

Loosening Psychoanalysis and Being Present Towards an Unknown Future

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INTRODUCTION

How does the educator support the “subjectification” of any student? How does the concept of “pedagogical presence” contribute to, and is it necessary to, this process? And what can psychoanalysis, or a modified version of Freudian psychoanalysis, offer us in order to better understand this “presence”, so that we can accompany each of our students on their journeys into the future and, by extension, into themselves? These appear to be the guiding questions that Trent Davis utilizes in his intriguing, carefully planned, and wide roaming paper. Davis begins - after what appears to be a bit of a philosophical reach to accommodate both Hannah Arendt and the conference theme - with Gert Biesta’s work and in particular Biesta’s claim that “weakness” and “risk” are necessary components for an education that sees “subjectification” as its goal. Assuming this to be a worthy goal, this implies a “non-mechanical” (Davis defines an education that incorporates weakness as being “non-mechanical”) pedagogical practice, one that incorporates weakness and supports the students in their challenging journey towards adulthood and selfhood. One final claim that Davis makes, following and expanding on Biesta, is that in order for this non-mechanical process that allows for weakness, risk-taking, and subjectification to occur, we are “inevitably left with education as ‘dialogical process’.”¹

SOME THOUGHTS ON PSYCHOANALYSIS

I want to begin by asking a single, simple question: What is it that a psychoanalytic interpretation of “pedagogical presence”, in particular a Freudian version, uniquely brings to the discussion of “weakness”, “risk”, “subjectification”, and “educational dialogue” that another therapeutic form does not (e.g. narrative analysis, or, in this case, given both the reference to Arendt and the acknowledged existential leanings of Biesta, the existential psychology such as that of Rollo May, Erich Fromm, or even Carl Rogers)? I have some concerns about Davis’s chosen commitment to psychoanalysis for several reasons, and I will outline two very quickly. The first, following Carol Gilligan’s critique of Freud,² is how Freud’s work moved from a more individually focused, subjective form of therapy, “the talking cure,” where he actively engaged with the actual words, and even authenticity of the patient (e.g. see the case of Anna O. for instance³) to encountering patients through the veil of his own theorizing. In the seven years of thinking and theorizing between Anna O. and Dora⁴ we can see how the actual voice of the patient disappears into penis envy, hysteria, and unconscious sexuality, so that victims of incest become representations of social norms, while their perpetrators are merely the victims of the challenges of fatherhood and the focused desires of the young. The worry then, to return to Davis’s article, is that we see the subjective subsumed by the social, the non-mechanical of the individual by the mechanical of the general theory, and - perhaps more

worryingly - the weak by the powerful. The second concern I have with a reliance on psychoanalysis arises from this danger of inequity, in particular the therapeutic association being seen as a workable parallel to the educational, teacher/student, relationship, and the unpacked assumption by Davis, that any adult, simply by right of being such, can understand what is going on in any student.

To clarify these concerns with psychoanalysis, I want to focus on two consecutive sentences from near the end of Davis's section on psychoanalysis, so that the reader, or pedagogue, can better understand this project of being present to their students. The first is from Anna Freud and the second is Davis's interpretation of it. A. Freud writes: "The task of a pedagogy based upon analytic data is to find a *via media* between these extremes - that is to say, to allow each stage in the child's life the right proportion of instinct-gratification and instinct-restriction." After citing this passage, Davis writes: "In other words, pedagogy as a *via media* or 'middle course' would help to address the conflict between the unfolding interior unconscious life of the student and the exterior reality and demands of the outside world."⁵

In these sentences we hear the "unfolding interior unconscious life" align with Freud's "instinct-gratification" whereas "instinct-restriction" parallels the "external reality and demands of the outside world." We hear a socializing of the subject and some troubling assumptions about the unconscious and instincts of our young students. What also occurs is, first, that Freud refers to both analytic data - the empirical collection and reliability of which has been debunked by most theorists, suggesting that Freud's empirical data was deeply suspect⁶ - and, to the appearance of a "stage" theory of children's lives that sounds like the intrusive appearance of that very mechanical, "non-weak," orientation to teaching that Davis has gone out of his way to disavow. This appears to be a theory of child development that requires the presence of an active teacher and arbitrator who stands as the social representative, even judge, who permits the child to explore a little, without their natural instincts getting the better of them. As a result, the *via media* that Davis seeks requires the teacher to find a way to avoid this developmental process being too oppressive. That is, the teacher must allow for an appropriate amount of subjectivity but, at the same time, not too much, as children, if left to their own devices, will surely fail to develop properly, at least in the social, instinct-restrictive sense.

INTERPRETING POETRY

To conclude, I thank Davis for introducing poetry into our discussion, a bold and stimulating innovation, and I should like to take another, sensitive look at it in the light of the concerns I have expressed above. While I appreciate his interpretation, I think that by "loosening" it a touch, in a way similar to my desire to loosen the psychoanalytic frame, we might come to a position that offers more flexibility but in a way that is acceptable to both of us. To set the tone, I will begin by extending the title of his section, "Doing what is needed," and turning it into "Doing what we think is needed, given our limited abilities, our desires to maintain relationships, the challenges of choosing from myriad possibilities, and the complexity of understanding any other human's contextually situated experiences."

The first stanza of the poem speaks of the decision to climb the dune and gaze at the ocean and to return without becoming part of the scene, but this proves to be impossible since the ocean was “performing” ocean and our climb made us part of the action. The second stanza tells us that the “performance” was a threatening storm coming “straight” at them. Davis suggests that in the third line, “what should our gaze mean?” Kit is asking a feeling question about leaping waves, whereas I believe there is a deeper epistemological, even axiological, question with regard to how to interpret this scene, how to feel about it, and even how to respond to and engage with the storm. The child does not know the answer. It is here, as Davis suggests, that the father turns directly to the audience in search of support and advice, as if admitting his own uncertainty and that the challenge of answering lies in the sense of the vastness, of the infinite conveyed by the words “absolute vista,” and the danger suggested by “far and cold.” Then, in the fourth and final stanza, before the father has managed to speak, Kit asks, “How far could you swim...?” Davis offers an interesting and compelling reading, in which he acknowledges that the answer is subtle, not bold and/or simple, and that Dad, given that he understands he is already swimming, is not sure if the answer he chooses is either right or good, but he admits that he is trying. I think there is also a suggestion here of the “presence” Davis discusses in his paper. Is the father not telling a gentle lie, since he knows full well that nobody can swim far in a storm-lashed ocean? But it is the lie that tells the child the truth they are possibly seeking at that moment. That is, that I, your father, am here with you, doing my best alongside, supporting as required, and that I plan to remain until such time as I am no longer needed. What more could he actually offer?

In fact, this is likely to be where Davis and I disagree on the heart of the message of the poem. Whereas for Davis this is a parent (I am not as comfortable as Davis with equating the parent/child relationship with that of teacher/student.) assuaging the fears of the child and doing whatever it takes to protect her, I hear a person seeking guidance, wrestling with his own similar, but different, parallel storm, treading water as fiercely as he can, working hard to maintain the relationship, and hoping that what he offers the child might work.

1. Davis, this volume.

2. Carol Gilligan, “The conquistador and the dark continent: Reflections on the psychology of love,” *Daedalus* (Summer 1984): 75-95.

3. Joseph Breuer & Sigmund Freud, *Studies on Hysteria* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1982).

4. Sigmund Freud, *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* (New York, NY: Touchstone Reprints, 1997).

5. Davis, this volume.

6. See for instance: M. B. Macmillan, *Freud Evaluated* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), or Richard Webster, *Why Freud Was Wrong: Sin, Science, and Psychoanalysis*. (London, UK: HarperCollins, 1995).