

The Empty Chair: Education in an Ethic of Hospitality

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INTRODUCTION

Education is, at all levels and in all forms, guided by ideas about the good life. Values such as independence, honesty, patience, fairness, courage, and care are included in mission statements of schools and universities, and taught implicitly or explicitly in educational settings ranging from the science lab to the soccer field. In other words, the purpose of the various forms of education is to foster the development of certain kinds of “ethical subjects.”

In the past several decades, ideas about decentering the subject (or self) have emerged. Many contemporary (especially Continental) philosophers today work from the premise that the individual subject that was so solidly at the center in modernist philosophy, has been definitively dethroned. However, the ethical frameworks that most commonly guide educational practice — autonomy, virtue, and care — still rely on this modernist conception of the subject. While ethics of autonomy and virtue focus on the ethical subject, and the ethic of care focuses on the ethical relationship between subject and other, none of these three frameworks go as far as to decenter the subject in the way that new ideas about the subject have done.

This essay examines in greater detail this gap between the dominant ethical frameworks for education and ideas about subjectivity, and proposes an ethic of hospitality as a framework that assumes a decentered subjectivity. First, I provide a brief overview of the ethics of autonomy, virtue, and care and highlight the conception of the subject that informs each of them. Second, I outline some philosophical critiques of the subject, as well as misunderstandings about the “death” of the subject. It should then be clear that there is a tension between new ideas about subjectivity and the ethical frameworks of autonomy, virtue, and care. Finally, I propose an ethic of hospitality and make suggestions for how this ethic might inform educational practice.

THREE ETHICAL FRAMEWORKS FOR EDUCATION

Perhaps the most influential ethical ideal in education has been the ideal of the autonomous, rational subject. The idea is that learning to think as independently and rationally as possible is a condition for human flourishing. Harvey Siegel, for example, writes that “we seek to render the child self-sufficient; to empower the student to control her destiny and to create her future, not submit to it.”¹ Self-sufficiency, moreover, is a requirement for individual liberty and thus, according to Siegel, for human flourishing: “such a person is free from the unwarranted and undesirable control of unjustified beliefs, unsupportable attitudes, and paucity of abilities, which can prevent that person from competently taking charge of her own life.”²

A similar emphasis on autonomy as the ideal guiding education can be found in Harry Brighouse’s argument that “autonomy is important enough to justify a

requirement that all children be subject to an education designed to facilitate it.”³ Autonomy, for Brighouse, is not an end in itself, but is a necessary condition for the good life: “the argument that education should facilitate autonomy depends on the idea that autonomy plays an important role in enabling people to live flourishing lives.”⁴ The ideal of individual rational autonomy is rooted in Immanuel Kant’s ideas about the person. Kant’s Enlightenment motto *sapere aude* — “have the courage to use your own understanding” — echoes in liberal education that has as its primary aim to foster students’ ability to think critically and reach their own conclusions.

The ideal of the virtuous subject, often seen today in variations of “character education,” is rooted in an Aristotelian conception of the subject. It emphasizes the development of a person’s character, rather than the development of the person’s ability to think critically and independently. Thomas Lickona, for example, a proponent of character education whose work is used in many schools in the US and Canada, writes:

The virtuous life includes self-oriented virtues (such as self-control and moderation) as well as other-oriented virtues (such as generosity and compassion), and the two kinds of virtue are connected. We need to be in control of ourselves — our appetites, our passions — to do right by others.⁵

The focus of character education is the development of the moral self. While it is acknowledged that a person needs the guidance of others — such as parents and teachers — to do so, the moral self is at the center of the picture. Drawing on the Greek etymology of the word “character,” Kevin Ryan and Karen Bohlin, for example, write that “we all actively engrave our own character on ourselves.”⁶

A third ethical ideal that guides education — although, perhaps, not to the same extent as the previous two — is the ethic of care as elaborated by, especially, Nel Noddings. The ethic of care sees as the guiding ethical ideal for education the establishment and maintenance of caring relations. Different from the ideals of rational autonomy and good character, the emphasis of the ethic of care is not on the subject, but on the *relation* between subject and other. The ethic of care marks a sharp departure from the ideal of rational autonomy, in that it emphasizes both emotions and relationship. Moreover, while some have interpreted “care” as a virtue, Noddings insists that caring is a quality of the relation, not of the subject in the position of carer; the carer should not be considered separately from the caring relationship. She writes, “I have put great emphasis on caring as a relation, because our temptation is to think of caring as a virtue, an individual attribute.”⁷

The ethical frameworks of autonomy and virtue, while significantly different, both emphasize the *strengthening* of the subject: if education achieves the ideal of autonomous rationality, the subject can stand on her or his own two feet in making good decisions, and if education achieves the ideal of good character, the subject’s actions will be guided by her or his own dispositions and no longer need correction by others. While the ethic of care emphasizes not the subject but the relationship, in the end it falls short of fully decentering the subject. Its emphasis on reciprocity, for example, on the need for the self to receive something — minimally some response

— in return for the caring it gives, is not just pragmatic, but part of the ethical ideal of caring itself: “my caring must somehow be completed in the other if the relation is to be described as caring.”⁸ All three ethical frameworks I have described, then, are at odds with ideas about a decentered kind of subject that have emerged in response to critiques of the subject. I address these critiques and responses in some more detail now.

CRITIQUES OF SUBJECTIVITY

In 1986 Jean-Luc Nancy invited several of his colleagues to answer the question, “Who comes after the subject?” Nancy’s point of departure was the observation that “the critique or the deconstruction of subjectivity is to be considered one of the great motifs of contemporary philosophical work in France.”⁹ These critiques have revolved around the idea that the subject is not nearly as rational and autonomous as it has been held to be. Critics have charged that the subject’s apparent autonomy and self-awareness are predicated on a fundamental dependence on who and what lies outside of it — on the other, whether in the form of the unconscious, or death, or some other other. As Nancy puts it, the critique or deconstruction of subjectivity was a “critique or deconstruction of interiority, of self-presence, of consciousness, of mastery, of the individual or collective property of an essence.”¹⁰ However, since autonomy had become seen as inextricably linked with the subject’s ability to say “I,” once autonomy was exposed as a fraud, some believed this spelled the end of subjectivity altogether: “A wide spread discourse of recent date proclaimed the subject’s simple liquidation.”¹¹ Nancy’s question challenged his colleagues to think about how the “I” might still come to say “I” after the critiques of subjectivity, and what kind of “I” it would be.

Jacques Derrida answers Nancy’s question by emphasizing the “fable” of the subject, both as a unified whole and as the origin of its own actions. He recasts the subject as “gathering itself together to answer to the other.”¹² This odd description is of a subject that is an assembly of traces — of relations, actions, memories — that presents itself as an identifiable subject only in response to an other. The unified and autonomous subject, then, is an illusory effect of discourse, a convention by which we identify a single locus of action — but this is not to say that there is no subjectivity or agency at all. As Sylviane Agacinski writes, the subject-who-comes-after-the-subject experiences the question of “Who?” as coming from the other; it does not ask “Who am I?” but instead responds to the question “Who are you?”¹³ This decentered subject is not reduced to inaction but operates in a mode of *response*. The mode of response is predicated on the condition of being addressed, and the decentered subject, while still able to act, is no longer the origin of her or his action.

THE NEED FOR A NEW ETHICAL FRAMEWORK

One explanation for why these critiques have not been taken up to a greater extent in the educational literature and practice may be that educators and educational scholars simply do not accept these new ideas about subjectivity. Some may believe, for example, that the critiques of subjectivity are overblown and that, while we can acknowledge that human beings are dependent on others in different ways

throughout their lives and may not be fully conscious of all their desires and motivations, this does not substantively alter rational autonomy as an ethical ideal. Others may reject the critiques of subjectivity because, as I have mentioned, they (mis)read them as an annihilation of subjectivity, hence of human agency and education as a deliberate project. If there is no subjectivity or agency at all, important ethical concepts such as intention and responsibility become rather tenuous. Hopefully, some of the comments I have made previously in the essay about the critiques of subjectivity can assuage these concerns.

For the purposes of my argument, I am interested primarily in another reason why these critiques have not been taken up to a greater extent in education, and that is that educators and educational scholars accept the critiques, but have not yet found a way to translate changed beliefs about subjectivity into changed educational practice. It is to these colleagues, in particular, that I propose an ethic of hospitality.

I would be sorely remiss if I did not mention a philosopher whose work suggests precisely this kind of radical rethinking of ethics, and has been taken up by some colleagues: Emmanuel Levinas. The framework I propose is based on the work of Derrida, whose views on ethics are undeniably indebted to Levinas's work. The reason I turn to Derrida rather than Levinas — or, perhaps put more accurately, to Levinas through Derrida — is that Levinas's work is notoriously elusive for practice. Ann Chinnery, for example, acknowledges that “one of the biggest stumbling blocks in trying to get to grips with Levinas's thought is that he offers no practical advice, no straightforward answers or prescriptions for practice,”¹⁴ and Sharon Todd notes that “from the vantage of education, [Levinas's] writings are impossibly out of joint with any attempt to systemize an ethical approach in education.”¹⁵

Derrida's work on hospitality builds on Levinas's work, although the latter did not call much attention to hospitality under that name. Derrida notes,

Although the word is neither frequently used nor emphasized within it, *Totality and Infinity* bequeaths to us an immense treatise of hospitality. This is borne out less by the occurrences of the word “hospitality,” which are, in fact, rather rare, than by the links and discursive logic that lead to this vocabulary of hospitality.¹⁶

Derrida's emphasis on hospitality enables educators to see a more workable ethical framework, one that takes the critiques of the subject seriously but that offers some guiding questions. While hospitality is decidedly not a virtue or a set of moral rules to be followed, it does provide direction in concrete educational situations that demand a response.

AN ETHIC OF HOSPITALITY¹⁷

Hospitality, for Derrida, is an unconditional gift given by a host who is aware of her or his indebtedness to the guest. Immediately, this marks a departure from other conceptions of hospitality based on reciprocity or exchange, in which the guest incurs a debt by accepting hospitality. Derrida insists that it is the guest's arrival that enables the host's hospitality as the latter “is first welcomed by the face of the other whom he means to welcome.”¹⁸ From the first moment of the scene of welcome, the host and her or his welcome are secondary, acting in response to the other — having,

as Todd proposes, no choice but to respond to the other: “The aspect of generosity which characterizes welcome suggests that the gift of hospitality is the only possible response to the Other whose alterity challenges me.”¹⁹

The main feature of the Derridean ethic of hospitality, then, is that the position of host, the subject of hospitality, is radically decentered. The ethic of hospitality is all about the guest, about giving place to a guest — without, even, knowing when this guest will arrive. With a reference to the Jewish custom of leaving an empty chair at the Seder table, Derrida writes: “The other may come, or he may not. I don’t want to programme him, but rather to leave a place for him to come if he comes. It is the ethic of hospitality.”²⁰

Just as Noddings’s philosophical elaboration of care puts it at a distance from everyday “warm and fuzzy” notions of care, Derrida’s elaboration of hospitality puts it at a distance from everyday ideas about hospitality. For example, we may imagine a “good host” to make an effort to interact and establish a relationship with the guest, to make the guest feel like “one of us.” An ethic of hospitality, however, is not about social conventions of welcoming, but about responding to an other who arrives and who confronts the host with absolute otherness. Writes Todd,

Welcome is not a gesture which seeks to reduce the independent nature of the Other’s existence through domination, identification, understanding, or even care; it seeks not to “envelop” or to protect. Rather, it stands as an affirmation of the Other’s strangeness whose independence is not in question.²¹

This is the distinct call of hospitality in scenes of education: in every educational situation a teacher is confronted with a student who is fundamentally ungraspable, and the ethical challenge is to respond to this student in a way that lets her or him be in otherness, that does not seek to recognize or otherwise close the gap with this singular other.

It should be clear that the ethic of hospitality is quite distinct from two other ethical approaches used in education. The first is “inclusion,” that is, the idea that all students should be included in an educational context, whether in the specific sense of the inclusion of students with disabilities or the more general sense of the inclusion of students of diverse backgrounds (ethnic, linguistic, religious, class, and so on). The difference between inclusion and the ethic of hospitality is that the former, as Linda Graham and Roger Slee point out, “presupposes a whole into which something (or someone) can be incorporated.”²² Hospitality, by contrast, does not seek to fit the guest into the space of the host, but accepts that the arrival of the guest may change the space into which he or she is received. The second approach from which an ethic of hospitality must be distinguished is “welcoming” conceived as a virtue, for example, in the work of Lawrence Blum.²³ In a discussion of moral education in racially diverse contexts, Blum proposes the “race-related virtue” of being “welcoming of Blackness.” This use of the idea of “welcoming” is different from Derrida’s conception of hospitality in several ways. First, Blum speaks of “being welcoming” as a virtue in the sense in which this is conceived in character education, thus bolstering rather than decentering the ethical subject. Second, Blum does not use the discourse of “welcoming” to interrogate how white people came to

be in the position of host and black people in the position of guest. Third, Blum writes that “being welcoming of Blackness” involves actions as well as attitudes and feelings, and that these include “feeling comfortable in the presence of Black people when their racial identity is being called attention to.”²⁴ In an ethic of hospitality, the question of whether the host feels comfortable in the presence of the guest is irrelevant.

Finally, I should note that hospitality is not an ethical *ideal*, in the way it may be read in Tetsuya Takahashi’s description of hospitality. Takahashi writes of the gift and hospitality, “To be sure, once they are realized, they lose their purity and become caught up in the movement of exchange and calculation. But still conditional justice, giving, forgiveness, and hospitality are what they are only because we can think of their unconditional states.”²⁵ Takahashi’s suggestion that unconditional hospitality loses its unconditionality once it is realized presupposes the possibility of achieving unconditional hospitality. However, the achievement of unconditional hospitality would be self-defeating: as I have explained elsewhere, “absolute hospitality annihilates itself: it is a gesture in which the host surrenders the home to the guest, and is thus effectively no longer a host, and hence no longer in a position to offer hospitality.”²⁶ Therefore, hospitality is both a necessary and an impossible demand: the hospitality one can offer will always be inadequate, “for one is always failing, lacking hospitality [*en faute d’hospitalité*]: one never gives enough.”²⁷ One has to do the best one can.

Hospitality, then, is a demand for openness to the arrival of something and someone we cannot foresee; a demand that is impossible to fulfill, but that confronts all of our decisions and actions. In an ethic of hospitality education must be constructed in such a way as to leave space for those students and those ideas that may arrive. This may seem like an absurd demand: if they may (or may not) arrive, how do we know who or what they are and *what kind* of space we should leave for them? Indeed, we cannot know who or what may arrive into our classrooms, our staff rooms, our curricula; the only questions we can therefore ask are: Does what I am about to do leave a possibility for my assumptions about knowledge and teaching and learning to be upset by a new arrival? Does it close down a space for future questioning or questioners?

HOSPITABLE PEDAGOGY, HOSPITABLE CURRICULUM

The challenges of using a Derridean ethic of hospitality as an ethical framework in formal education are significant, especially since formal education is steeped in the paradigm of exchange, while hospitality as I have discussed it is an unconditional gift. However, I want to suggest that hospitality can be seen as the impossible challenge that should interrupt pedagogical and curricular decisions and the subject who makes such decisions. This ethic, at every turn, poses the question, “Will you let the other take place?”

Derrida writes that “hospitality is the deconstruction of the at-home” and, in the context of education, the “at-home” (*chez soi*) can be taken in multiple ways.²⁸ It is, for example, the curriculum, that body of knowledge with which we ask students to

become familiar. Taking seriously the challenge of the ethic of hospitality means deconstructing the curriculum, so that students come to understand how the “home” of knowledge called curriculum came to be what it is.²⁹

A hospitable curriculum, then, pays explicit attention to the voices that have been excluded from its development, and the effects of their absence. Furthermore, it asks how it can give place to, or would be undone by, the arrival of new ideas — for new ideas do not necessarily sit comfortably in the existing home of the curriculum. For example, the very idea that individual subjectivity is not nearly as individual as it was held to be, and that, therefore, the individual shares authorship and responsibility for what he or she says and does with a large number of other subjects, poses challenges to educational approaches predicated on individual subjectivity. In order to truly *give place* to this idea, one must be open to the changes this arrival will make, for example, to the focus on individual leaders, inventors, and authors in the curriculum, and on students’ individual achievements. As Derrida suggests, an individual author’s signature is more accurately understood as a signature by a “Société à responsabilité limitée,” consisting of the author plus a “more or less anonymous company” of other authors to whom the signing author is indebted.³⁰ Emphasizing this indebtedness deflects the celebration of individual achievement and illustrates that one can only offer hospitality if one has first been received.

The “at-home” of education is also the figure of the teacher. An ethic of hospitality impels the host to examine her or his own sense of being at-home. Aside from young children’s common misconception that the teacher must surely live in the school, teachers can become quite “at home” in the school, the curriculum, and their position. The ethic of hospitality reminds them that the spaces of education are not *their* spaces, spaces they own or should consider under their control, but rather spaces into which they have been received and whose purpose is to give place to students. For teachers who work in neighborhoods where they do not live, this is an especially important reminder.

The first requirement of hospitable education is the empty chair, a place for the new arrival. Leaving aside the bureaucracies that have sprung up around the registration of “late arrivals” in K-12 schools — bureaucracies that often further delay a student’s arrival — there are some students whose arrival poses a particular challenge. For example, students without the required immigration papers may be permitted to attend K-12 public schools, but schooling is predicated upon a conception of citizenship from which they are excluded.³¹ Hospitable education must play an active role in examining the construction of the *socius* and *demos*, the forms of collectivity that shape social and political life, and ask how newcomers can be received into them. Education is inhospitable if it confronts undocumented children with their visitor status, and it does not suffice to let them “take place” only in the circumscribed space of the classroom or the school. Hospitable education actively contributes to the erasing of the line between those who are at home in the *socius* and *demos* and those who are its guests, and offers all students the opportunity

to reimagine the *socius* and *demos* of which they, and unforeseen others, will be members.³²

CONCLUSION

The ethical frameworks of autonomy and virtue often include direct instruction and assessment. For example, students can be asked to explain their moral reasoning or to demonstrate particular virtues in their interactions with peers. The emphasis of the ethic of care is on modeling caring, “so we do not tell our students to care; we show them how to care by creating caring relations with them.”³³ Likewise, hospitality is not instructed but modeled. The onus is on teachers to offer hospitality, and to show that their interventions are aimed at leaving open a place where the other may arrive. This is a demanding and impossible ethic, one that cannot be perfected or completed, but that demands a response nonetheless. In this way, the ethic of hospitality in education does justice to critiques of subjectivity; as Derrida asks rhetorically, “is not hospitality an interruption of the self?”³⁴

1. Harvey Siegel, *Educating Reason: Rationality, Critical Thinking, and Education* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 57.

2. *Ibid.*, 58.

3. Harry Brighouse, *On Education* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 15.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Thomas Lickona, *Educating for Character: How Our Schools Can Teach Respect and Responsibility* (New York: Bantam, 1992), 50.

6. Kevin Ryan and Karen E. Bohlin, *Building Character in Schools: Practical Ways to Bring Moral Instruction to Life* (San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 1999), 11.

7. Nel Noddings, *The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1992), 17.

8. Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 4.

9. Jean-Luc Nancy, “Introduction,” in *Who Comes After the Subject?* eds. Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, and Jean-Luc Nancy (New York: Routledge, 1991), 4.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*, 5.

12. Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy, “‘Eating Well,’ or the Calculation of the Subject,” in *Who Comes After the Subject?* eds. Cadava, Connor, and Nancy, 100.

13. Sylviane Agacinski, “Another Experience of the Question, or Experiencing the Question Otherwise,” in *Who Comes After the Subject?* eds. Cadava, Connor, and Nancy.

14. Ann Chinnery, “Aesthetics of Surrender: Levinas and the Disruption of Agency in Moral Education,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 22, no. 1 (2003): 5.

15. Sharon Todd, “Welcoming and Difficult Learning: Reading Levinas with Education,” in *Levinas and Education: At the Intersection of Faith and Reason*, ed. Denise Egéa-Kuehne (New York: Routledge, 2008), 170.

16. Jacques Derrida, “A Word of Welcome,” in *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999), 21.

17. See also Claudia Ruitenberg, “Giving Place to Unforeseeable Learning: The Inhospitability of Outcomes-Based Education,” in *Philosophy of Education 2009*, ed. Deborah Kerdeman (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2010).

18. Derrida, "A Word of Welcome," 99.
19. Todd, "Welcoming and Difficult Learning," 178.
20. Jacques Derrida, "'I Have a Taste for the Secret,'" in *A Taste for the Secret*, Jacques Derrida and Maurizio Ferraris, trans. Giacomo Donis (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 2001), 83.
21. Todd, "Welcoming and Difficult Learning," 177.
22. Linda J. Graham and Roger Slee, "An Illusory Interiority: Interrogating the Discourse/s of Inclusion," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 40, no. 2 (2008): 278.
23. Lawrence Blum, "Race, Virtue, and Moral Education," in *Philosophy of Education 2004*, ed. Chris Higgins (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2005).
24. *Ibid.*, 55.
25. Tetsuya Takahashi, "On the Unconditional: Thinking of Education in Japan," (paper presented at the 11th biennial conference of the International Network of Philosophers of Education, Kyoto, Japan, August 2008).
26. Ruitenberg, "Giving Place to Unforeseeable Learning," 269.
27. Jacques Derrida, "Hostipitality," in *Acts of Religion*, trans. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002), 380.
28. *Ibid.*, 364.
29. Arguably, it may be more accurate to characterize this as witnessing the auto-deconstruction of the curriculum. See Gert Biesta, "Witnessing Deconstruction in Education: Why Quasi-Transcendentalism Matters," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 43, no. 3 (2009).
30. Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 36. In an ironic gesture, Derrida borrows the term *Société à responsabilité limitée* from the world of business, where it means a private company with limited liability.
31. In the U.S., for example, after *Plyler vs. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982).
32. Claudia Ruitenberg, "Review of Michael A. Peters and Gert Biesta, *Derrida, Deconstruction, and the Politics of Pedagogy*," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 29, no. 1 (2010): 80.
33. Noddings, *The Challenge to Care in Schools*, 22.
34. Derrida, "A Word of Welcome," 51.