

Gifts of Teaching

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Chris Higgins's argument begins with the problem of teaching as "thankless work." Many involved in teaching suffer from the sense of a lack of recognition. Such lack is often muffled, however, by "asceticism" and "altruism." Higgins's intention is to reveal the problem behind these typical patterns of teaching, and to reclaim "the desire for recognition" that he considers to be integral to meaningful teaching—teaching that contributes not only to the growth of students, but also to teachers themselves. To this end, Higgins presents his alternative idea of mutual recognition in the asymmetrical relationship between teacher and student. His strategy is to correct the imbalance (as he finds it) in Martin Buber's "one-way recognition" or "lofty asceticism" by drawing from Jessica Benjamin's thoroughly intersubjectivist theory of mutual recognition.

Higgins presents an eloquent, coherent, and in many respects persuasive account of the significance of recognition in teaching. And yet I feel there is something missing, or say, not quite true to the "dynamics" of the diverse realities of teaching—perhaps precisely because of his articulacy and coherence. In response, focusing on three points, I explore aspects of Buber's text that point to a slightly different interpretation than Higgins gives, and that suggest other gifts of teaching.¹

First, there is something missing from the dichotomy that Higgins sets up between Benjamin's intersubjective theory of recognition in mutual direction and the "one-way relationship" of Buber's "lofty asceticism." Buber describes the moment of inclusion as the experience of the situation from the other side with "the extension of one's own concreteness, the fulfilment of the actual situation of life, the complete presence of the reality in which one participates" (*BMM*, 114-15). The self stands in "the common situation of 'educating' and 'being educated'" (*BMM*, 119). The kind of "one-sidedness" that Buber discusses here is not merely the altruistic negation of the self, or self-sacrifice. It is not only the standpoint of the other self that this self is now adopting; neither is the issue well understood in terms of the choice between self-sacrifice and self-assertion. Rather, one-sidedness is a mode of self-transcendence, accompanied by a sense of "humility" (*BMM*, 112). Buber suggests that the unexpected gift of teaching is bequeathed when we leave our narrow framework of thinking, our narcissistic insistence on self-consciousness, and open ourselves to something beyond our grasp, perhaps eternally so. This mode of detachment, I believe, is what Buber means by "special objectivity" as a condition of lofty asceticism (*BMM*, 113).

Second, Higgins's notion of mutual recognition, like Benjamin's, gives us the image of a classroom where teaching and learning take place concentrating especially on the psychology of the human selves involved. According to Higgins, a teacher always does (and, allegedly, ought to) reflect on his own psychological state

while being concerned with that of his students, constantly questioning “who he is.” In this highly self-conscious mode of teaching, however, certain rich dimensions of learning and teaching tend to be excluded—dimensions that are revealed when we learn to release ourselves from our narrow, constricting egos. Consider, for example, the kind of wonder that teachers and students may experience when they are absorbed in something like astronomy. They face the subject matter together, but largely without any need of recognition; they are absorbed in the joy of learning. In these moments, both teacher and students undergo invisible moments of growth by losing their self-consciousness through attention to something larger than themselves. Is there not a danger that the self-conscious teacher who desires to be thanked, to be recognized, “in return,” may lapse into a kind of hubris, or narcissism, or in the worst case, a perverted form of power—a danger always hidden within the economy of reciprocity, a danger always hidden in teaching? To avoid such dangers, Buber warns us to leave the existing self rather than be self-assertive.

Third, in Benjamin’s clear-cut, explicit, and generalized account of recognition (“to recognize is to affirm, validate, acknowledge, know, accept, understand, empathize, take in, tolerate, appreciate, see, identify with, find familiar, . . . love”), which Higgins supports, the elements of separation, condemnation, and loss are dismissed as if they were barriers to mutual recognition. In Buber, in contrast, encounter with the other is altogether more elusive and problematic:

The educator who practices the experience of the other side and stands firm in it, experiences two things together, first that he is limited by otherness, and second that he receives grace by being bound to the other. He feels from “over there” the acceptance and rejection of what is approaching . . . of course often only in a fugitive mood or an uncertain feeling; but this discloses the real need and absence of need in the soul (*BMM*, 119).

The emphasis on the acknowledgement of limits here is expressed more sharply by Stanley Cavell. In his interpretation of philosophical scepticism, Cavell discusses the “unhandsome” elements of separation, condemnation, and loss as inherent in human communication. The unhandsome part of human being is not so much the failure of recognition; it is the failure to acknowledge that failure, that limitation; it is the skeptic’s obsessive anxiety for security and certainty. As Cavell discusses this in his *The Claim of Reason*, in the moment of learning, the transformation of the self (including the teacher’s) takes place when the adult is confronted by separation from the child.² Learning and teaching do not always take place in “ever greater delight” in the mutually dependent mother-child relationship, as Higgins describes this. Higgins’s procedural account of Benjamin’s idea of mutual recognition suggests that this failure of recognition is something culpable, and therefore something that needs to be rectified. Buber and Cavell remind us, however, that our education often starts in the very moment when we recognize such limits with humility, even perhaps with a sense of reverence. When we forget the unhandsome condition of human being, this sense of limit, and when we appeal to the general account of recognition as a panacea, there is a danger that practices of teaching and learning will become thinner than they otherwise might be.

I would like to ask Higgins therefore whether mutual recognition is the *sole* way of characterizing the “dynamics of teaching.” Teaching and learning are dynamic

once we open our eyes to the diverse gifts of teaching—gifts of the kind that we receive when we become patient towards something that is not easily made explicit and articulated. The dynamics of teaching also require the courage to leave one's desires, needs, or accustomed ways of thinking in order to receive something that is beyond one's grasp.

Recognition does not necessarily have to take the form of immediate reciprocity, or indeed any explicit form. Oftentimes, the sense of recognition strikes us later in our life—perhaps after the teacher dies and when the student becomes the mother or the father of a child; recognition may be returned to the teacher by someone outside the relationship; or a great lecturer can succeed in inspiring the growth of students without any obvious kind of mutual recognition, even without knowing them at all. Buber suggests that in a one-sided relationship, the teacher experiences the moment of “recognition” without an immediate return or explicit recognition from the student:

In learning, from time to time what this human being needs and does not need at the moment, the educator is led to an ever deeper recognition of what the human being needs in order to grow. But he is also led to the recognition of what he, the “the educator,” is able and what he is unable to give of what is needed—and what he can give now, and what not yet. So the responsibility for this realm of life allotted and entrusted to him, the constant responsibility for this living soul, points him to that which seems impossible and yet is somehow granted to us—to self-education. (*BMM*, 120).

Unlike the kind of asceticism that Higgins describes, Buber's asceticism is filled with a sense of wonder, awe, or reverence over the creative powers of the child—this particular child that a teacher faces in the here and now. The Buberian teacher surely will enjoy the moment of communion even if she is not thanked, recognized at that moment (or at all) by the child. The gift of teaching is greater than what our limited self-knowledge can grasp. To thank rather than to be thanked, to let things be rather than avariciously to grasp them, and to respond to the world rather than asking to receive response—this is the different though deeper sense of value, call it recognition perhaps, that Buber teaches.

1. Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, trans. Ronald Gregor-Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1947). This book will be cited as *BMM* in the text for all subsequent references.

2. Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 125.