

Martin Buber's "Sacred" Way and Moral Education

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Cherlyn Pijanowski's essay is a rich, sensitively written and thought-provoking meditation which deals with a number of centrally important educational and philosophical matters. Her hermeneutic readings of the diverse philosophical and literary writers treated valuably illuminate the themes addressed and the claims made. I cannot in this response do justice to the many readings and issues the essay offers for our consideration. My primary focus will be on the interpersonal mutual relationality Pijanowski develops through Martin Buber's articulation of Thou. Along with the experiential and the moral, the relational is offered as one criterion for the guidance and assessment of pedagogical practice. For Pijanowski, this criterion is indeed deemed the most comprehensive and important of the three with respect to the kind of self-formation and self-governance moral education should foster in teaching for democratic selfhood. My intent will be to articulate further Buber's conception of moral education in an attempt to raise a number of critical questions regarding the legitimacy of the privileged status Pijanowski bestows upon the relational dimension of teaching and learning.

Pijanowski's turn to mutual relationality emerges partly out of her concern that experiential learning may be operative with an instrumentalist, objectifying, and subjugating conception of experience: as she writes, "when we speak of experience we turn the world and others into objects to be experienced for our own benefit." We are consequently called to examine "the quality of relationships" viewed through Buber's understanding of Thou as somehow non-"experiential:" "in the act of experience Thou is far away."¹ When Thou is present, Thou is present as a kind of light illuminating an educative path or way — a "sacred" way — for us to follow. In that Thou enables us to assess the quality of experienced relationships within learning and teaching, Thou must offer us a criterion in the form of some norm or law to which the justifiability of our practices is answerable. Thou leads us to ask certain questions that are not optional given the nature of education. Such necessity leads us to ask whether Thou, in its distance from experience, possesses a certain universality. Can Thou be shaped by and thus be contingent upon our experienced relationships if what Thou requires of us as persons is to norm our actual lives in accordance with the kind of mutual relationality inherent in the questions Pijanowski identifies? In asking how the student I serve is also serving my own self-education, in asking whether I am objectifying the student as but another opportunity for my self-aggrandizement and the perpetuation of my presumed superiority over her, I address and assess my acting upon you as affirmations or denials of genuine reciprocity, solidarity, and mutuality as illuminated by Thou. As Pijanowski recognizes what may be Thou's universal call here is not primarily to learn about the responses of an external world to the stimuli effected by my causal agency upon it. If there is a universal and necessary call here, it is that I form a will to enter into communion with world as the locus of realization of my own personhood through

the realization of others' personhood. Let me try to locate something of the nature and origins of this universality in Buber's writings.

All true educators, Buber maintains, possess "insight into the structure of great character."² And so they must since Buber believes moral education to rest at the heart of anything we legitimately call educative (*BMM*, 104, 111, 113). What does Thou in its distance from experience require for genuine relationality between self and other to be possible? As I believe we should read Buber, Thou as criterion or norm prescribes — indeed, commands — a glimpse of eternity, however veiled or fleeting. This "insight," Buber tells us, is a fragile and vulnerable one; it requires protection and nurturing in the face of forces distinctively marking our modern age.

Today host upon host of men have everywhere sunk into the slavery of collectives, and each collective is the supreme authority for its own slaves; there is no longer, superior to the collectives, any universal sovereignty in idea, faith, or spirit (*BMM*, 110).

What Buber laments here is our modern tendency to deny the universal applicability and absolute validity of any norms, to refuse "their claim to be of a higher order than man and to govern the whole of mankind" (*BMM*, 108). Whatever these transcendent and universally valid norms are, they require critical examination since they norm acts of intended reciprocity, mutuality, and equality. It is by the light of these norms that the true educator is able to fulfill his most primary task: that of instilling in the student "the desire...to behold again the eternal values, to hear again the language of the eternal norm" (*BMM*, 116). It is only through such a "way" that the true educator can "awaken in young people the courage to shoulder life again" (*BMM*, 115).

We need critically to ask after the character of that law which the educator seeks to instill in his student:

[The educator] has to introduce discipline and order, he has to establish a law, and he can only strive and hope for the result that discipline and order will become more and more inward and autonomous, and that at last the law will be written in the hearts of his pupils (*BMM*, 113).

The universality here, Buber maintains, cannot be of a Kantian kind, even though we have to admit that a return to a pre-Kantian time is not a legitimate option for us (*BMM*, 111, 113-14). Pace a Kantian conception of character as an integrated system of universalizable, impersonal maxims, Buber recommends fostering "the desire to become a person" as the path to instilling the eternal norm within moral personhood (*BMM*, 111). Consequently, we need to ask critically what Buber means by "personhood" — by the "essence" of "personhood" as "that for which a person is peculiarly intended, what he is called to become."³

"Personhood," "the language of the eternal norm," "the law written in the heart," all of these should be read as moments of Thou as way or criterion. The educator must be possessed of "insight" into their meaning and authority for these comprise the foundations of his teaching regarding what is right and what is wrong, what the genuine realization of human life means, what one's being closer to the realization of "actual being" means (*BMM*, 106-7; *KM*, 82-83). For Buber, these are the ingredients of that "insight" individuating any educator who "regrets the obscuring of eternity" and who answers the call to will the student "to enter into a personal relation with the absolute" (*BMM*, 110-11).

The character of mutual relationality also requires attention. Thou allows the educator to recognize in his own authentic being what is right. But by virtue of its universality, the eternal norm must also be validly applicable to and thus potentially present in the other:

Because it is the right, it must also be alive in the microcosm of the other, as one possibility...[T]hat which is recognized [in one's own self] as right, as just, as true... for that very reason must also be established there, in the substance of the other" (*KM*, 82, 69).

Granted, the educator's "insight" is not simply limited to rightness as accordance with or derivation from moral norm or law. Once the universality of a law or norm is established or justified, questions regarding its application remain. These latter questions concern the appropriateness of application of law to particular cases. Buber is clear that to apply the eternal norm appropriately within the educative relation requires acknowledgement that authentic human personhood/existence is a possibility we each realize in a personal and unique way. Our understanding of the right itself, which in virtue of its rightness we possess in common, is also possessed by each of us "in a singly and uniquely personal way" (*KM*, 83, 69, 84). Consequently, the educator must acknowledge and confirm the independent otherness of the other — an otherness always to be recognized as "this particular being, made in this particular way" — even though his task is at times to reveal to the other the wrongness of his convictions (*KM*, 69, 79, 68, 85, 106; *BMM*, 23, 100). If we are to privilege Buber's Thou as the "sacred" way towards justifiable moral education for democratic self-governance, we need to identify carefully the points at which respecting the authenticity and good of the other as a particular subject of a particular biography and culture comes into conflict with a moral norm or law we can all recognize to be right in virtue of its rightness.⁴

1. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald G. Smith (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 38-39.

2. Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, trans. Ronald G. Smith (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 115. This text will be cited as *BMM* for all subsequent references.

3. Martin Buber, *The Knowledge of Man: A Philosophy of the Interhuman*, trans. Maurice Friedman and Ronald G. Smith (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 130. This text will be cited as *KM* for all subsequent references. On the view that conceptions of personhood are "intrinsically evaluative" and themselves subject to moral disagreement, see Bernadette Tobin, "The Virtues in John Wilson's Approach to Moral Education," *Journal of Moral Education* 29, no. 3 (2000): 301-11.

4. While educative relations must involve inclusion of the particularity of the student as other, such inclusion cannot comprise "mutual inclusion" or "full inclusion." See *BMM*, 23, 96-101 and Buber, *I and Thou*, 131-34.