

Transference Love from the Couch to the Classroom:
A Psychoanalytic Perspective on the
Ethics of Teacher-Student Romance

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INTRODUCTION

In this essay, I will try to convince you that a question often thought to be more or less easy to answer, and therefore uninteresting, is actually more complicated than we tend to think and deserves a closer look. I am hoping to begin, then, by giving you a philosophical itch where you might not have had one before, but as soon as I have accomplished this, I will go on to offer you a conceptual tool with which to scratch it. In writing this, one might say, I am not unlike a salesman who arrives at your door bearing a poison-ivy plant in one hand and a bottle of Calamine lotion in the other. If you will forgive me this contradiction, there is a question I would like us to take up together, one, as I said, which should perplex us more than it does currently, and that is: “is it wrong for teachers and students to become romantically involved?”

I must admit that, as framed, this question seems less likely to induce perplexity as it does a panicked scramble up the nearest hill in search of the moral high ground. And once we have climbed our respective hills, there is little chance for dialogue beyond the shouting of “for” and “against” across the valley that divides us. It is into this valley that I want to lead you, because I am less interested in which hill you would climb than in what we can understand by asking *why* it might be morally acceptable or not for teachers and students to become romantically involved.

Once we begin to reflect on our moral intuitions and attempt to justify them, we may very well find that what looked like agreement or disagreement over this one question really amounts to responses to different questions. Before entertaining any answer, then, we will focus our question and locate within it the truly open question at its heart, which stands to teach us something about the nature of the teacher-student relationship and education itself. Once we have posed this question, I will argue that a discussion of Freud’s concerning the analogous moral dilemma in psychoanalysis represents one intriguing path out of the valley. More specifically, I will suggest that the concept of transference helps us to find the words with which to articulate the central educational issue involved in this question about teacher-student fraternization, and to defend an answer to that question.

COMPLICATING THE QUESTION

So, is it wrong for teachers and their students to become romantically involved? Some would answer this quickly with a resounding “yes,” while others would want to make some distinctions first. For most, the key issue would be the age of the student in question. And it is true that the strength of the moral language used to describe cases of teacher-student love affairs varies with the age of the student involved. A primary school teacher who engages in a sexualized relationship with a student elicits moral horror and is prosecuted as a criminal. High school teachers

who sleep with their students, however, are more likely to be called “slimy” or “irresponsible” than sick or evil. College professors, meanwhile, are at worst considered unprofessional or careless for dating their undergraduate students, and by graduate school, most teacher-student liaisons are represented as little more than something to gossip about.¹

This variation in our responses seems to suggest an answer to our question: “it depends on the age of the student involved — up to a certain point, it is wrong, but after that point, it is, well, none of our business one way or the other.” But is this an answer to our question, or have we, in fact, traded in our question about teachers and students for one about adults and children? Given that we are after the educational crux of the matter, we should qualify our question as follows: is it wrong for teachers, *qua* teachers, to become romantically involved with their students, *qua* students?”

Let us pause to consider a possible objection which is that educational relations always, and perhaps in some essential way, involve asymmetries of age, competence, or maturity. Indeed, they are also characterized by many other power dynamics. Perhaps then, the educational question is just a subset of what we might call the “Lolita question,” or perhaps both can be subsumed under a general question about power and consent in relations of love. And yet, are there not particularly educational dimensions to this case, that are not reducible to whether a student is old enough or powerful enough to consent freely to a romantic relationship with a teacher?

One way to find out whether such issues exist is to consider a case where issues of power and consent are at a minimum. Consider the case of a female visiting professor teaching a pass-fail, continuing-education course in a professional school to students her age. Imagine, also, that one of her students, a man let us say, who is well established in his profession and good enough in the subject matter to pass the course without any trouble, declares that he has fallen in love with her. If she feels the same way about him, is there any reason why they shouldn’t act on their feelings?² Even in this special case, I would argue, there are ethical concerns, and if we pursue these concerns we will find ourselves on a distinctively educational path.

Someone inclined to criticize a relationship like this, between consenting adults and free of coercion, might choose to call it “unprofessional,” but what sort of normativity is implied by this epithet? We might ask, for instance, whether “professionalism” is a moral or an ethical category. Morality concerns the rightness or wrongness of actions, with an emphasis on our obligations to others. It tends to involve impersonal judgments, as in, “it was wrong of him to do such and such.” Because of their potential for reversibility, that is, if it applies to you it also applies to me and *vice versa*, morality often becomes the basis for laying down guidelines institutionally, professionally, or even interpersonally, enabling someone to say to another, “if you cross this line you will be censured and punished.”

In regard to our dilemma about teachers and romance, I am less interested in such third-personal, moral considerations about rightness and wrongness, as I am in first-personal, ethical questions. These are the kinds of questions we ask ourselves

in reflective moments about the shape we want our lives to take, about who we want to be, and about the kinds of activities that flow from and feed such identities. For those of us who have woven a large part of our identity around the practice of teaching, we will always be asking anew: what is the good life, how does teaching form a part of such a life, what are the goods achievable in this practice, and what can I do to make my practice more alive to the most important of these goods?

A discourse of professionalism, then, can be shaded in either of these directions, constituting a morality of professionalism or an ethics of professionalism. The first declares that to be professional is to practice one's profession within certain bounds and according to certain principles. Professional ethics, on the other hand, involves reflection on the goods in one's practice. While the former is more common, it is the latter which interests me here. I have not raised the question of teacher-student romance to legislate for others a code of conduct, nor to condemn anyone, but to open a space for each of us to think about our own teaching practices, and our own relationships with students. This kind of ethical reflection is fragile and is actually inhibited when the other discourse, that of morality, barges into the room prepared to sort us into good and bad. Let us concern ourselves, then, not with whether it is wrong for teachers to choose to engage in sexual relations with their students, but with the positive goods in the practice of teaching that may be jeopardized by this choice.

So, is it *educationally* ethical for teachers and students, in their capacity as teachers and students, to become romantically involved? This is the question we have come to, and it seems already sufficiently focused and complicated to preclude any easy answers. To determine whether educational goods are threatened, one must provide an account of what sorts of goods one might hope to realize in one's relationships with students, or in education in general. On the other hand, is there not still an easy way out? Without getting into such intractable issues as the nature of the teacher-student relationship and the aims of education, could we not simply conclude that teacher-student romance is obviously unethical in the sense I have specified, since it involves importing something foreign, namely love and passion, into the scene of education, and would therefore constitute an impediment or distraction given any educational goals?

Unfortunately, this path is not available to us, for education is, I would argue, awash with loves and passions and desires of various sorts. Some sort of love brings the teacher into homeroom every morning at 7:00 am and guides her actions, from the tender to the tough. When things are going well, the students too are impelled by a love of knowledge and a passion for discovery. Then there is the special kind of love that bonds students to certain of their teachers and seems a prerequisite for forming a love of one's own for the subject matter. Lest we try to sanitize all these passions, we must also admit that the only kind of students there are (or teachers for that matter) are embodied ones. This fact should not lead us to conclude that love for knowledge or infatuation with a teacher is any more reducible to hormonal surges as a thirst for learning is to a parched throat, but don't be fooled: bodily passions, deep emotional needs, and our more cerebral desires cannot be so easily distinguished. The Greeks knew this, Rousseau knew this, but we appear at times to forget

it. We cannot condemn teacher-student affairs simply because they conflate education with love.

TRANSFERENCE LOVE: FROM THE COUCH TO THE CLASSROOM

We began with a moral dilemma, with a sort of moral litmus test asking little more from us than a choosing of sides. Since then, I have worked to locate, within this dilemma, the issue which is distinctively educational, and to frame it in such a way that we are not afforded easy answers, but rather, brought up against a genuine and pressing mystery at the heart of education. The final form of our question is: “*Given that educational relations involve and partly depend on certain kinds of love, why is it educationally ethical or unethical for me as a teacher to pursue a romantic relationship with one of my students?*” The question we have derived is rather unwieldy, formed as it was through a process of accretion. Put more synthetically, the question becomes: “what sorts of love do, and should, animate the teacher-student relationship, and why?”; or, shorter still, “what types of love are educative?”

I want to turn, now, to one thinker’s response to these questions, and in the process take us away from the world of schools to a less familiar scene of education. Psychoanalytic therapy, as I have argued in detail elsewhere, is best understood as an educational practice in the broad sense.³ Like all educational practices, inside and outside of schools, it aims to foster development, to help someone learn and flourish. Pedagogically, psychoanalysis is similar to many educations, described and enacted, which give pride of place to the role of interpersonal relations, mediated by language, as the prime facilitator of growth. Ethically, it takes its place in a long line of educational thought, inaugurated in the Platonic dialogues, which place, at the center of its vision of the aims of education, the goods of self-knowledge and freedom.

Given this basic analogy, we should be struck by the symmetry between the question we have been wrestling with and that which motivates one of Freud’s short technical papers called “Observations on Transference Love.” Freud turns to the question, what should an analyst do when a patient declares that she has fallen in love with him and why, because, as he says, this situation “is so complicated, and conditioned by so many factors, so unavoidable and so difficult to dissolve, that discussion of it has long been a pressing need of analytic technique.”⁴

After considering his options for advising an analyst in such a situation, he declares:

It would be very simple for me now, on the score of conventional morality, emphatically to insist that the analyst must never in any circumstances accept or return the tender passion proffered him. . . . I shall not fulfill these expectations, however. . . . because in this instance I can go behind moral prescriptions to the source of them, namely to utility. I am on this occasion in the happy position of being able to put the requirements of analytic technique in the place of a moral decree without any alteration in the results.⁵

In this passage, Freud reveals that while he will advise his colleagues to avoid entering into romantic relationships with their patients, he will argue for this proscription on the basis of “utility” rather than “morality.” Freud glosses utility as the “requirements of analytic technique.” In other words, he wants to argue that only a bad *analyst* would return and consummate his patient’s avowal of love, without

necessarily invoking the logic, of the conventional morality of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna, that only a bad *person* would do so. He is suggesting that something in the nature of analysis gives the analyst reasons, internal to his practice, for declining his patient's offer. He misconstrues these as purely instrumental, extra-moral considerations, but as we noted above, psychoanalysis is an educational practice. All practices which set out to foster development must rely on a vision of human flourishing which justifies, and makes sense of, the transformations it engenders as a kind of development, and not mere change. Freud tries to answer his question on the basis of the ethics embedded in the practice of analysis; he is attempting to answer the question, "why is it analytically unethical for an analyst to become involved with a patient?"

In the passage above, Freud asserted that not only was it common for an analysand to fall in love with her analyst but that such incidents were "unavoidable." To understand this, we need to recall that psychoanalysis is fundamentally, as Freud famously remarked in a letter to Jung, "a cure through love." The bond between analyst and analysand is a loving, empathetic one, and the analysand could not push through resistances nor take interpretations seriously without feeling a certain regard for her analyst and concern for his opinion.⁶ Analysts call this fundamental affective bond "transference." Beyond this diffuse, positive transference, though, there are many other dimensions to the transference. The patient is encouraged by the nature of the analytic situation to bring unresolved conflicts, repressed ideas, problematic relationships, and so on into the present of the analysis and into connection with the analyst. The relation to the analyst is on one level nothing but a repetition of the past.

Of course, we also find ourselves acting out scenarios from the past in our normal lives, but usually without any awareness that we are doing so, and often with real and detrimental results. What is special about the analytic situation is the way it encourages the analysand vividly and deeply to re-inhabit repressed feelings, disavowed fears, and the like, while at the same time keeping one eye, as it were, in the present, aware that one is repeating. Analysis provides a sort of binocular vision, allowing something to be present and past at the same time, so that the past might be integrated into the present for the first time. As Freud puts it:

The main instrument, however, for curbing the patient's compulsion to repeat and for turning it into a motive for remembering consists in the handling of the transference. We render it harmless, and even make use of it, by according it the right to assert itself within certain limits. We admit it as to a playground, in which it is allowed almost complete freedom and is required to display before us all the pathogenic impulses hidden in the depths of the patient's mind.... The transference thus forms a kind of intermediary realm between illness and real life, through which the journey from the one to the other must be made.⁷

Why, given that repetition can threaten the entire analysis, as in the case of sudden passionate transference love, encourage repetition at all? Why not simply encourage analysands to talk about their past only, as it were, in the past tense? Freud explains:

It is undeniable that the subjugation of the transference-manifestations provides the greatest difficulties for the psychoanalyst; but it must not be forgotten that they, and they only, render the invaluable service of making the patient's buried and forgotten love-emotions actual and manifest; for in the last resort no can be slain *in absentia* or *in effigie*.⁸

The picture that emerges in these passages is as follows. The analyst offers himself as someone relatively blank. He attempts to approach each session without a particular agenda, to let his attention float evenly over the material brought up by the analysand, and to retain a certain neutrality towards the issues and characters emerging in the analysis. This blankness makes the analyst suitable for a wide range of transferences and helps to create in the analytic situation a space that, as Freud says, is safe for play. What comes up in analysis is eminently real, in a certain sense more real than the bulk of our day to day interactions, but it is also, in another sense, unreal. It is understood that not everything declared will be acted on, and that nothing felt about the analyst or the analysis should be taken as the last word.

The analyst builds this safety by showing that the analytic space is *for* the patient. A good analyst works on keeping his own needs and troubles out of the analysis, and does not come to the sessions trying to be liked, full of feathers ready to be ruffled, and so on. When events occur within their relationship, he is concerned with what this means for the analysand. In this way, a particular emotion which surfaces in relation to the analyst can become a clue in their ongoing attempts to understand how the history of her key relationships has come to determine the way she structures all of her relationships. The trust I have been describing would be broken were the analyst suddenly to take one of the repetitions, a piece of this play, as real in a literal sense. But as Freud notes, this is often difficult for an analyst and perhaps never so difficult as when an analysand flatters her analyst with a declaration of love. Here is what Freud has to say about how to make use of the love transference analytically, as opposed to letting it sidetrack the analysis:

At first glance it certainly does not look as if any advantage to the treatment could result from the patient's falling in love in the transference. No matter how amenable she has been up till then, she now suddenly loses all understanding of and interest in the treatment, and will not hear or speak of anything but her love, the return of which she demands; she has either given up her symptoms or else she ignores them; she even declares herself well. A complete transformation ensues in the scene — it is as though some make-believe had been interrupted by a real emergency, just as when the cry of fire is raised in the theatre. Any physician experiencing this for the first time will not find it easy to keep a grasp on the analytic situation and not to succumb to the illusion that the treatment is really at an end.⁹

Freud's lesson, here, is that the analyst must not let himself be drawn into any one particular drama to the detriment of the work as a whole. Analysis proceeds on the assumption that feeling something in relation to the analyst is one of the most important ways of making use of a session. A declaration of love may be, for instance, an analysand's way of asking whether the analyst is interested in her whole person, including parts she may have yet not dared to show, or if, like others, he is seduced by the charms of the false self she has formed to cope with the world. It may turn out, then, that the analysand was involved precisely in testing boundaries to see whether the analytic bond is strong enough to resist being abandoned for another.

What is important, then, is that the analyst "keep a grasp on the analytic situation." This means remembering that it is the analytic relationship which is real: it is the theater without which the declaration of love and other relational drama could not be reenacted. The cry of fire does not interrupt the drama; *it is* the drama! The analyst who lets himself be swept off his feet by a patient's declaration of love

is like a director who, after watching her star actor pull off a great death scene in rehearsal, starts auditioning new actors for the part. The analyst has a responsibility to enter empathically into the analysand's very real struggles with those aspects of her past that haunt her, but he also has a responsibility to hold onto the perspective that these ghosts are not fully real in the present. He lends his heart and intelligence, indeed his very person, to the analysand's dramas, but he must never forget that they are not his dramas.

The analyst must be responsive, of course, to a sudden love transference as he would to any part of the session, but must not accord it undue reality or primacy. The solution to the dilemma is neither to reject the patient's offer nor to accept it, but to allow it to play itself out and to help guide the analysand to interpret it. Here is how Freud puts this:

It is therefore, just as disastrous for the analysis if the patient's craving for love prevails as if it is suppressed. The way an analyst must take is neither of these; it is one for which there is no prototype in real life. He must guard against ignoring the transference-love; and just as resolutely must he withhold any response to it. He must face the transference love boldly but treat it like something unreal, as a condition which must be gone through during the treatment and traced back to its unconscious origins, so that it shall assist in bringing to light all that is most hidden in the development of the patient's erotic life, and help her to learn to control it.¹⁰

In other words, the analyst responds but does not respond *in kind*. This is one of two central insights in Freud's discussion of transference love which I would like us to consider in regard to the issue of love and the teacher-student relationship. As teachers, we pride ourselves on our responsiveness, but the question Freud raises for us is, to what part of our students do we respond? Students are constantly sending messages our way, from their unconscious behavior, to their way of taking up the work of the class, to their explicit communications. We neither could nor should respond to all of these signals.

Consider an example: a casual acquaintance displays a lot of anger toward you and generally acts as if he or she hates you. In this case, I assume, you would be likely to count this against the person, and abandon your acquaintance or retaliate in some way. If a student were to tell you that he or she hates you, though, you would probably try to resist the urge to respond in kind. You might understand the event as a sign of trouble, a testing of boundaries, or a residue of past school-inflicted traumas. You might choose to make an overture to the student, or decide that what is called for is simply humor or unflappable consistency, demonstrating that your regard for the student is not a precarious thing. Even if your response shows that you take the situation very seriously, I take it that you will want to not take seriously one particular aspect of this display of hate, namely, that it is really and ultimately about you. At our better moments, we are so fully engaged with the material, with the student, with the connection between the student and the material, that we do and should find a comment directed at us as a person (that is, rather than as a teacher, or a person in role) as an odd and possibly annoying distraction. It may even constitute a dramatic interruption, but we strive to treat such an interruption as only the particular form that the ongoing dramas of learning and growth are taking, and not as the end of those dramas.

What I have said here about hate applies as well to romantic love. We should be responsive to the fact that one of our students is going through a drama that will affect her learning and ought to be heeded in the handling of the relationship. This does not mean that we should treat a student's avowal of love as something which calls for a life decision on our part. To do that would be to respond in kind and to lose sight of the fact that classrooms are in part like the playground of the analytic situation, a place in which we can express ourselves without every utterance leading to immediate action. When someone is in process, and you have devoted yourself to witnessing and facilitating that process, you are wary to treat as definitive any one version of the evolving being before you.

This brings me to the second of Freud's insights, which I would like to introduce with a rather long quote:

For the physician there are ethical motives which combine with the technical reasons to hinder him from according the patient his love. The aim that he has to keep in view is that this woman, whose capacity for love is disabled...should attain complete access over this function which is so inestimably important for real life....He must not let the scene of the race between the dogs be enacted, in which the prize was a string of sausages and which a funny fellow spoiled by throwing one sausage to the course; the dogs fell upon it and forgot about the race and the prize in the distance luring them on to win. I do not mean to say that it is always easy for the physician to keep within the bounds prescribed by technique and ethics...the combination of mental and bodily satisfaction attained in the enjoyment of love is literally one of life's culminations....And yet the analyst is absolutely debarred from giving way. However highly he prizes love, he must prize even more highly the opportunity to help his patient over a decisive moment in her life.¹¹

As teachers, we are fundamentally transitional objects, we may love and be loved, but these loves arise in the service of attaching a student's love to what is good in a wider world than that of the classroom or the teacher-student relationship. As teachers, we are at most a station along the track, or perhaps with a few students a kind of switching point, but when we begin to think of ourselves as a destination, we have lost sight of something central to the practice of teaching. As teachers, our love for our students as learners, as fellow searchers on a quest to understand themselves and their world, as human beings in the process of widening their experience and deepening their capacity to think and feel, is our best reason not to let this love be replaced by another.

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1. Since even the words chosen to name such a relationship, for example, "sexualized," "sleep with," "date," and "liaison" above, come already loaded with our moral estimation, it will be impossible for me to describe the type of relationship under discussion in this essay without begging the question of its acceptability. "Romantically involved," for instance, is a bit coy, but all of our words for love relationships come presorted by the mind-body distinction: if they evoke the sexual, they tend to neglect the deep emotional bonds that are part and parcel of most sexual relationships; or, if they highlight the spiritual aspects of love, they curry a Victorian disavowal for the body and the sexual. By "romantically involved," I mean the kind of relationship that is sparked by personal attraction, driven by a sexual passion, and fueled by the need for physical and emotional intimacy.

2. Let us also exclude the possibility that the other students would find out about the affair and feel jealous. In this hypothetical, let us assume that pursuing the affair will not affect the other students in any way.
3. See, for instance, Chris Higgins, "Freud on Education: From Applications to Implications," presented at the spring meeting of the Middle Atlantic States Philosophy of Education Society, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, N.J., 13 April 1996; and, "Transforming Talk: Psychoanalysis and the Multicultural Classroom in Dialogue," presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Paper Session, Chicago, Ill., 27 March 1997.
4. Sigmund Freud, "Further Recommendations in the Technique of Psychoanalysis: Observations on Transference Love" in *Therapy and Technique*, ed. Philip Rieff, trans. Joan Riviere (1915), (1915; reprint, New York: Collier Books, 1963), 168. Though there are, of course, analysts and analysands (Freud's term for the patient or client, for the one analyzed) of both genders, Freud wrote this at a time when analysis was an entirely male profession. He makes the patient in the scenario female because the majority of early analysands were female and because prevailing homophobia made it far less common for a male analysand to act out his positive transference onto a male analyst as romance. For the sake of clarity, I retain Freud's gendering of these roles in my discussion.
5. *Ibid.*, 171-72.
6. Thus Freud's question parallels our own down to the last detail: given that analysis is a cure through love, why is it not analytically ethical for an analyst to become romantically involved with one of his patients?
7. Sigmund Freud, "Further Recommendations in the Technique of Psychoanalysis: Recollection, Repetition, and Working Through" (1914), in *Therapy and Technique*, ed. Rieff and trans. Reviere, 164-65.
8. Sigmund Freud, "The Dynamics of the Transference" (1912), in *Therapy and Technique*, ed. Rieff and trans. Reviere, 114-15.
9. Freud, "Observations on Transference Love," 170.
10. *Ibid.*, 174.
11. *Ibid.*, 178. Translation altered.