

Recycling God, or Synonymity Celebrated

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On one hand, David Saavedra's essay seems to take a well-travelled road. Indeed, his notion of attention reminds of Nel Noddings' concept of engrossment, or Jane Roland Martin's "Schoolhome." Many other educational thinkers explored relationality in education. Many have told educators to pay attention to children's life stories, the ways kids construct them—for example, Vivian Gussin Paley. Saavedra's notion of attention seems to be a mere synonym to those well-established notions. On the other hand, every new synonym brings out a new and unexpected layer of meaning that allows us to look at a familiar terrain with new eyes, see details previously missed, and pathways left unnoticed. It happens whether or not the author cites his or her predecessors. I would like to celebrate synonymity in general, and in this particular case.

Why is every language excessive? Why do we need big, large, huge, enormous, gigantic, colossal, vast, titanic, and immense, where big seemingly may suffice? We need them because our attitude toward the size of an object may be different, from neutral to frightened, from admiring, to contemplative. Synonyms insert the speaker right into the signifier. Beyond language, the collective human thought exists as a repetitive attack on the world and on the human condition within it, each attempt carried on with its own set of linguistic weapons. If not for synonymity, philosophers would have been unemployed thousands of years ago. The reason we are not all Plato's footnotes is that we invent new vehicles to travel the same road repeatedly.

Saavedra's take on relationality in education is unique because it

tells the immigrant children's story, and yet it focuses on how to listen to them—without making assumptions, and carefully taking in their unique lived experiences. One may object that native-born children possess the same extent of unique circumstances and deserve as much teacher attention as immigrant children. In a way, one should treat all students, and all others as foreigners, whose stories are unknowable until they are truly heard. Yet, the selected category of interlocutors is not essential to David's argument. What is essential is *how* to pay attention.

Borrowing Simone Weil's vocabulary, he emphasizes openness to insight, patience, and intent. Weil also presents a requirement that presents a problem to David. She calls for the kind of attention that is akin to prayer, "with a View of the Love of God." Saavedra's dealing with it is erroneous. This is not a criticism specific to his essay, for many if not most contemporary philosophers make the same error. (An error made simultaneously by large groups of people is no longer an error. It is a school of thought or trend, or a movement). Instead of looking for synonyms for God, he dismisses the concept altogether. He suggests that faith is not required to cultivate attention, and of course, he finds textual justifications for such a dismissal. However, if Weil could do without God and without faith, she probably would. If you take God out of her essay, it will leave an empty shapeless skin. In fact, her opening paragraph states: "The quality of attention counts for much in the quality of the prayer. Warmth of heart cannot make up for it."¹ Saavedra equates Love of God and love of our neighbors. But they are not the same thing; this would be a pair of false synonyms, like "big" and "long"—somewhat related, but just not synonymous enough to hold the concept.

One of the most unfortunate unintended consequences of philosophy's secularization was relegating God and faith into a special category of concepts that are thought to be beyond synonymization. It is

unfortunate, because it resulted in a wholesale dismissal of the thousands of years' worth of good philosophy, not just in the Christendom, but well beyond it. It is as if we suddenly decided to get rid of the notion of "cause" or "quality" or "similarity" and just tried to keep writing philosophy as if nothing happened. Some people, mostly historians, still do read the Patristic or contemporary Christian philosophy. However, historians are not philosophers. Philosophers prefer the sanitized kind of reading where they try to salvage what is left after removal of God. Yet, without God, the literature just loses all its oomph. If you cannot find a synonym to something, you really do not understand it.

Epistemologically, God is a construct that describes the intentionality and abstract direction of truth seeking. God is a constructed ideal that lacks specificity and could, it was hoped at the time, be universal. Faith is, basically, a discipline of looking for answers while paying attention to one's own and to other people's minds.

In mathematics, zero is a fiction, just all the other numbers are fictions, but perhaps more fictional than the rest. Yet it is such a useful fiction that mathematics is unthinkable without it. God is a similar construct for philosophy; it allows capturing the holistic directional commitment to truth, but taken as an entity, it is impossible to either define or imagine. Now, the Christian philosophers knew all of this and much more, for they undertook a systematic study of God in the first thousand years of Christianity. Some of us perceive their writing as pointless speculations about non-existent mythical beings. It is only because we do not understand the language they worked with. Or rather, we confuse it with the language of the mass culture of the time.

Of course, Christian philosophy and the real life of Christian churches have never been in accord. The latter have become and remain largely exclusionary and thus incompatible with the contemporary mul-

ticultural society. The tragedy of Christianity is that it had to work for both the philosophers and for the masses of worshippers, for whom it was just another religion, with its symbols, rituals, rules, and idols. In these kinds of disputes, the mass culture always prevails. Philosophy has discovered and then forgotten an important tool.

Saavedra's concept would have been much stronger if he found a way to keep God there, under a different name. He would have to explore the deeper connection between attention and the Love of God. The whole point Weil is making is that the regular pedestrian human love does not cut it. The regular garden variety love does not have enough energy to make us capable of sustaining attention. Kids can be difficult, like Fabienne who keeps bossing other kids around. Human love is sustained by reciprocity and is by definition exclusive (you love someone because you do not love everyone else), and that is not what Weil has in mind. Reciprocity is dangerous because it seeks in return something the other cannot give. This regular love is very problematic in education, for more than one reason.

The Greeks had a useful distinction between Eros and Agape, where the latter is a kind of generalized non-erotic love for all (the Love of God). At a very basic level, a normal human being whose mind has been programmed to calculate debts, categorize people into friends and enemies, and count favors and slights is incapable of loving dozens of other people's kids. Take your average teacher, with a mortgage, a couple of their own kids, aging parents, and the accountability reform. Remember, we are dealing with a mass profession of four million teachers in the US alone. Where do you think all that love should come from?

To generate sufficient Agape, one has to be engaged in a special rigorous exercise similar to what Jews, Christians, and Muslims call prayer, and Buddhists and Hindus call meditation and mantras. The exercise

needs direction: an addressee, which we used to call God. However, since many terrible things have been done in the name of that useful construct, we abandoned it, and have a hard time generating Agape in sufficient quantities. The information technology revolution laid bare the relational essence of education. It is also becoming apparent that the energy source for relations is in short supply.

There were several attempts to rename God through finding a good synonym. Hegel's *Weltgeist* comes to mind. Martin Buber's Eternal Thou and Mikhail Bakhtin's big dialogue may be added. Whitehead was trying to secularize and de-Christianize God, and the list can be continued. None of these attempts seems to be catching. Why is that?

Well, people usually see through the guise. Say "God," and people want to slam their doors in your face because they suspect an attempt to convert to one of the many sects. The way to go is to create many synonyms for God, each specific to its field of application and to the attitude of the speaker. For example, for the purposes of sustaining teachers' attention and strengthening relationality, we need a concept that allows it to nurture the ability to pay attention to students' stories. That would be the next essay by David Saavedra I am looking forward to reading.

1 Simone Weil, "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God," in *Waiting on God*, (New York: Fontana Books, 1959), 66–76. Cited by reprint <http://www.hagiasophiaclassical.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Right-Use-of-School-Studies-Simone-Weil.pdf>.