Sidorkin does not address educational policy *per se*, his critique of John Dewey's failure to seriously consider the role of economic interests in education carries provocative implications for policies regarding compulsory schooling and education reform.

Four authors explore challenges that arise when we conceive of education as "creating space for the new." Gert Biesta develops a theory of "weak education" to defend the existential uniqueness of each new human being against often unexamined norms of humanistic education. Mario Di Paolantonio considers the example of a clandestine torture center in Argentina to illustrate both why teaching about past atrocities must respect the irreducible particularity of the past and how the past continues to be implicated in the present. Claudia Ruitenberg critiques outcomes-based education as an ethical failure to extend hospitality to "newcomer" students and suggests reimagining educational spaces as *khora*. Doris Santoro questions the equation of social justice education with student activism. She contends that curricula and practices that assume this equation fail to provide students with a sanctuary for developing revolutionary new thinking.

The nine remaining "Essays" take up a number of topics. Feminist theories inform the work of Peter Nelsen and Leonard Waks. Nelsen maintains that caring must be understood in terms of triadic, not dyadic, relationships. The need for such a reframing becomes salient when persons reject the efforts of those who care for them. Waks suggests that early attempts to synthesize theories of justice with theories of care can help resolve *aporias* that currently divide those who imagine cultural cosmopolitanism in terms of universal principles from their feminist and postmodernist critics, who challenge universalistic positions.

Two essays on indoctrination also employ feminist theories. James Lang argues that, unlike what he calls "the dominant discourse on indoctrination," feminist epistemologies offer a robust way to distinguish indoctrination from acceptable educational practices. Barbara Peterson challenges the literature on indoctrination from the perspective of feminist pragmatist scholar Cheryl Misak. A third essay, by Charles Howell, complements these two pieces. Howell's essay on cheating in college does not specifically address indoctrination or feminist theories. However, Howell's claim that faculty and administrators can reduce cheating through assignments that require students to make their thinking visible resonates with the view of rationality that Lang and Peterson believe separates indoctrination from good education.

Karen Sihra and Helen Anderson explore three examples of epistemic short-sightedness and consider how Mahatma Gandhi's notion of *ahimsa* can help

educators address the pedagogical violence that they believe results from short-sighted thinking. Séamus Mulryan also turns to non-Western religious thinking. According to Mulryan, the “warrior” tradition of Shambhala Buddhism illustrates how persons can cultivate the kind of courage that Gadamerian dialogue presumes but fails to explicate.

The essays by Darron Kelly and Trent Davis echo Mulryan’s concern for communication in educational settings. Kelly employs Jürgen Habermas’s discourse ethics to support his view that a popular text in educational administration lacks adequate moral grounding. Davis argues that Michael Oakeshott’s ideal of conversation is superior to Deweyan pragmatism for enhancing understanding between philosophers and educators.

The diversity of issues and approaches that characterizes these 27 essays provides a wealth of material to consider. But these essays do not simply span a range of unrelated topics; rather, they address a common theme. Explicitly or implicitly, all of these essays invite us to wrestle with the vexing questions that arise when we engage with others who differ from us and thus surprise, question, challenge, and even refute our assumptions and our self-understandings. The “other” with which these essays are concerned may be an individual, a culture, an orientation, a truth-claim, an interest, or a desire. Some authors encourage open curiosity toward others and argue that engagement should strive for consensus and a harmonious integration of differences. Some authors contend that reconciliation, although well intentioned, can be forced or unjust. We must not underestimate our proclivity for fearful resistance nor diminish our tendency to suppress conflicts and other forms of rupture.

This certainly is not the first time that “engaging with different others” has emerged as a theme in the Philosophy of Education Society’s Yearbook. Nonetheless, the pervasiveness of this theme is especially notable throughout this year’s essays. These essays make it clear that the depth and breadth of differences that challenge relations with others is profound. Further, they emphasize that the need to engage with others is fueled by urgent concerns that are framed in moral, political, epistemic, and existential terms. Above all, these essays suggest that engaging with others is an educational imperative: engaging with others can be hard and therefore needs to be learned and taught. Moreover, insofar as engagement is transformative in a positive sense, it is inherently educational.

The Presidential Essay and Kneller Lecture, together with the three “Featured Essays” in this volume, provide a nuanced account of issues we must consider if we want our engagements with others to be meaningful and just. David T. Hansen’s Presidential Essay looks to Diogenes in order to explore what Hansen calls a “cosmopolitan orientation.” According to Hansen, Diogenes is the quintessential other whose life exemplifies “unnamable suffering, that the exile, the castaway, and the wanderer know in their bones.” Hansen questions Diogenes’ attachment to a state of perpetual exile. “In severing his roots in local life,” Hansen asks, “does Diogenes become not a citizen of the cosmos but a citizen of nowhere?”

To be cosmopolitan, Hansen counters, is to inhabit the crossroads where different cultures intersect. Hansen explains that living in this space requires reflective openness to that which is new, as well as reflective loyalty to that which is familiar. We must be able “to dwell meaningfully in a space of often paradoxical transition: of leaving *and* remaining at home, of engaging the strange *and* the familiar, of witnessing *and* participating” (emphasis in original). While negotiating this tension is difficult, Hansen observes that empirical research demonstrates how people do so all the time. Hansen suggests that the daily routines of teachers and students in classrooms reveal cosmopolitan relations and can help us understand how a cosmopolitan orientation can be learned and taught.

Engaging with others, Paul Taylor argues in his Kneller Lecture, is an ethical practice that requires lucid perception. Lucid perception depends “on the willingness and ability to call into question the ensemble of needs, interests, abilities, and assumptions — in other words, the *selves* — that we bring to our attempts at perception” (emphasis in original). Taylor stresses that critical self-awareness can be achieved. In postcolonial contexts, however, this achievement is hard-won. Our perceptions and our self-understanding continue to be colored by sociohistorical dynamics that normalize and reinscribe racist stereotypes and assumptions, which we are trying to recognize and alter.

Art, Taylor claims, can aid the process of self-critique by helping us work through “the legacies of [postcolonial] relations, and their persistence in altered forms.” Even art that perpetuates blindness can be instructive. Films such as *The Last King of Scotland*, for example,

are useful resources for ethical reflection, but not because they help us to “dispel and unmask confusion” about how to understand or apply our ethical concepts. They are useful because they invite us, albeit in ways that are orthogonal to their manifest mission and message, to interrogate our *lack of confusion* when confronted by a stereotype from central casting. They invite us to cultivate suspicion in the face of lucidity that comes too easily, lucidity that is immediately satisfying because of its responsibility not to the standing terms of ethical discourse, but to the standing terms of modern race-talk. (emphasis in original)

Thus, for Taylor, art can help us confront our propensity to exclude and conceal people whom we exploit, because we fear that they will interrupt our comfortable ways of life.

Taylor, I think, would welcome Hansen’s cosmopolitan orientation. For his part, I believe that Hansen would share Taylor’s concern that crossroads are not necessarily innocent or benign intersections. Nevertheless, these two lectures emphasize different aspects of engaging with others. Hansen accents reconciliation; Taylor underscores rupture.

Like Taylor, Sharon Todd highlights the persistence of rupture. Drawing on Hannah Arendt, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Emmanuel Levinas, Todd argues that conflict is a “preoriginary moment of being.” Without this primordial condition of conflict, being-with-others would not be possible. “There can be no pluralism without conflict,” Todd concludes. From this perspective, Todd explains, “education would not be an exercise in dialogic practice across social differences.” Education rather

“would be rethought as an approach to political being (as a being together with others) which necessitates a serious engagement with the radical, preoriginary conditions of conflict.”

Francis Schrag acknowledges conflict and argues that moral education must teach children to protect themselves from others who wish them harm. This means, Schrag argues, that deception, force, and other types of actions that would be “proscribed in normal situations by both normative ethics and common sense morality, are not only appropriate but also moral responses to enemies seeking to deprive us or our loved ones of our basic rights to life and liberty.” Schrag stresses that the “ought” he has in mind “is a moral ‘ought,’ not merely a prudential one.” No less than learning to thrive in copasetic environments, learning to survive in bad situations requires moral education.

Whereas Todd stresses the persistence of conflict and Schrag argues that living in conflict-ridden situations demands a certain type of moral education, Charles Bingham counsels reconciliation in a manner that recalls Hansen’s cosmopolitan orientation. Bingham focuses on the predicament of educational philosophers who, we might say, find themselves at the crossroads between what Bingham calls “pure philosophy” on the one hand and educational practices on the other. Drawing an analogy between educational philosophy and the modern novel, Bingham argues that educational philosophers — like good novelists — should regard their work as neither subsumed by practical problems nor utterly removed from them. Educational philosophers instead can “become philosophical.” Becoming philosophical, Bingham explains, means that one’s work is “*informed* by philosophy, but not *guided* by it” (emphasis in original). At the same time, educational philosophers are not beholden to crises of practice. Rather they are able to “make philosophy *out of* education” (emphasis in original). Bingham concludes that educational philosophers “must, like the modern artist, be hypervigilant about their own artistic genre.” Becoming philosophical, educational philosophers “actually fortify the hinterland for pure philosophers.”

Taken together, these five papers raise a spectrum of concerns to ponder when engaging with others. In so doing, they provide a helpful lens through which to read not only these papers themselves, but also the 27 “Essays” in this volume and the responses that accompany them. Using this lens to focus your reading, you may want to ask yourself the following questions: How is the “other” defined? How do or should we react when an “other” confronts us? What consequences arise when we do or do not engage with “others”? What counts as “productive” engagement, and why? Are there times when we should refuse to engage? What specific challenges does engaging with others suggest for educational practices and aims?

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