On Compassion and Community Without Identity:
Implications for Moral Education

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When one thinks of community, what often comes to mind is people who have something in common — common interests, ideas, or ideals, or perhaps a shared identity based on geography, culture, language, race, or religion. Community is also often accompanied by somewhat romantic notions of a kind of togetherness against the ravages of the world outside. As Zygmunt Bauman puts it,

> Words have meanings: some words, however, also have a "feel." The word "community" is one of them.…To start with, community is a "warm" place, a cosy and comfortable place. It is like a roof under which we shelter in heavy rain, like a fireplace at which we warm our hands on a frosty day. Out there, in the street, all sorts of dangers lie in ambush; we have to be alert when we go out, watch whom we are talking to and who talks to us, be on the lookout every minute. In here, in the community, we can relax.… .We may quarrel, but these are friendly quarrels, it is just that we are all trying to make our togetherness even better and more enjoyable than it has been so far and, while guided by the same wish to improve our life together, we may disagree how to do it best. But we never wish each other bad luck, and we may be sure that all the others around us wish us good.[1]

Despite critiques from many fronts, including postmodern, poststructuralist, feminist, queer, and critical race theory, this idealized image of community as a refuge or safe haven still holds sway in much educational discourse and in teacher education programs in particular.[2] The ideal classroom is typically portrayed as a safe space — a place where students are free to learn and explore together, and where the differences that separate us in the outside world give way to a shared identity as equal members of the classroom community.

While many North American classrooms prior to the 1970s were, on the surface at least, quite homogeneous, shifting patterns of immigration, policies of racial integration, and mainstreaming of students with disabilities, as well as an opening up of discourse around race, class, gender, and sexuality, brought differences to the fore. Critics revealed the persistent inequities in educational policy and practice, and, as the face of public school classrooms changed, cracks began to appear in the veneer of assumed commonality and cohesiveness. But, rather than attending to the critiques and revisiting the prevailing understanding of community based on identity or sameness, educators generally responded by seeking to further entrench that notion. Moral education, in particular, has focused on teaching students to see the essential similarity between persons (that is, the idea that beneath the skin we are all basically the same) and on cultivating empathy as the salient precondition for community in pluralist societies, and in classrooms within those societies.[3] In a recent article, entitled "The Community of Those Who Have Nothing In Common: Education and the Language of Responsibility," Gert Biesta echoes the critique of community as identity or commonality, but suggests that we do not need to abandon the idea of community altogether.[4] Rather, he says, we need to reframe it. He draws on Bauman, Derrida, and Alphonso Lingis to sketch a picture of community that

rests, not on some form of shared identity, but on a recognition that we are all inescapably and irreducibly other to the other. This notion of "community without community,"[5] as Derrida calls it, interrupts the dominant language of identity or commonality with the language of responsibility, and is, on Biesta's view, "the most important, and ultimately the only relevant educational community."[6]

In this essay, I want to pick up where Biesta leaves off, making a tentative foray into the preconditions or moral dispositions that might make such community — community without identity — possible. By way of backdrop, I will briefly sketch the prevailing conception of community as identity that continues to inform educational discourse and practice. Next, I will raise the postmodern/poststructuralist critique of this conception by Bauman, Derrida, Levinas, and others. I will then ask what it might mean to think about community as a kind of "permanent coexistence with the stranger" wherein community is based on a "negative" commonality — on our shared condition of existential lack or incompleteness.[7] In the fourth section, drawing mainly on Levinas, I will posit compassion (construed as a particular kind of suffering-with-the-other) as a moral attitude, or way of being, that is especially suited to fostering community without identity; and I will close by outlining some of the attendant implications for moral education.

COMMUNITY AS IDENTITY

As I mentioned at the outset, the long cherished ideal of classrooms as safe and caring communities continues to inform educational theory and practice. Take, for example, Thomas Sergiovanni's description of community as being "at the heart of a school's lifeworld."[8] Schools, he says, can be understood as:

> • Learning communities where students and other members of the school community are committed to thinking, growing, and inquiring and where learning is an attitude as well as an activity, a way of life as well as a process

> • Collegial communities where members are connected to each other for mutual benefit and to pursue common goals by a sense of felt interdependence and mutual obligation

> • Caring communities where members make a total commitment to each other and where the characteristics that define their relationships are moral in character

> • Inclusive communities where economic, religious, cultural, ethnic, family, and other differences are brought together into a mutually respectful whole

> • Inquiring communities where principals and teachers commit themselves to a spirit of collective inquiry as they reflect on their practice and search for solutions to the problems they face.[9]

Note the focus on commonality, connection, and inclusion. Admittedly, there are claims to recognizing and accepting diversity, but the underlying assumption is that differences are merely contingent, and ought not to get in the way of the real business of forging bonds of community across those differences.

As Derrida reminds us, however, the word "community" means a kind of "military formation," a wall of protection that we build against the other. Community is a way of keeping ourselves safe and guarding ourselves from the difference of the other.[10] And, when communities are based upon positive commonality or identity with the other, the price of admission for those who do not already share the

requisite qualities or traits is a denial of their difference, or, at the very least, a willingness to break down the barriers to understanding each other across such difference. In the classroom this typically takes the form of asking marginalized students to reach across the bridge of ignorance to teach their classmates about "what it's like to be *x*" (Aboriginal, for example, or bullied, or gay, or deaf) — in other words, to make their lives intelligible to the dominant students and thereby gain entry as legitimate members of the classroom community. In this way, it is believed, students will come to see others as basically just like themselves, regardless of race, class, gender, sexuality, or ability. The intent is to divest difference of its divisive force and thereby restore the ideal of the classroom as a safe and caring community.[11]

For Derrida, Levinas, and others, however, this erasure of difference is a particularly pernicious form of metaphysical violence. It is a Hegelian move wherein difference is overcome by the creation of a new identity inclusive of difference, or, to put it more bluntly, assimilation in another guise.[12] In order for community to be non-violent, they suggest, we must resist the impulse to erase or consume otherness in the name of commonality or shared identity. We need to find "another kinship," Levinas says, one that will enable us to conceive of the difference between oneself and the other in a way that preserves the other's alterity and resists oppression and subsumption of any kind.[13] We also need to reframe our understanding of community in such a way that it is a community without identity — a "non-identical community that cannot say I or we."[14]

COMMUNITY WITHOUT IDENTITY

For Derrida, whose work has been characterized as a response to the "importunate plea of the displaced" — the stranger, the wayfarer, the immigrant and those who have "no native place, no place to rest their head"[15] — the move toward non-violent and non-identical community requires a move toward a conception of "community without community."[16] By this he means community "pressed to a near breaking point, exposed to the danger of the non-communal, communities that are rendered porous and open-ended, without homogeneity and self-identity, putting their community and identity at *risk*."[17] In the term "community without community" the "without" serves to efface community without completely annihilating it; it puts it under erasure, calling it into question in the very act of asserting it.[18] It is a way of being together that resists the appeal to identity in favor of a profound responsibility and responsiveness to the other, to those who lack the protection of belonging.

Consistent with Derrida's emphasis on responding to the other, but drawing more explicitly perhaps on Levinas, the salient distinction for me is that community without identity is based on a "negative" commonality. That is, rather than the "positive" traits or attributes (such as race, culture, class, or religious or political commitments) that mark communities of identity, community without identity is based on our shared condition of existential lack or incompleteness. On Levinas's view, subjectivity is made possible only by a radical kind of passivity.[19] To be a subject is to suffer, to undergo, and be subject *to* the other. To be an "I" is to live for the other — for a time beyond my own time and a world without me.[20] Being in

community is therefore to be, in a sense, hostage to the other; it is to suffer for the other and with the other. And it is only "through the condition of being a hostage," Levinas says, "that there can be pity, compassion, pardon, and proximity in the world — even the little there is, even the simple 'after you sir.'"[21]

For Judith Butler, who draws on both Derrida and Levinas as well as on psychoanalytic thought, it is precisely the subject's fundamental incompleteness and foreignness to itself that forms the ground for connection to others. As subjects constituted only in response to the other, she says, we do not and cannot know who we are: "Since there was a 'before to me' which I cannot narrate, the subject can never fully recuperate the conditions of its own emergence."[22] Identity is therefore necessarily contingent and unstable. In John Caputo's words, "the things we come up with when we describe our condition are written in the sand, a desert sand that is vulnerable to the next storm."[23] But, rather than denying the subject agency, Butler claims that a recognition of our radical "unselfknowingness" and the essential "unknowability" of human existence itself results in an ethical posture of humility on the part of the subject, and generosity when this humility is extended to others.[24] Her conception of community is thus also one of community without identity, a "provisional construction wrought from the fact that we are all half-mad....We are half-mad in the sense that we are opaque to ourselves and fundamentally dependent on the other."[25]

Notice the stark contrast between the traditional understanding of community, which is based on claims to positive identity and commonality, and which therefore implies both self-understanding and knowledge of the other, and a conception of community based on our fundamental incompleteness or lack, which recognizes the impossibility of knowing either oneself or the other. It is precisely this emphasis on subjectivity as heteronomous — as a radical and inescapable kind of passivity or suffering — that I find indispensable in rethinking the notion of compassion as a precondition for community without identity.

COMPASSION AND COMMUNITY WITHOUT IDENTITY

As I mentioned above, particularly over the last ten years or so, empathy has been identified as the pivotal moral emotion and a necessary precondition for community where traditional bonds of affiliation (for example, family, nation, and religion) no longer hold. And if one sees community as based on some form of positive commonality or identity — on the capacity to say "we" — this indeed makes very good sense. However, given the limitations of empathy and the moral risks of erasing or consuming difference in the name of essential similarity, the current emphasis on identity and commonality will no longer serve.[26] On my view, a conception of community without identity requires a shift from the focus on positive similarity to a "kinship" based on a recognition of our existential incompleteness and fundamental suffering as subjects constituted in passivity and subjection to the other — the kinship of compassion (from the Latin *com-* [together] and *pati* [to suffer]).

Now, compassion has long played an important role in moral theory, from Aristotle to Schopenhauer to the more recent studies of altruistic behavior,

especially by the rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust. However, an important distinction between these approaches and a Levinasian understanding is that, in the former, compassion has "content." On an Aristotelian view, for example, compassion is a painful emotion aroused by the awareness of another's suffering due to the loss of goods (such as food, friendship, health, and freedom) that are considered essential to a fully flourishing human life. Compassion is also typically characterized by a desire, on the part of the agent, for the alleviation of the other's suffering in order that she might regain the capacity to fully exercise and enjoy her subjectivity.

For Levinas, on the other hand, the suffering of existential incompleteness is an inescapable condition of subjectivity. Therefore, compassion is not a matter of responding to the suffering that results from the loss of particular goods, but rather a response to the appeal of the other by one who is already declared responsible to and for the other. He makes this point by recalling a scene from Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* in which Sonya Marmaladova looks upon Rashkalnikov in his despair and is filled with "insatiable compassion." Levinas draws the reader's attention to Dostoyevsky's use of "insatiable" rather than "inexhaustible." When we accept the measure of our destiny, he says — that one's being is for-the-other prior to being for-oneself — compassion is an "absolute orientation" and the fundamental movement that carries us forward.[27] Compassion is thus emptied of its content, but not its ethical force: "The relationship with the Other puts me into question, empties me of myself and empties me without end, showing me ever new resources. I did not know I was so rich, but I no longer have the right to keep anything for myself."[28]

In the modern era, it was Schopenhauer who made the strongest case for compassion as the basis for morality.[29] "Only insofar as an action has sprung from compassion," he says, "does it have any moral value; and every action resulting from any other motives has none."[30] On his view, moral worth is the absence of all self-interested motivation, and egoism and moral worth are mutually exclusive. This might sound entirely compatible with a Levinasian view, but there is an important distinction. For Schopenhauer, the individual is basic. Compassion therefore requires a metaphysical transcendence of the gap between individuals whereby the agent abandons egoism and takes on the suffering of another as he would his own, and *as a result of that transcendence*, desires to alleviate the other's suffering.[31] For Levinas, on the other hand, our "pre-ontological intersubjectivity," or pre-essential dependence on the other, means that the "I" *already* signifies total altruism or compassion.[32]

However, even if one is convinced by Levinas's appeal for such radical other-centredness, what implications can we draw from it for education, and specifically for educating toward a community that does not deny or annihilate difference — a community without identity?

IMPLICATIONS FOR MORAL EDUCATION

In contrast to the current emphasis on cultivating empathy as a way to foster community across difference, Megan Boler, Sharon Todd, and others have argued

convincingly that the strategy of asking students to "put themselves in another's shoes," and to reflect on how they would feel if (*x*) were done to them, is ineffective at the least, if not downright harmful.[33] Simulation exercises meant to replicate situations of suffering that are removed from the students' own lives (such as asking them to go without food for a day in order to experience hunger, or to curl up on the classroom floor in spaces marked out to the size of that allotted to prisoners on the slave trading ships in order to identify with those who endured such horrific conditions) are of little educational or moral worth. In addition to implying that moral responsibility need only be extended to those persons and situations into which one is able to imaginatively project oneself, these simulation exercises diminish the very real suffering of the hungry and oppressed by suggesting that one can somehow access another's mental state by simply replicating the external conditions of that experience and projecting one's own feelings onto the other.

Todd acknowledges, however, that we all engage in projection to some degree. Teachers often attempt to empathize with their students in order to determine how to act in the students' best interest, and these attempts are not entirely without benefit:

> Indeed, projectively imagining what a child living in poverty might be suffering can inform a teacher's decision about how to make life better for that child. Providing food in the classroom, starting a clothing exchange at school, offering time and space at school to do homework, and connecting the family to community supports are some of the direct benefits that can accrue from these feelings.[34]

But, she adds, we should never assume that our projected feelings are in fact what the child feels; and, more to the point, why do we think we need to feel what the other feels in order to arouse our moral responsibility for that other?[35]

I argued above that a Levinasian conception of compassion might offer a promising starting point or precondition for community without identity. Such compassion rests, however, not on the capacity to see similarity instead of difference, but rather on the capacity to live with the unexpected and unknown, to live with the radically other without attempting to annihilate or overcome otherness by seeking in the stranger some version of ourselves. For the pre-service teachers in my own institution, many of whom come from small, white, religiously conservative communities, encounters with the unexpected and unknown often take the form of encountering differences of race, class, and sexuality. For some of these students, their attendance at university marks the first time they have actually had a face-to-face conversation with an Aboriginal person or with an out gay man. Those who are open to such encounters (or perhaps simply caught off-guard) find their stereotypes about "lazy, drunken Indians" and "limp-wristed fags" challenged, and they may also come to a painful realization of their own complicity in systems of oppression. As Lingis says, "To enter into conversation with another is to lay down one's arms and one's defenses; to throw open the gates of one's own positions; to expose oneself to the other, the outsider; and to lay oneself open to surprises, contestation, and inculpation."[36]

To expose oneself to the other is to risk what one holds as true, and these students often find themselves in a position of radical unknowing and, to use Butler's word,

"unselfknowingness." They can no longer sit easily around the Sunday dinner table listening to racist and homophobic jokes, but neither can they just walk away from those long-held and cherished relationships. It is a position of profound suffering, but it is also, I want to suggest, a position of possibility — the possibility of an opening into compassion and community without identity.

Thus, rather than encouraging students to assimilate, familiarize, and otherwise fit the other into their already established conceptions, we need to help them learn to live with ambiguity and uncertainty.[37] We need to suffer with them in the tension of not knowing who they/we are, and with the impossibility of ever truly knowing the other. For it is precisely the capacity to receive the other *as other*, to resist the impulse to reduce the other to the same, and to take that demanding path together, I suggest, that allows for the possibility of community without identity.[38] In Lingis's words:

> In the compassion that turns to the other, there is fear that the other will not be able to endure and fear that the other, mired in pain, may not be able to obey the summons addressed to him. The other feels the touch one brings to him as a force come from elsewhere that draws him out of his pain, mired in itself, and draws him into a suffering that depersonalizes and that is no longer his alone, and no longer his. One goes because one finds oneself compelled to go….Every move of one's hand that is moved to tact and tenderness acknowledges the imperative addressed to one in the susceptibility of the other. One has to suffer for the others and with the others.[39]

1. Zygmunt Bauman, *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 1–2.

2. See, for example, Kathleen Knight Abowitz, "Reclaiming Community," *Educational Theory* 49, no. 2 (1999): 143–160; various pieces in Megan Boler, ed., *Democratic Dialogue in Education: Troubling Speech, Disturbing Silence* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 57–67; Elizabeth Ellsworth, "'Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering?' Working Through the Oppressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy," in *Feminisms and Critical Pedagogy,* eds. Carmen Luke and Jennifer Gore (New York: Routledge, 1992), 90–119; and Nel Noddings, "On Community," *Educational Theory* 46, no. 3 (1996): 245–266.

3. See, for example, the *Roots of Empathy* curriculum currently used in eight Canadian provinces. Available at: http://www.rootsofempathy.org. For contrasting views, see Megan Boler, *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Sharon Todd, *Learning from the Other: Levinas, Psychoanalysis, and Ethical Possibilities in Education* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 43–64; and Susan Verducci, "A Conceptual History of Empathy and a Question It Raises for Moral Education," *Educational Theory* 50, no. 1 (2000): 63–80.

4. Gert Biesta, "The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common: Education and the Language of Responsibility," *Interchange* 35, no. 3 (2004): 307–324.

5. Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship,* trans. G. Collins (New York: Verso, 1997), 202.

6. Biesta, "Community," 307.

7. Ibid., 313; and Bauman, *Community*.

8. Thomas Sergiovanni, *The Lifeworld of Leadership: Creating Culture, Community, and Personal Meaning in our Schools* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000)**,** 59.

9. Ibid., 59–60.

10. John Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 271–272.

11. For an incisive critique of this approach, see Alison Jones, "Talking Cure: The Desire for Dialogue," in Boler, ed., *Democratic Dialogue*, 57–67.

12. Drucilla Cornell, *The Philosophy of the Limit* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 52.

13. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence,* trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981).

14. Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, 231.

15. John Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics: On Not Knowing Who We Are* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 64.

16. Derrida, *Politics of Friendship,* 202.

17. Ibid.

18. Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 64.

19. Even though passivity has not traditionally been associated with subjectivity, it has still played an important role in ethical thought. In Martha Nussbaum's discussion of Aristotelian ethics, for example, our humanness depends in part on passivity, on our own vulnerability to pain and loss. Similarly, our capacity for accurate moral perception and for responding to the other's suffering depends in large part on our willingness to be passive. See Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of the Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) and *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990). The salient difference between Nussbaum's Aristotelian view and Levinas's conception is that, for the former, passivity derives from free will: the subject is understood as a substantial or mastering center of meaning who chooses or consents to passivity. For Levinas, on the other hand, passivity cannot be chosen; it is "*pre*voluntary, *pre*virtuous, *pre*conscious and *pre*moral." His conception of subjectivity *as passivity* is therefore a more radical departure from the traditional understanding in which passivity is a subset of a prior constellation of free will, choice, consent or denial. See Adriaan Peperzak, *Beyond: The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 76.

20. Emmanuel Levinas, "Meaning and Sense," in *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*, eds. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 50.

21. Emmanuel Levinas, "Substitution," in *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*, eds. Peperzak, Critchley, and Bernasconi, 91.

22. Unpublished notes from Judith Butler, "Ethical Violence," (keynote lecture presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society, New Brunswick, N.J., November 10, 2001).

23. Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 35.

24. Butler, "Ethical Violence."

25. Ibid.

26. In previous discussions around this issue, I have had to concede that a thin form of empathy may in fact be required in order to recognize the other as a being worthy of moral concern in the first place. I thank Claudia Ruitenberg for bringing this point to my attention.

27. Levinas, "Meaning and Sense," 52.

28. Ibid.

29. While writing from within the Western tradition, Schopenhauer's work on compassion was also inspired by Buddhist thought, especially on suffering as the basic human condition.

30. Arthur Schopenhauer, *Philosophical Writings*, ed. Wolfgang Shirmacher (New York: Continuum, 1994), 204.

31. Schopenhauer, *Philosophical Writings*, 203–205.

32. Emmanuel Levinas, "Transcendence and Height," in *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writing*, eds. Peperzak, Critchley, and Bernasconi, 18.

33. See Boler, *Feeling Power*; and Todd, *Learning from the Other*.

34. Todd, *Learning from the Other*, 60.

35. Ibid.

36. Alphonso Lingis, *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 87.

37. In a similar vein, Hunter McEwan argues that rather than conceiving of education as processes of familiarization, we ought to conceive of it along the theme of estrangement. However, while McEwan's point is to reclaim a place in education for risk, wonder and perplexity, rather than the more radical approach implied by Derrida's and Levinas's conception of opening ourselves to the incoming of the other, both approaches take as a starting point a recognition that education, as it is currently construed, is deeply steeped in an avoidance of the unknown and unfamiliar. See Hunter McEwan, "On Making Things Difficult for Learners," in *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 2000,* ed. Lynda Stone (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2001), 260.

38. While the call for this kind of destabilizing and other-centered education cannot be reduced to a simple recipe or formula for best practice, there are still concrete implications for classroom life. See, for example, Gert Biesta and Denise Egéa-Kuehne, eds., *Derrida & Education* (London: Routledge, 2001).

39. Lingis, *Community*, 179.