

Joris Vlieghe

Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences
KU Leuven, Belgium

An Immanent Account of Teaching. A Clarification on Affirmation, Politics, Love, Ontology and Ethos

W tym artykule oferuję kilka refleksji wokół projektu immanentnej ontologii nauczania, którą rozwijam z Piotrem Zamojskim w książce 'Towards an Ontology of Teaching'. Zaczynam od identyfikacji trzech właściwości dominującego dyskursu w teorii edukacji i praktyce edukacyjnej, które stanowiły kontekst dla opracowania nowego podejścia do nauczania. Następnie oferuję syntezę głównych elementów argumentu naszej książki, redukując go do pięciu kluczowych tez immanentnej ontologii nauczania. Wreszcie w ostatniej i najdłuższej części podejmuję dyskusję z krytyką tej teorii, która już pojawiła się w polu teorii i filozofii edukacji. Próbuję dowodzić, że dotychczas podejmowane argumenty krytyczne opierają się na interpretacyjnych nieścisłościach i pomyłkach.

Słowa kluczowe: nauczanie, ontologia, polityka, afirmacja, miłość, etos

In this article I offer some reflections on the project of developing an immanent ontology of teaching, a project I embarked upon with Piotr Zamojski in our book *Towards an Ontology of Teaching*. In that sense, I regard my co-author also as a co-author of this article, in spirit, and this accounts for the use of the pronouns 'we', 'us' and 'our', where appropriate. In a first part I try to give some background by identifying three features of the dominant discourse in educational theory and practice that have called us for working out this new approach. Then, I go on in a second part

summarizing the main points of our book with the help of five very precise theses. In the last and longest part, I discuss five possible lines of critique of our project and try to show that these are based on incorrect interpretations of our work.

The background of the project

There are at least three important circumstances that call for embarking upon the project of an immanent ontology of teaching¹. The first is the dominance of a particular way of thinking in the field of social sciences and humanities, viz. the conceptual apparatus developed by hermeneutics and post-structuralism. These two highly influential intellectual currents have some things in common despite their obvious differences, and more particularly that they both emphasise the inevitable differentiation and pluralisation of meaning, and with that they value the unlimited potential of sense making². This radically anti-essentialist view sets it as a program to look for intersections, grey areas, undecidables, etc and to praise their value. For decades now, educationalists saw only the benefits of this position (which are of course undeniable). However, what remained unproblematized is that together with the two other circumstances this position is lethal for education as such. This is so for several reasons, one of them being that to this view one cannot make any substantial claim about educational matters without being accused of suppressing and not showing respect for alternative views on and appreciations of one and the same phenomenon. There are only interpretations, and not acknowledging this equals violence. Instead, if there is a task left for educationalists, it consists of constantly debunking this violence and to praise and recommend differences and heterogeneities. On a more general level this boils down to a disappearance of the common world from our view, without which one cannot speak of education at all. Education denotes the introduction of the new generation into the common world, and hence in order to educate one has to at least assume that there is something more than just differences, meaning: one, commonly shared world³.

The second circumstance is the fact that English has become the lingua franca in the academic world and that this has resulted, in educational theory especially, in a particular Anglo-American account of doing educational research that has become a paradigm for the whole field. Formerly, there were in the field of educa-

¹ J. Vlieghe, P. Zamojski, *Towards an Ontology of Teaching. Thing-centred pedagogy, Affirmation and Love for the World*, Springer, Cham 2019.

² Cf. P. Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, The Texas Christian University Press, Fort Worth, TX 1976; J. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, Routledge, London – New York 2001.

³ Together with Naomi Hodgson and Piotr Zamojski I turn attention to this problem in our *Manifesto for a Post-Critical Pedagogy* where we underline the necessity to assume that we can act and speak together. See: N. Hodgson, J. Vlieghe, P. Zamojski, *Manifesto for a Post-Critical Pedagogy*, Punctum Books, Earth, Milky Way 2017.

tional theory several traditions which not only consisted of divergent vocabularies and basic notions (causing different frames of understanding), but which also come with distinctly different institutional structures – and this involves that education according to these diverse traditions tends to operate in exclusive ways, both in academia and in social imageries⁴. It happens that within the Anglophone tradition education is not considered as an autonomous academic discipline, but only as a field of studies covered by disciplines that have basically no relation with education. Hence, within this tradition, one cannot study 'pedagogy' ('Pädagogik' in Germany, 'pedagogiek' in Flanders or 'pedagogika' in Poland), but engages in 'education studies' (to be compared with 'cultural studies'), consisting of courses such as sociology of education, philosophy of education, psychology of education, history of education, educational policy, etc. In other words, in the Anglophone academia education as a distinct research interest does not exist. There is no such thing as a specific educational approach or educational perspective – and it is utterly impossible to make something like *educational* claims, to highlight the *educational* dimensions of a phenomenon (such as teaching), or to ask *educational* research questions. Rather, education – in the Anglo-American tradition – is just a an object in the world that can be investigated as a historical, psychological, sociological, philosophical or political, etc. issue.

This fits together with a third circumstance, viz. the appropriation of education by political and economic forces, a view that has also become hegemonic today⁵. This is to say that education functions as a mere means to achieve particular economic and political goals. What these goals are can vary considerably, but they always function on two levels: individual and societal prosperity. Therefore, education is seen as the instrument for personal economic success, but likewise as a vehicle for securing the economic progress of societies; it is a tool for individual emancipation, but also for collective emancipation and radical political changes; but it conversely also be viewed as the instrument to conserve the existing order of things, be it within the sphere of upbringing or in society at large. Regardless of the ideological orientation of these (and many other) goals – education is without exception merely understood as a means to achieve these objectives. Dovetailing with this particular economized and politicized positioning of education, there is the tendency to educationalise political, societal or economic problems⁶ i.e. to view them as resulting from a lack of education, or of an insufficient education, and hence, the evident answer to tackle these problems is to rely on educational means.

⁴ Cf. G. J.J. Biesta, *Disciplines and theory in the academic study of education: A comparative analysis of the Anglo-American and continental construction of the field*, "Pedagogy, Culture and Society", 2011, 19 (2), p. 175-192.

⁵ F. Furedi, *Wasted: Why education isn't educating?*, Continuum, London 2010.

⁶ P. Smeyers, M. Depaepe (eds.) *Educational research: the educationalization of social problems*, Springer, Dordrecht 2008.

A good illustration here is unemployment which is no longer regarded as a structural economic issue that can only be addressed only via macroeconomic means at the level of the state, but that is increasingly seen as an individual issue: it is individual persons who are not properly educated in view of the current needs of the job market, and hence in order to get a job they need to (re)educate themselves⁷.

This last circumstance also contribute to an oblivion of education. Today, it has become increasingly difficult to recall what is really at stake in education beyond these appropriations that define education through the lens of the individual success of a child, social equity, radical democracy, the need of a thriving knowledge economy, radical democracy, etc. Likewise, educationalists themselves seem to forgo an interest in education *per se*. Although it might sound attractive to see education as a (powerful) cure for the wrongs of this world, as it would mean that educational research is key to bringing generalized prosperity, but in fact this boils down to losing sight of what makes education educational.

The combination of these three circumstances was the exact reason why Naomi Hodgson, Piotr Zamojski and myself have called for developing a post-critical pedagogical stance in education and educational research⁸. The second principle of our *Manifesto for a Post-Critical Pedagogy* claims that instead of emphasizing differences in possible points of view, ambiguities, incommensurabilities, etc. we need to make the effort of establishing a common ground. Instead of constantly exposing and/or praising the messiness of educational phenomena, instead of fusing and confusing education with other spheres of live, other practices and other interests, we need to commit ourselves to expressing what education is all about, so as to render it present and intelligible again. Following a distinction introduced by Klaus Mollenhauer⁹, this means that instead of thriving in the impotent standstill of hermeneutical pedagogy, what is requisite today is cultivating a pedagogical hermeneutics. Instead of assuming it is the educator's task to multiply possible perspectives of meaning-making and hence to foreclose commonality, it is the contemporary calling of education to help fostering practices that allow for meanings we can hold in common.

The project Piotr Zamojski and myself undertook in fleshing out an imminent ontology of teaching should be regarded as a consequence of this post-critical commitment to education. Because we felt that today, more than ever, teaching is an educational practice that risk to become fully marginalised and that is suppressed by various societal, economic and political forces, we undertook

⁷ M. Simons, J. Masschelein, *Governmental, Political and Pedagogic Subjectivisation: Foucault with Rancière*. "Educational Philosophy and Theory", 2010, 42 (5-6), p. 588-605.

⁸ N. Hodgson, J. Vlieghe, P. Zamojski, dz. cyt.

⁹ K. Mollenhauer, *Umwege. Über Bildung, Kunst und Interaktion*, Juventa, München 1986.

the project of bringing teaching to life again, i.e. articulating in detail and from an inside perspective what it means to be a teacher, relying on a strong and clear *educational language*. In the next section I try to summarize the main points of our book, in the form of five very precise claims.

Key theses of an immanent ontology of teaching

Education is an autonomous sphere of life

In our book, we draw from Hannah Arendt¹⁰ the basic idea that education is a sphere in-between: neither the domain of private affairs (*oikos*), nor of political deliberation and action (*polis*). Education, thus, has its internal logic that is distinct from both an economic and a political logic. As Arendt has put it, education is what happens when a representative of the existing generation is introducing the new generation to the world, the old and common world, our world – the only one we've got. As we argue, this means that neither the student, nor the teacher are the most crucial dimension of education. Education is first and foremost about the world, or to be more precise: a thing that a teacher is pointing to, i.e. a part of the world, a thing that is put on the table (a subject matter such as music, mathematics or woodcraft). Leaving behind the language of student-centred or teacher-centred pedagogy, we call for a thing-centred approach. What a teacher essentially does is that she invites her students to study this thing with her, just for the sake of this thing. But, if we look at what is happening today, education is more and more subordinated to the aim of addressing personal needs, economic demands, and political objectives. Contrary to this, when approached from within, we hold that education is for education's sake. This is, introducing newcomers to our common world, and giving them the opportunity to study this world and to be transformed accordingly, is good in and of itself, and so we should not look for an external justification.

This is why we turn to Giorgio Agamben's¹¹ idea of pure immanence, and advocate an immanent approach to education. This is, we call for approaching education on its own terms and according to its own, intrinsic logic. We take education to be meaningful in and of itself (i.e. one cannot meaningfully claim that one regrets to be educated, or if one feels dissatisfied with one's education, one should say that one is just wrongly educated). And hence, from such a purely affirmational point of view, it follows that education has to be studied from the inside-out.

¹⁰ H. Arendt, *The Crisis in Education*, [in:] eadem, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, The Viking Press, New York 1961.

¹¹ G. Agamben, *Potentialities. Collected essays in philosophy*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1999.

What makes a teacher into a teacher is the event of falling in love with a subject matter and the labour of staying true to that event, by making it present in the classroom.

It happens that one devotes more and more of one's time and energy to something: a mathematical theorem or a piece of piano music. And so, out of a sudden, one is completely taken over by this thing: mathematics as such or a piano music as such. It happens that one is taken by a love for this thing. If this is love for the thing just for the sake of this thing – then the person in love cannot not teach. Teaching has now become an internal necessity. Referring here to the philosophical language developed by Alain Badiou¹², we claim that teaching essentially means being faithful to the event of falling in love for a subject matter. This implies that teaching is all about the relentless effort of making this event (of falling in love with a subject matter) present in the classroom. One cannot not share this love to the next generation. Teaching is therefore both *eros* – the attempt of making newcomers being seduced by the allure of a thing, and through that the allure of the world – and *agape* – love that is made public and that unconditionally gives away what is worthwhile, what is, fascinating, what draws us towards it itself.

It is through focusing attention on a thing (thing centred-pedagogy) that educational equality is installed.

A teacher puts a thing on the table¹³. Then, this thing is there, available to be studied by everyone in the room. Since it is a thing, and not an object (a resource that is there to satisfy our own interests following Heidegger's¹⁴ distinction here), it withdraws while the gathered make their attempts to come closer to it. Hence, a thing equalises everyone in the room as students. This is possible only due to an earlier suspension of the effects of political, economical, cultural, and /social effective identities, that are rendered inoperative in the classroom. Teaching is excessive (following Badiou¹⁵, we say that it is an excess of grace) because it concerns everybody regardless of differences in gender, ethnic or religious identity, social and economic position, etc that might set them apart. These particularities are suspended. Those gathered around a thing appear now purely and only as students. A teacher invites literally everyone to study a thing with her.

¹² A. Badiou, *Being and Event*, Continuum, London – New York 2005.

¹³ J. Masschelein, M. Simons, *In Defence of the School. A Public Issue*, Education Culture & Society Pub., Leuven 2013

¹⁴ M. Heidegger, *The thing*, [in:] *Poetry, language, thought*, HarperPerennial, New York, NY 2001.

¹⁵ A. Badiou, *Saint Paul. The Foundation of Universalism*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2003.

Teaching is not about freeing students from ignorance and oppression, and it is not about showing to be an expert, but about taking responsibility for the world (for that what is worthwhile). Hence teaching is rather a way of being in the world – an ethos and not a job, or a profession.

The fundamental attitude of a teacher towards the world is one of affirmation, not critique. Although studying involves being critical, the very gesture of pointing to a thing is affirmative. Phenomenologically speaking, what a teacher does is saying: come and have a look, this is deserving attention and the effort of being studied. Even if this thing, from an ethical perspective, can be perceived as something evil (as for sure is the case with war, genocide, or discrimination) the very gesture of a teacher is always affirmative: *this is worth your effort, hence let's study this together*. That is why teaching does not align with the logic of emancipation (which always assumes a priori that there is a slave that has to be freed), but with the logic of responsibility. We draw here inspiration from the philosophy of responsibility of Georg Picht¹⁶ and Hans Jonas¹⁷, who argued that responsibility has an ontological character, that it goes back to the fact that there is good in the world, and that its existence is in some way dependent upon us. There are good things that lie in the range of our power to act. Teaching is exactly taking up such a responsibility for something. Hence, it is not a profession, it is rather a way of being, an ethos, that is developed, not through training, but through a form of care for the self. Drawing from Michel Foucault¹⁸ we argue that the care for a thing and the care for the self are closely related: becoming a teacher is a work on the self during which one transforms oneself so as to be able to share the love for a subject matter. This process of self-formation doesn't result so much in the possession of professional competence, but in a particular way of being.

Education can have a political significance only to the extent that it doesn't function as a means for political ends.

Elisabeth Ellsworth¹⁹ shows that taking critique to its last consequences leads us to agree upon the idea that a non-repressive education is impossible, that there will always be enslavement, oppression, violence and inequality in education. Taken her analysis a step further, we argue that when one starts from assuming that education always has a political character, one must in the end abandon education

¹⁶ G. Picht, *The Concept of Responsibility*, "Religion", 1998, 28 (2), p. 185-203.

¹⁷ H. Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility. In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London 1984.

¹⁸ M. Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: lectures at the Collège de France 1981-1982*, Palgrave, Basingstone 2005.

¹⁹ E. Ellsworth, *Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering? Working Through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy*, "Harvard Educational Review", 1989, 59 (3), p. 297-324.

in favour of engaging the new generation directly in political action. Paradoxically, it seems that the critical standpoint is unable to conceptualise the *relation* between education and politics. We draw from Hannah Arendt²⁰ and Jacques Rancière²¹, in order to explore this relation. Arendt warns us that a direct political agenda is destructive for education. However, in her claim that education is a sphere in between *oikos* and *polis*, she suggests that one cannot imagine education without the existence of *polis*. In a purely privatised world there is no common world to be introduced to, and so the newcomers undergo only what we could call socialisation. Rancière's²² idea of political subjectivisation suggests – moreover – that it is probably necessary for those who have no part in a given societal order to first go through educational transformation and to experience potentiality (i.e. a strong experience of being able to). Hence, education has the capacity to transform the political sphere, i.e. it can bring the event of politics into the police order. However, if the actualization of this potential becomes the intention, or driving force in education, it is appropriated by a political logic, and it gets reduced to a mere means for political change. Therefore, education possesses a disruptive, politically significant force, and it grants the opportunity to provoke and support political transformation, but only if it is conceived as an autonomous sphere, governed by its own proper logic. The paradoxical conclusion to draw then is that education is only relevant for politics in so far and only to the extent that it remains apolitical. At the moment that education gets actualized in a political direction, we end up in a situation where the proper of education has withered away.

How to understand teaching in a post-critical and immanent way, and how not to

The formulation of strong claims, as in the last section, certainly has the benefit of unyielding clarity, but it also runs the risk of causing misunderstandings. In the rich dialogue that came about in the wake of the publication of our book, we noted that some of our ideas were taken in directions we didn't want to suggest ourselves. Hence, I would like to go deeper into some of the basic arguments of the project and bring some nuance to utterances that too easily might be mistaken. In the spirit of the last section I propose to address these misinterpretations – again – point by point.

²⁰ H. Arendt, dz. cyt.

²¹ J. Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1991.

²² Idem, *Politics, Identification, and Subjectivisation*, "October", 1992, 61, p. 58-64.

This so called post-critical project of rendering the practice of teaching in an affirmative key is itself critical, and even pre-critical

It goes without saying that many of the above claims, and also the concerns that form the background of our work as exposed in the first section of this article, can be used to develop a criticism of everything that goes wrong in education today. In that sense the book is critical, not post-critical. Indeed, we actually claim that post-structuralism and hermeneutics don't do justice to the rich phenomenon of education, we are adamant in our denunciation of the colonization of the educational sphere by economic and political agendas, we argue that education is *not* about emancipation of enslaved students *but* about responsibility for our world, we warn that teaching is at the brink of the risk of being made utterly impossible or forgotten, etc. The list of these and similar claims to be drawn from our project is virtually endless. However, the question remains whether our substantial account of teaching is dependent upon these lines of critique in a dialectical way. With this I mean that an affirmative account is *only* possible on condition of the negation of something else – in the same way that a concept of day necessarily implies its negative, night, that that we can only understand what it means to be 'here' because one is not 'over there', or that life only makes sense in view of a certain death.

I take this last example, because the treatment of it by Badiou²³ in his study of the figure of Saint-Paul, inspired us very much in developing the argument of the book. The Event that makes all the difference for those who believe, so Badiou argues, is the Resurrection of Christ, which can be all too hastily defined in negative and dialectical terms: the overcoming of (the scandal of) death – a negation of a negation, so to speak. However, on a closer reading, what is at stake is precisely pure affirmation: the Resurrection is an Event because it just happens, and more exactly as something that is not merely the other side of death²⁴. That is why it is so unheard of and doesn't seem to fit. What is at stake is a relentless (i.e. non negative) affirmation of life which is completely uninterested in the opposition between death and life (defined as death's opposite)²⁵. Put differently, the Resurrection only makes a difference *if* one is willing to take an attitude that is no longer interested in a dialectical overcoming of death, and in plainly affirming life²⁶. It is a matter of taking an attitude in which one becomes indifferent to what could be termed its opposite in dialectical terms.

Returning to our project of an immanent ontology of teaching, it is evidently the case that our substantial account of what teaching is about can be read as a negation of many things that happen today, and that it can be used as a critical tool.

²³ Badiou, dz. cyt.

²⁴ Tamże, p. 70-73.

²⁵ Tamże.

²⁶ Cf. tamże, p. 68.

But, then it is used in a way that does not do justice to the change in attitude we call for. We precisely want to show that it is possible and meaningful to remain faithful (to rely, again, on Badiou's Paulinic vocabulary) to aspects of the educational realm that we can experience as being worthwhile. The specificity of our line of argument consists of taking such a resolute stance vis-à-vis what is good in education and in teaching, and to propose for taking care after it. This might be an uncommon attitude to start from these days, but we hope it makes in and of itself a difference. If we care about certain educational practices and discover a language to articulate what is at stake in them, we can start living different lives (as students and educators). That is in the end what counts, and what we have tried to achieve by fleshing out an immanent ontology of teaching. Admittedly, the very notion of 'post-criticality' might be not the most elegant predicate to express our intentions, and hence 'affirmational' might count as a more adequate description of the basic momentum our project stands for. However, if speaking of post-criticality still stands today, it is because when approaching to task of critique seriously (not as an orthodox ritual, but when posing critical questions about critique) it becomes clear that the critical recognition of the current status quo leads precisely to the call for going beyond critique and towards affirmation²⁷. This affirmation is therefore not just naivety of a pre-critical stance, but a secondary naivety performed in spite the critical awareness²⁸.

The issue is thus whether one wants to fully affirm what is good about teaching, or whether one merely wants to debunk what is wrong about the situation we are in, adding more critique to an already enormous reservoir of critical sounds. In that sense, what we say about the teacher – as someone driven by the need to staunchly affirm the (part of the) world she stands for – applies to the stance we have taken as educational researchers. In a similar vein, Tyson Lewis²⁹ proposed that the style of our own writing would be more apt to the ideas we defend if we would call our Manifesto for Post-critical Pedagogy not so much a Manifesto but a Declaration. This comes down to taking a particular stance in life: to make manifest what is of value, which – indeed – is also a matter of explicitly declaring why teaching matters – so as to make a difference – fully out of love and devotion to something.

I think that the same argument should nuance the allegation of pre-criticality. What I mean with this last misunderstanding of what we do in our book is the idea that our real interest is in continuing the status quo or even going back to the good

²⁷ See: J. Vlieghe, P. Zamojski, *Towards an immanent ontology of teaching Leonard Bernstein as a case-study*, "Ethics and Education", 2020, 15 (1), p. 1-17.

²⁸ Cf. J. Ranciere, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*; P. Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy. An Essay on Interpretation*, Yale University Press, New Haven – London 1970.

²⁹ T. Lewis, *A response to the 'Manifesto for a Post-critical Pedagogy'*, [in:] N. Hodgson, J. Vlieghe, and P. Zamojski, *Manifesto for a Post-critical Pedagogy*, Punctum Books, Goleta (CA) 2017, p. 23-34.

old days of frontal class-room teaching with an authoritarian teacher in command. At first sight, this might sound like a pertinent critique, as we do define teaching in terms of pointing out aspects of the world to newcomers and of demanding their attention, as we openly avouch the educational value of instruction (in the meaning of the German *Lehren*), and – to make it very concrete – align with Leonard Bernstein (as a case which displays what teaching is about) when he shows that a particular piece of music should be played with a particular instrument (leaving out the possibility that a student might have a different opinion on this matter, but hasn't got the opportunity to oppose the master, or else running the risk of making a fool of herself).

However, all this is not given in by nostalgia, or by a wish to critique pernicious effects of child-centered reforms in education. What we try to show is that there are practices that are indeed established ones, but that are also worth caring for in view of their eminent educational potential. That is exactly why we try to conceive of instruction, or more generally of educational gestures that are meant to show to students that there are things in the world that are important and worthy of care and study, not in terms of the sterile opposition of teacher-centeredness and child-centeredness, but as a way to disclose a world out of love for this world and as an occasion for students to share in this love. Instruction can be a desirable pedagogical practice, not because it is instruction per se but because it testifies to educational love.

The gesture of pointing out things that are valuable is not a means of socialization or indoctrination, but a gift. The teacher, conceived of from a thing-centered perspective, is as a matter of fact a most vulnerable one, as she knows that the gift can be refused. The teacher as someone who exposes her love is also fully exposed herself, as there is no guarantee that the gift will be accepted. The whole point of teaching, and here we align with Arendt³⁰, is that the new generation is truly a new generation, and hence they might go on with the old world in completely unforeseeable ways. But, for this to happen, the new generation also has to be able to experience itself as new, and hence in relation to something that matters – an already existing world. Hence, if a music teacher who (out of the best motives) does not take the effort to show that creating a piece of music demands a respect for the thing itself (i.e. that some pieces require particular instrumentation) and instead chooses to build her course around individual preferences, she is no longer teaching music, but merely facilitating opportunities to have talks about experiences and taste. It is only because a teacher demands attention for certain qualities of musical instruments and because it then becomes clear that it is not true that anything goes in music, that in the future a student might come up with the idea of using instruments in completely unforeseeable ways. But, this probably will not convince

³⁰ H. Arendt, dz. cyt.

some of our critics, as this example also ties in with the following opposition to the position we defend.

An immanent account of teaching is in denial of reality: education and teaching are through and through political issues

What is left out in the above account is, of course, the fact that Bernstein is a privileged white, male, English speaking, etc. person. Not going deeper into the fact that he came from a very disadvantaged background and that he was homosexual (which escaped the attention of some of our critics), it is of course undeniable that the content of his own teaching is pretty biased. And, this speaks to the more general concern that education takes place in *this* world, and that this world is in so many ways a theatre of (unacknowledged) oppression, inequality and cruelty.

An affirmational reading of existing educational practices might then sound as the confirmation of the idea that we are not at all interested in political issues and that we choose to disregard them as unimportant. Our book has been written within the ivory tower so as to defend this ivory tower. I would argue that such an allegation precisely testifies to the dangerous confusion between politics and education. In our book, one can be perfectly in favour of the most progressive political ideals and still defend education for education's sake. This is: the many wrongs of this world should be addressed and measures should be taken, but this regards a political rather than an educational issue. There is no doubt in our minds that there are many things wrong in the world and that these should be put straight, but this is first and foremost a responsibility of the adult generation to take care after how we shape our societies. This is a purely political challenge, to which we agree, but not an educational one.

Formulated differently, the logic of education demands that political institutions should organize society in such a way that education can just be education, and not a means for political aims (which politics is apparently not capable to resolve). Moreover, as should be clear from the fifth claim put forward in this article, education can be an important precondition for radical societal change, but only if education's autonomy is respected. Very concretely put: how are we going to imagine the very basic fact that alternative ways of governing a community or a country and of organizing a system of production and exchange of goods and services is a possibility, if we are not first allowed to study these things in themselves (i.e. education *about* politics and *about* economy – but the same applies, obviously, to education *about* religion, *about* sexual identity, *about* the histories of dealing with disabilities, ethnical differences, etc.)? Political change first needs a moment of study (but not the other way around: study does not need to end up in politics, and this is a point we are fully aware of which we don't find problematic).

An argument that is often brought in against our position is the idea that inevitably the curriculum always testifies to a politically informed choice. E.g., most

curricula in the Western world privilege mathematics above the arts and the regular art course is mostly about Western art only. Again, we don't deny this, and we don't think that this is an issue without importance. But, a first consideration to take into account is that we don't conceive of education in terms of the transmission of a fixed body of knowledge, skills and competences. It is, instead, about showing that there are some things that are worthwhile to explore, to care after and to study. What these things are will *always* be a contingent matter and this can't be avoided. But, it could be argued that it is important that the new generation gets exposed to things that matter, so that they come to matter for them, even if they take these things in completely new directions. If teachers are forced to teach things that don't matter to them out of reasons of a political project to bring more justice in this world, build a knowledge economy, or other reasons, it seems unlikely that they still teach out of love, and hence that they teach in the essential meaning of this term. This of course, doesn't preclude that we can think politically (rather than educationally) about which aspects of the world curricula should and shouldn't include, albeit on the condition that politics shouldn't decide on what it entails to study these aspects, and what learning outcomes this should result in.

Secondly, and making a stronger claim, I want to take sides with Rancière, when he quotes Jacotot: 'everything is in everything'³¹. With this he means that everything we encounter as students, be it a poem, a delightful dish, a piece of music, a physical law, etc. is the expression of the same intelligence we equally share. Education happens at the moment that a student has the strong experience that she is able to put this intelligence at work in gaining proficiency – i.e. when she senses that she manages to understand the poem and write one herself, that she understands the finesses of cuisine and can start cooking herself, etc. It is this experience that marks all the difference – and hence it would be ridiculous to start differentiating between more and less valuable disciplines (e.g. mathematics is more important than carpentry) or more and less appropriate subject matters (e.g. we shouldn't teach opera to children). Similarly, the fact that a particular course is on the curriculum for contingent reasons can be a political problem, but doesn't constitute an educational issue per se.

Identifying love as the core of teaching is a reckless proposal that remains blind to its fanatic and partisan features

It is evident that education is an intra-personal interaction too, and hence all kinds of emotions happen to be at play between teachers and students, one of them being love. This has been thematized by educationalists, who have indeed drawn attention to potentially excessive and exclusive tendencies that come with this dangerous emotion. When we are in love with someone there is always the risk of

³¹ J. Rancière, dz. cyt. p. 19.

idealization, jealousy, forgetting about other persons and things that matter, etc.³². And in the last decades we have become quite sensitive for the possibility of all kind of abuses that stem from an erotic interest teachers might have vis-à-vis their students. Now, in our book, we explicitly take a thing-centred point of view, and so it is important to consider that what is at the core of teaching is love for a thing, not for a person. To be more precise, love for a subject matter can actually prevent many of the risks mentioned above. The teacher who is driven by love for the world is not interested in herself being idolized and neither is she interested in any of her students in special. Teaching is always teaching for everyone and hence for no one in special. One teaches because one deems something so important that one must share it with others, but these others then appear as representatives of the next generation, not as individual children.

If, for instance, the piano teacher Elfriede Jelinek portrays is used as case against a conception of teaching out of love for something (viz. the love for Schumann's piano music), because here clearly being in love is portrayed in its most perverse consequences³³, I would claim the exact opposite: because the teacher is so taken by an obsession towards one of her students, she is no longer able to teach. The same holds for the fanatic and for the professional idiot³⁴. The fanatic can be excluded as a proper teacher, precisely because she is not driven by an educational love (i.e. to really share this love because the subject matter matters) but by a purely private love which results from self-obsession. This is, it is impossible for her to really share. There is no *agape* to her doings. At the other side, we find the professional idiot, who is also not driven by educational love, albeit in this case that she lacks *eros*: she does not approach her subject matter with passion, and so there is nothing to share. There are only lifeless rules to be followed with the greatest precision. Of course, according to a thing-centered account, it is the thing that is in the centre of our attention that puts particular demands on those who study it (teacher and students alike) – a particular piece of music, indeed, needs to be performed by the right instrument. But, the respect for the rule is here the result of a dedication and surrender to something one is in love with, whereas in the case of the professional idiot rule-following has become the object of love itself.

³² bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress. Education as the Practice of Freedom*, Routledge, New York – London 1994; S. Ramaekers, *Love for the World in Education*, [in:] N. Hodgson, J. Vlieghe, P. Zamojski, *Manifesto for a Post-Critical Pedagogy*, Punctum Books, Earth, Milky Way, p. 63-67; A. Gibbs, E. O'Brien, *Out of Love for Any Thing? A Response to Vlieghe and Zamojski on Some Pedagogical Problems with an Object-Oriented 'Educational Love'*, "Journal of Philosophy of Education", 2021, 55 (1), p. 215-225.

³³ See: Lewin in this volume.

³⁴ In this way I try to render the German notion of *Fachidiot* in English. Most certainly by bringing this matter I am not aiming to offend anybody, neither to raise a controversy, but to point to people who are proficient in using professional highly complex knowledge, skills and procedures but who fail to acknowledge that there is anything beyond these procedures.

A thing-centered account of teaching commits the error of a misguided essentialism and exemplarism

The project of an immanent *ontology* of teaching turns around seeking out what teaching is about, i.e. what makes a teacher into a teacher, or still: what it means to be a teacher in a strong and substantial sense. Such a claim can easily raise the suspicion that we want to fixate 'the' features of 'the' teacher in a traditional way, both essentially and normatively. As if we have discovered the final truth about the teacher and argue that every teacher has to compare herself and her teaching to this idea(I)³⁵. This misgiving could be furthermore spurred by our analysis of the teaching practice of Leonard Bernstein, which according to some readers is presented as exemplary, i.e. as a role model we all need to follow and emulate.

However, this is far removed from the claims we actually make. 'Ontological' needs to be taken in the Heideggerian sense³⁶, viz. (1) as a dimension of being that has to be carefully distinguished from the merely 'ontical' level and (2) as a matter of conditions and attitudes rather than as the essential and hence rigid core of a particular phenomenon. A small comparison might be helpful. Approaching humans ontologically doesn't mean that all humans share the same essence which completely determines their being. It means that our humanity is rather a lack of such essence, which makes that we first need to take a particular attitude towards a set of conditions, viz. that our life is always a life in plural and that we all know that life is finite. This, then, is translated at the ontic level in singular life choices, e.g. one can respond to the challenge of plurality by an infinite set of options, ranging from withdrawing from the world to becoming an extreme philanthropist.

Likewise education is an ontological response to what Arendt³⁷ calls natality: it is a given condition that newcomers (i.e. beings with the real capacity to start something totally new) arrive in an already existing world (which will deteriorate unless we take care after it). More in particular, teaching can then be analysed in terms of love for the world and sharing this love to the new generation in such a way that they can begin anew with our world. This is an issue of taking an attitude given a particular ontological condition. Again, this attitude can translate itself at the ontic level in a manifold of ways, e.g. love can turn one into a fervent and passionate teacher (which Bernstein certainly was), but it is not excluded that a calm and restrained teacher can show the same love for the world. In that sense Bernstein is thus not 'the' example to follow, although a study of his gestures can inform us about what it is a teacher does ontologically speaking.

³⁵ N. Hodgson, *Post-critique, politics, and the political in educational philosophy*, "On Education. Journal for Research and Debate", 2020, 3 (9) 2020, https://doi.org/10.17899/on_ed.2020.9.3

³⁶ M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Blackwell, Oxford 1962.

³⁷ H. Arendt, dz. cyt.

This dovetails with the methodological approach we display in the book, which is phenomenological throughout. When point out to particular gestures, such as showing that a subject matter is important and why it is, drawing attention to the matter of the subject matter, drawing attention to what everyone can see, etc. we try to appeal to each and everyone's own experience with teaching and being taught. The sole criterion is whether our account is recognizable and makes sense. That the practice of teaching is deeply meaningful and valuable is based, so to speak, in our own experience of this meaning and value. That is also why our approach is an immanent one, i.e. we consistently take an inside-out perspective. This fits in with another aim of the book, viz. developing a rich and substantial language that speaks to teachers and that gives them the opportunity to envisage themselves again as performing something of great educational importance – and hence to bring life to teaching again.

*An ontological account of teaching implies
a far going deprofessionalization of the teacher*

In our book we assent to Arendt's claim that in order to become a teacher being an expert in a subject matter is more important than being an expert in teaching³⁸. After all, if one is not specialized in a subject matter, one cannot be in love with it, and an overstressing of didactical competences runs the risk of losing love for the world out of sight and to embrace negligence (more or less assuming then that a good teacher can teach everything). So, it seems like we are saying that the importance of teacher training is overestimated and maybe we are even advocating the end of teacher professionalism.

It is true that our ontological account comes with a quite uncompromising redefinition of what it means to be a teacher. More exactly, we present the figure of the teacher in terms of a way of being: one never stops being a teacher, e.g. when the day comes to an end. This is because it regards an attitude of love and care for a subject matter, which has consequences for everything else one does and experiences in one's life. But, this doesn't entail that one becomes a teacher automatically. On the contrary, in order to stay true to one's love for a subject matter and in order to be able to share this love with newcomers, intense work and effort is required. With Foucault the teaching profession could be defined in terms of an ongoing care for the self.

Our point is, hence, not to minimize or to abolish teacher education. Rather, we advocate a reform of existing teacher 'training' models. What we suggest is not to start this preparation process with imparting general pedagogical competence (e.g. classroom management skills, learning how to create impactful PowerPoint presentations), so much as to invite teachers-to-be to ask themselves why they find it

³⁸ Tamze.

important to be a teacher of a particular subject matter, i.e. why they find it important to pass on *this* subject matter to the new generation. And, while deciding on this (which itself can be a life-long work on the self) they also need to make up their minds about what the best pedagogical methods are to achieve this. This could be part of a dynamic document which we have also called a 'teacher declaration'. It is then in view of this declaration that one takes a course on designing Powerpoints or refuses to use them (because the subject matter demands so). This could also entail seeking for inspiration in literature, film or inspirational figures (like we did with Bernstein).

Conclusion

In this article I have made an attempt to give an account of what the project of an immanent ontology of teaching entails, at the same time dealing with some misgivings that arouse in the wake of the publication of our book. Therefore, I started from the key circumstances that made the development of an ontology of teaching a necessary task. The simultaneous disappearance of the common world from our sight, the risk of losing a strictly educational research interest in education, and the functionalisation of education pose a real danger to the very existence of education. To avoid this, it is requisite to engage in an affirmative way of doing educational research, which is aimed at expressing the essence of suppressed educational practices. One of these being teaching. After that, I synthesised the argument developed with Zamojski in *Towards an Ontology of Teaching* into a five theses. Finally, I responded to potential and actual criticisms of this position by restating the fundamental tenets of an immanent ontology of teaching: affirmation, the relation between education and politics, educational love, ontology and ethos.

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