

Coming Into the World, Uniqueness, and the Beautiful Risk of Education: An Interview with Gert Biesta by Philip Winter

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PW Is there a theory of education in your work?

GB There probably is, although I have to say that this is more something that has emerged over the years than that it is something that I deliberately set out to develop. I have, of course, always been interested in theoretical and philosophical questions about education, but it was probably only when I started to work on my book *Beyond Learning* (Biesta 2006) that things came together and a theory of education emerged—and even then I was only able to articulate what this theory was about after I had finished the book.

PW Can you briefly describe what this theory is about and how it ‘works’?

GB Sure. Conceptually it hangs on two notions: ‘coming into the world’ and uniqueness.’ To understand why those notions are there and why they matter, I probably need to say a few things about the issues I was responding to in developing these ideas. The work on ‘coming into the world’ started in the late 1990s when I was invited to contribute to a conference on identity. When I started to explore that notion I realised a number of things. One was that I was actually not really interested in the question of *identity*—which for me is always the question of identification (identification by someone and/or identification with something) and therefore always articulates a third person perspective; identity is an explanatory concept, one could say—but much more in the question of *subjectivity*, that is the question of how we can be or become a subject of action and responsibility. For me that is the educational question, whereas identity is much more a sociological and psychological problematic.

By then I had already read enough of Foucault to understand that, unlike what many people still seem to think, the whole discussion about the death of the subject was not about the death of the very possibility of subjectivity—or ‘subject-ness’—but rather was aimed at the idea that it is possible to speak the truth about the subject, that is, to claim to know what the subject is and to claim that it is possible to have such knowledge. One can of course

treat this entirely as a philosophical matter, but I was interested in how the idea that it is possible to speak the truth about the human subject actually ‘works,’ that is, what it is doing and has been doing in a range of domains, including education and politics.

It was at that point that I realised that education—or as I now would say: *modern* education—tends to be based on a truth about the nature and destiny of the human being, a truth about what the child is and what the child must become, to put it in educational terms. Notions such as ‘autonomy’ and ‘rationality’ play an important role in modern educational thought and practice. While I’m all for autonomy and rationality, both notions are not without problems. Is it the case, for example, that we can ever be completely autonomous? What would that actually look like? And isn’t it the case that the border between rationality and irrationality is historical and, in a sense, political rather than that it is simply ‘there’ or can be found deep down inside the human being? In addition to these more general and in a sense more philosophical questions, I was also concerned for those who may never be able to achieve autonomy or rationality. Are they beyond the scope of education? Are they outside of the sphere of politics? Are they beyond the scope of what it means to be human? The idea of speaking the truth about the human being was for me, therefore, not just as a philosophical question; for me it was first and foremost an educational, a political and an existential question. That is why I was less interested in trying to articulate what the subject *is*—which, when I pursued this theme in the writing of philosophers such as Heidegger, Levinas, Foucault and Derrida, was an impossibility anyway. I rather tried to find a language that could capture how the subject *exists*.

What I picked up from Jean Luc Nancy was the idea of ‘coming into presence’ which, for me, was a much more existential way to talk about the subject, one that referred to an *event* rather than an essence or identity, and one that expresses an interest in who comes into presence rather than that it tries to define what is to come, ought to come or is allowed to come into presence. The idea of ‘coming into presence’ thus turned traditional educational thinking on its head by not starting from what the child is to become, but by articulating an interest in that which announces itself as a new beginning, as newness, as natality, to use Arendt’s term. What is crucial about the event of ‘coming into presence’ is that this is not something that can be done in isolation. To come into presence is always to come into the presence of *others*—which led me to an exploration of what one might call the relational dimensions of the event of subjectivity. Some of this was informed by my earlier work on pragmatism and the idea of intersubjectivity, but what I felt was missing from pragmatism was an awareness of what I would now call the deconstructive nature of ‘coming into presence,’ that is, the idea that the condition of possibility for anyone’s ‘coming into presence’ is at the same time its conditions of impossibility. I drew some inspiration from the work of the Swiss architect Bernard Tschumi who, at the time, was arguing for a conception of architecture that included the way in which people make use of buildings and through this always interrupt the architectural programme. But the main inspiration came from Hannah Arendt and her notion of ‘action.’

Arendt not only helped me to see that my coming into presence is always depends on how my beginnings are taken up by others. She also helped me to see that if we are committed to a world in which everyone’s beginnings can come into presence, we have to live with the fact—which is actually not a fact but an articulation of what is means to exist politically (Biesta 2010a)—that the ways in which others take up my beginnings are radically beyond my control. The very condition that makes my ‘coming into presence’ possible—that is, the fact that others take up my beginnings—also disrupts the purity of my beginnings, so to speak, as others should have the freedom to take up my beginnings in their own ways. Arendt’s intriguing phrase ‘plurality is the condition of human action’ still

captures this very well, as it is only under the condition of plurality that *everyone's* beginnings can come into presence, and not just the beginnings of one single individual. It is because of this line of thinking that I shifted from the notion of 'coming into presence' to the notion of 'coming into the world.' The main reason for this was to highlight what I see as the inherently political nature of the event of subjectivity, that is, the fact that the event of subjectivity can only happen in a world of plurality and difference—a *polis* or public sphere, so we might say. Educationally all this means that the responsibility of the educator can never only be directed towards individuals—individual children—and their 'coming into presence' but also needs to be directed to the maintenance of a space in which, as Arendt puts it, 'freedom can appear.' It is, therefore, a double responsibility: for the child *and* for the world and, more specifically, for the 'worldly' quality of the world.

PW And what about uniqueness?

GB The idea of uniqueness is important because if we only were to have the idea of 'coming into the world,' we would have an account of how the event of subjectivity occurs—we would have a theory of subjectivity, to put it differently—but we would not have an argument for why the subjectivity of each single subject who comes into the world might matter. That is why the idea of 'coming into the world' needs to be complemented by a notion of 'uniqueness.' But there are two ways in which uniqueness can be articulated—one which brings us back to identity and questions about knowledge of the subject, and one which leads us to an existential argument. In my work I have articulated this as the distinction between 'uniqueness-as-difference' and 'uniqueness-as-irreplaceability' (Biesta 2010b)—and the inspiration for the latter approach comes from Emmanuel Levinas. Uniqueness as difference focuses on our characteristics, on what we *have*, and articulates how each of us is in some respect different from everyone else. Again we could say that this is a third person perspective, but what is more problematic here is that uniqueness-as-difference is based on an instrumental relationship with the other: we need others in order to articulate that we are different from them, but that's all that we need the other for. Uniqueness-as-irreplaceability, on the other hand, brings in a different question: not what *makes* me unique, but *when does it matter* that I am I? The brief answer to this question is that this matters when I am being addressed, when someone appeals to me, when someone calls me. Those are situations in which I am singled out by the other, so to speak. And in those situations—if the other is after *me*, not after me in my social role (which would be my identity)—we are irreplaceable; or to be more precise: we are irreplaceable in our responsibility for the other. Whether we take up this responsibility, whether we take responsibility for our responsibility, to use Zygmunt Bauman's phrase, is entirely up to us. There is no theory that can tell us that we should do this. Nor can the other command that I should take up my responsibility. This is entirely up to me. In this sense, therefore, the idea of uniqueness-as-irreplaceability not only articulates a first person perspective, but is also entirely existential. It claims nothing about what the subject *is*—just about situation we can find ourselves in, situations in which we are literally singled out and in which our uniqueness matters. I still find this quite a powerful way to engage with the event of subjectivity—and also a quite beautiful way, actually. I don't see it as a theory of subjectivity but have rather called it an 'ethics of subjectivity' (Biesta 2008)—as the question of subjectivity, of the event of subjectivity, is approached in ethical terms, rather than in epistemological or ontological ones, which is another way of saying that about the human subject there is nothing to know.

PW How does this relate to ‘coming into the world’?

GB Well, in a sense it specifies how uniqueness can come into the world. But uniqueness is an event, not something the individual can possess or claim to possess (or claim to know for that matter). As an event it is therefore something that always is at stake, where there is always the question whether the event of subjectivity can be achieved—which is perhaps already a bit too active as a term.

PW What can educators do with these ideas?

GB Very little, actually—that is, if you take doing in the Aristotelian sense of *poiesis*, that is to think of doing as production. And there is of course a long tradition in which education is understood along those lines, that is, as a process that needs to produce something, that needs to have certain outcomes, as in the currently all too popular phrase of ‘learning outcomes.’ But we do not produce out students; we are there to teach them—just as we do not make our children; they are born to us. Subjectivity, therefore, is precisely *not* an outcome and even less a learning outcome; it is precisely *not* a thing that can be produced—which is why I like the idea of the *event* of subjectivity and of subjectivity-as-event so much. But it leads to a certain predicament for educators in that on the one hand I am arguing—and I am not alone in arguing this but am connecting to a long educational tradition—that the question of subjectivity should be a prime educational interest, whereas on the other hand I seem to be saying that there is nothing that educators can do.

My response to this predicament is to argue that while subjectivity cannot be *produced* through education—or for that matter politics—it is actually quite easy to *prevent* the event of subjectivity from occurring. If the event of subjectivity has to do with the ways in which I can be addressed by the other, by the otherness of the other, it is quite easy, both at the individual level and at the institutional level, to create situations in which the possibility for being addressed is edited out, where, as Jan Masschelein has put it, we become immunised for the call of the other, where we put up our fences, close our eyes and ears—and perhaps even our hearts—and eradicate the very risk of being interrupted by the other, the risk of being addressed by the other, of being put into question by the other, to use a Levinasian phrase. And that is perhaps the greatest problem with making education into a risk-free experience, into a zone where we can no longer be put into question, where we can no longer be addressed, where we can no longer be touched, where I am never at stake, so to speak. To make education 100% safe, to make it 100% risk-free thus means that education becomes fundamentally un-educational. That is why the risk of education—what I tend to call the *beautiful* risk of education—is so very important; but I am that it is not fashionable to argue that education ought to be risky.

PW Does that also lie behind your critique of certain tendencies in educational research? I’m thinking here, for example, of your critique of evidence-based education in your “Why what works won’t work” essay (Biesta 2007).

GB Absolutely. The whole idea of evidence-based education is again based on the eradication of risk and a desire for total control over the educational process. There are a number of issues here. One has to do with the assumptions about educational processes and practices that inform the conception of research that is promoted here. The assumption is

that education can be understood as a causal process—a process of production—and that the knowledge we need is about the causal connections between inputs and outcomes. I don't think that education is such a process—and I also don't think that education should be *understood* as such a process or, even worse, should be *modelled* as such a process. The latter point is important because I do think that it is, in principle, possible to model education as a causal process, that is, to make it into a process that operates in a causal way. This can be done by radically reducing the complexity of the educational process (Biesta 2010c). This requires that we control *all* the factors that potentially influence the connection between educational inputs and educational outcomes. This can be done, but it is a huge effort, which not only raises the question whether it's worth the effort—the Soviet Union wasn't able to sustain the total control of its citizens, and probably North-Korea will not be able to sustain it in the end—and also whether the effort is desirable, and when you take it to its extremes it's quite obvious that the effort is ultimately not desirable. But it is a slippery slope, and in a lot of countries education is rapidly moving in this direction and is becoming oppressive, not only for those at the receiving end—students—but perhaps even more so for those who have to work under such oppressive conditions, teachers, school leaders and administrators.

PW Is there a risk that you create a rather black and white picture, where it is either control or freedom, either causality or total openness?

GB That's a fair point, and it actually has to do with one of the things I realised after the publication of *Beyond Learning*, which is that while the question of subjectivity is a very important and, in a sense, both essential and fundamental dimension of education, it is not the be all and end all of education. That is why, in my book *Good education in an age of measurement* (Biesta 2010a), I argued that education, particularly school education, not only functions with regard to human subjectivity, but performs other functions as well. In the book I refer to those other functions as qualification—this is the domain of knowledge, skills and dispositions—and socialisation—which I defined as the way in which, through education, we become part of existing 'orders' (social orders, political orders, cultural orders, religious orders, professional orders, and so on). I think that it is important to be aware that education functions in these three domains. But I also see these three domains as three dimensions of educational purpose, that is, three dimensions in which educators can claim that education should function, should make an impact. Perhaps—but I still want to say this with great caution—questions about relationships between inputs and outcomes, questions about making education 'work,' have a place where it concerns the qualification and socialisation dimension of education. After all, if we want our students to learn complex skills—like flying a Boeing triple-7, performing brain surgery, but actually in the whole domain of skills, including car mechanics, plumbing, etcetera—we want to make sure that our students get it 'right' (which for me always also include the need for students to be able to make judgements about what it means to get it right, plus the ability to judge when getting it right is not what is needed in a particular situation). So we have to be mindful that education is not just about the question of the subject. But at the same time I would also say that if this dimension falls out—if it disappears from the scene, if it is no longer considered to be relevant, then we have ended up in an *uneducational* space. The art of teaching, in my view, is precisely that of finding the right balance between the three dimensions, and this is an ongoing task, not something that can be pre-programmed or sorted out by research.

PW A final question then: what is the place of democracy in your theory of education?

GB While in what I have said so far I haven't used the word 'democracy' I hope that it is clear that there is a strong democratic 'sentiment' in the way in which I look at education. For me it goes back to the connection between subjectivity-as-event and the idea that the event of subjectivity is only possible under the condition of plurality. That, in a sense, is where the democratic ethos and the educational ethos come together and perhaps even coincide. That is why, for me, the democratic is at the very heart of the educational—it's not an add-on, but it is what is at stake if we see the event of subjectivity in the way in which I have tried to approach it.

PW Thank you very much.

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