

From the Theory of Recollection to the Theory of Encountering: Bring Teaching and Learning Back to Education

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In his essay, Gabriel Keehn takes us on a fascinating journey of explicating Plato's nativism and Socrates' theory of recollection and their implications for education, particularly for learning. He convincingly argues that such theories not only exclude teaching, as has been widely acknowledged, but exclude learning as well! "Plato's radical nativism commits him not simply to the idea that there can be no teaching, but also to the claim that there can be no learning." There is no knowledge acquisition, only recollecting what's already inside us. As humans, Keehn explains, "the only process that we undergo ... is that of recollection, by which our innate knowledge is drawn out of us."

Keehn observes that the theory of recollection is premised on two fundamental beliefs of Plato and Socrates: "the immortality of the soul and the claim of anamnesis." Our eternal soul has always existed and has known all that is to be known. If there is anything we don't know at the present time, it is because we have forgotten it in our present life and all we need is recollection. Therefore, teaching and learning in their genuine sense, as we understood them, are both "impossible." The only thing "teachers" can do, as suggested by Socrates, is engage in a logical sequence of questioning, a maieutic process, so "students" come to remember what they already know.

While the belief that the immortal soul contains all possible knowledge may no longer have appeal for contemporary educators, Keehn reminds us that there is an "updated and refined" version of Plato's nativism in the contemporary philosophy of cognitive science. Jerry Fodor has maintained that "all lexical concepts" are "unlearned," or "in a certain sense, innate."¹ Not interested in examining the truth claim of such a theory, Keehn states that his purpose is to suggest that the theory of nativism is "a live hypothesis" and a position "which merits serious consideration, particularly from our position as educators."

With their apparent implications for education, we might think that such theories of nativism and recollection leave education with little to do, but here Keehn makes an unexpected turn. Emphasizing Fodor's notion of "triggering" and Socrates' "right question," Keehn argues that "if nativism were to be adopted," it can actually help us "recognize the potentially fruitful, interesting, and indeed humanizing possibilities" of education because "the knowledge of the students as unique individuals with a unique set of experiences, [that] likely [are] dramatically distinct from those of the teacher," bring triggering opportunities for other students. Keehn suggests that "the more objects, people, and situations that children are able to experience, the more innate concepts will be triggered into activity." Even multiculturalism in the classroom can be supported by the theory of recollection, "as the distinct ideas, artifacts, and history brought into the classroom by individuals with differing cultural backgrounds would be another layer of exposure, and hence another site of triggered learning."

Responding to Keehn's proposition, I would like to ask two questions: One, if the theory of recollection is grounded in an outdated notion of an eternal soul with complete knowledge, and if Fodor's theory of mind has not provided a convincing reason for us to take it seriously (and Keehn has not proposed such to be the case), besides the fact that it resonates with Plato's nativism, why is it necessary to revive a theory that is based on a questionable assumption? And two, my main question for Keehn, relates to his use and expansion of the notions of "triggering" and "right questions" to include, or even to mainly signify, students' exposure to differences. Aren't the "triggering" and "right questions" essentially for the purpose of pulling out what is already inside the learner? Aren't they supposed to be a very rigorous, targeted, even skillful guiding process, as demonstrated by Socrates' maieutic pedagogy? How can we justifiably claim that other's individual knowledge and experiences automatically trigger students' recollection of internal knowledge? The slave boy, having lived and experienced many situations throughout his life, had no idea that he knew the mathematical concepts all along until Socrates interrogated him with relentless logical questioning. For me, there is still a world of difference between the "triggering" of nativism and the encountering of the unknown and the different. The former seems to target predictable results and the latter signifies open, unpredictable, and uncontainable possibilities. Keehn may have been too quick in substituting the idea of encountering for the idea of "triggering."

But my main concern with Keehn's proposition is his lack of conversation with the recent educational discourse that seems so adamantly to bring teaching and learning back to education. "The gift of teaching"²² or "learning from the Other,"²³ as proposed by Gert Biesta, Sharon Todd, and others tries to make the case that learning is precisely about "bring[ing] more than I contain."²⁴ Lamenting the contemporary discourse about learning that has made teaching the facilitation of learning and teachers the mere resources for students to realize their own "purposes and desires,"²⁵ Biesta argues that "the very point of education is precisely not to repeat what is already there but to bring something new to the scene."²⁶ "Teaching only has meaning if it carries with it a certain idea of 'transcendence.'"²⁷ Todd also argues that Socrates "cannot simply be taken at his word"²⁸ and in the *Meno*, Socrates taught the slave boy something he never knew — that he was a learner, a "subject of pedagogy."²⁹ Todd thus presents Socrates as "the teacher, who, like the perfect murderer, makes it appear that teaching has not taken place, who leaves the scene without a trace, and who, moreover, is convinced of his own innocence."³⁰ Drawing on Emmanuel Levinas, Biesta and Todd emphasize the significance of the Otherness of the other and the impact the Other exerts on the self. Todd argues, "the maieutic model erases the significance of the Other and claims that learning is a recovery contained within the I, rather than a disruption of the I provoked by the Other in a moment of sociality."³¹ Encountering the new and the Other in learning, then, indicates that "we should be open to the possibility that something more radically different might break through."³² As Levinas argues, "Teaching is a discourse in which the master can bring to the student what the student does not yet know. It does not operate as maieutics, but continues the placing in me of the idea of infinity."³³

Such a theory of teaching and learning contradicts the theory of recollection; it is the theory of encountering, the opposite of the theory of recollection. In this theory of encountering, not only does teaching regain its significance as introducing something new, even radically exterior, to the students, but learning also regains its true meaning of opening up to the unknown, the unexpected, and allowing the exterior to affect the self, leading to its growth and transformation. I argue that the theory of encountering can accomplish more of what Keehn suggests the nativist educational model can accomplish: the “exposure” of students and the “democratic shift in educational practice.”

Ultimately, the difference is about what makes the person: Is the soul already formed with all the knowledge there is to be known, or is every student an open, evolving subject that is capable of being transformed and going beyond who she or he already is? Is the outside, the exterior, insignificant and only instrumental for the self-realization of the student, or is there such a thing as the primacy of the Otherness of the Other? Those are fundamental questions not only for these learning theories, but also, if I may say so, the central questions of modern and postmodern philosophy. Then on what ground should we still embrace the self-containing metaphor that enables the theory of recollection and nativism?

To be fair, the focus of the theory of encountering is not as much about students’ cognitive development as about the student as an evolving subject. Learning and knowledge are not just about accumulation of information, nor even about potential equity of intelligence; more importantly, they are about the forming and transformation of students’ subjectivity. Thus there is nothing dehumanizing about saying that we are still lacking, we still need to *learn*, and that encountering the different Other signifies the possibility of learning.

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1. Jerry Fodor, “The Present Status of the Innateness Controversy,” in *RePresentations: Philosophical Essays on the Foundations of Cognitive Science* (Brighton, UK: Harvester Press, 1981), 275.
 2. Gert Biesta, “Receiving the Gift of Teaching: From ‘Learning From’ to ‘Being Taught By,’” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 32, no. 5 (2013): 449–61.
 3. Sharon Todd, *Learning from the Other: Levinas, Psychoanalysis, and Ethical Possibilities in Education* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2003).
 4. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 51.
 5. Biesta, “Receiving the Gift of Teaching,” 457.
 6. *Ibid.*, 452.
 7. *Ibid.*, 451.
 8. Todd, *Learning from the Other*, 23.
 9. *Ibid.*, 24.
 10. *Ibid.*
 11. *Ibid.*, 30.
 12. Biesta, “Receiving the Gift of Teaching,” 454.
 13. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 180.