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TOWARD A PEDAGOGY OF RELATION

One of the main intellectual trends in American educational philosophy could be described as a shift from the pedagogy of behavior to the pedagogy of relation. Not a widely used term, pedagogy of relation nevertheless captures the shared intent of otherwise widely diverse group of writers. It is mainly, but not exclusively, associated with feminist thinkers like Nel Noddings, Jane R. Martin, and Carol Gilligan. Among non-feminists, one can mention a group of philosophers who support one or another form of proceduralism (often inspired by Jurgen Habermas),[1] Gert Biesta's communicative pedagogy,[2] and Frank Margonis and his relational ontology.

A common thread of this broad trend is an assumption that education is a function of specific human relations, and not a function of certain behaviors. If something could be learned from the epic tale of educational reforming of the 20-s century, it is that educational systems cannot be improved by promoting any specific teaching or administrative practice. Teacher behaviors do not transfer from one setting into another. The replicability issue has never been adequately resolved. (Theodor Sizer's reform program is one notable exception; it acknowledges the non-transferability of behaviors, but does not really articulate the concern for relations). Subsequently, educational theory experiences certain paradigm crisis – we are no longer able to give educational practitioners an advice, because we think in term of doing. Thus the need to start thinking in terms of being, or, rather of co-being.

The feminist scholars did not specifically respond to this particular failure of the educational reforming. Rather, they sought to address the gender biases of educational theory and practices and in social life in general. However, they have created an important tradition of concentrating on relationship analysis. Nodding's examination of care, Martin's idea of the Schoolhome and its three C's of care, concern, and connection, and Carol Gilligan's ethics of care are examples of theoretical constructs that take human relationships to be the primary building blocks of reality. The observable human behaviors as well as cognitive schemata are to be interpreted against the more primary facts of human rations.

Nell Noddings writes about "taking relation as ontologically basic,"[3] although she prefers to develop the theory of specific type of relations (care) rather than address more general implications of relational ontology. Frank Margonis makes the link between the ontology and the pedagogy in his paper *Demise of Authenticity*. He calls for "adopting an ontological attitude towards educational relationships."[4] Margonis argues that teachers need to realize that the concern for primacy of relationships in education comes from realization that relationships have the primacy of being. This link is important because it changes the most fundamental assumptions not just about education, but also about our thinking about education.

From Ontology To Taxonomy

In the 20-th century, the roots of relational ontology can be traced to Martin Buber: "All real living is meeting." The basic structure of Buber's though is defined in his initial claim: "To man the world is twofold."[5] *I-Thou* and *I-It* are two pairs of primary words that separate two

very different modes of existence. Hence, *I-Thou* or just *Thou* refers to the realm of the dialogical relation, while *I-It* or *It* to the realm of subject-object experiences. Buber's approach was to concentrate on two types of relations (*I-Thou* and *I-It*) to show how human existence depends on which relation is in place. He majestically succeeded in establishing the primacy of relation. However he had to rely on sharp opposition of the two types of relation to make the point that relations truly matter. Buber described an almost magical transformation that occurs when people shift from the world of regular I-It relations into the higher world of I-Thou, is if an invisible and ineffable switch flipped. As a result, his theory of relations lacks in nuance. It is either I-Thou or I-It, all or nothing. There is nothing else and nothing in between. In his later work, Buber tried to enrich this binary model by introducing the notion of *Zwischenmenschliche*, or the interhuman. The interhuman consists of elements of every day life that may lead to a genuine dialogue, or, as Buber describes it, "I-Thou" relation. But the interhuman is not an "I-Thou" yet; it just opens some way to toward I-Thou.

Buber then distinguished again two essentially different areas, or dimensions of human life, the social and the interhuman. Social phenomena exists, in his words, "whenever the life of a number of men, lived with one another, bound up together, brings in its train shared experiences and reactions."[6] But it does not mean that between one member and another there exists any kind of personal, or existential relation. In the interhuman, to the contrary "The only thing that matters is that for each of the two men the other happens as the particular other, that each becomes aware of the other and is thus related to him in such a way that he doesn't regard him and use him as his object, but as his partner in a living event."[7] Another important characteristic of the interhuman is that it does not include psychological and social structures, or, as Buber calls them, "lasting dispositions." By the sphere of interhuman he means "solely actual happenings between men, whether wholly mutual or tending to grow into mutual relations."[8] In other words, Buber tried to overcome the extreme duality of his relational taxonomy, yet he replaced it with yet another, if less extreme, binary opposition.

Buber's bipolar logic resulted in his deep pessimism about achievability of dialogue (genuine I-Thou relations) in the situation of educational encounter. Essentially, he claims that full mutuality is impossible between a student and a teacher (as between a therapist and patient – anywhere certain power asymmetry exists). This is where Buber's version of relational ontology ceases to be helpful for educational theory. He may be right in his pessimism, and I will address the problem of power imbalance separately. However, it becomes clear that pedagogy of relation cannot be based on the typology of relations offered by Buber. We will need a more nuanced taxonomy of relations. Such taxonomy may be some sort of a graduated scale between I-Thou and I-It extremes. In other words, it may be productive to think about *how much* and *what kind* mutuality is in a relation.

One can think of a student-teacher relations as a series of stages, each with a specific characteristics and indicators. As artificial as this sort of taxonomies usually sounds, it may be more helpful than the mad search for foolproof teaching techniques and classroom management strategies. If we can get teachers to pay attention to relations rather than behaviors, it will be a step forward. This paper is not the right place to experiment with taxonomies of relations in education, but let me offer an example of how such taxonomy

might look like. Classroom relations can be: (1) Stereotypical – students and teachers treat each other solely on the basis of stereotypical knowledge of each other's official position, class, gender, race; (2) Exploratory – trying to see if another party deviates from stereotype; (3) Cooperation – parties decide that cooperation is possible; (4) Recognition – accepting each other's identities, (4) Respect – recognition of the relation's value, willingness to pay some costs in order to maintain the relation; (5) Mutuality – the relation becomes an end in itself, school-related roles become secondary. Again, this is just a quick sketch of possible taxonomy, not a finished product. My aim is simply to illustrate how the pedagogy of relation can be made relevant to practitioners.

Epistemology of relation

According to Uemov,[9] three groups of phenomena compose our world: things, qualities, and relations. All three could be described through each other. A thing could be a sum of qualities, a quality is an aspect of a thing, a relation is a quality of a system of things. Relations cannot belong to one thing; they are the joint property of at least two things. Relations located, so to speak, in-between things, and are located in neither of the things joint into a relation. In theory, any two objects in the universe may relate to each other in some way. Relation understood extremely broadly loses any meaning. However, more restrictive interpretations of relation will bring an irresolvable issue of objective (real) relations versus subjective (imagined) ones. I will therefore skip the metaphysical discussion entirely, and move directly into the realm of human relations.

Translated into the language of social science, relations assume very distinctive character. Relations do not describe an individual; they always describe a group or a pair of people. One cannot describe a relation by observing individual or group behavior, for human relation always has a hidden component of emotion, attitude, past history, and social context. One cannot describe a behavior by examining one person through any available psychological tool. However, this affective component sometimes obscures the in-between-ness of a relation, because emotions clearly describe individuals, while relations do not. Therefore, relations are neither behavior, nor individual emotions. One can think of relation as a relatively stable interpretive context. Individuals interpret each other's words and actions through certain prism of past experiences and culturally and socially induced expectations. Relations are invisible interpreters that mediate our communications. When a pair of people are said to have relationships of trust, or respect, or suspicion, or competition, this means that any word or act by one of them will be interpreted by another in a certain way.

Buber seemed to assume that the dialogical relations are direct, and unmediated as opposed to mediated relations of I-It. This may be so, unless we assume that the I-Thou relations also mediate communication in a certain way. In other words, deep mutuality depends on certain rules for mutuality, even if the rules consist of ignoring all other rules. Relations are always already there, they can change, but not disappear or be circumvented.

The ontological specificity of relations creates certain epistemological difficulties. Margonis identifies one epistemological problem with relations – our knowledge of relationship always remains partial and limited.[10] Efforts of Thayer-Bacon can at least partially address this problem. She is developing the relational epistemology, which "is motivated by the desire to

expand what epistemology means to include the qualities of knowing that have historically been viewed as detrimental or distracting to the obtaining of knowledge -- qualities such as feelings, emotions, and intuitions which are usually linked to women rather than men."[11] Thayer-Bacon infuses knowing with relationality, which may help us understand relations better. However, correcting the process of knowing with inclusion of relationality does not necessarily solve the problem when relations are the objects of knowing. In other words, following Thayer-Bacon, we can know better all classes of objects; but her approach does not give us any special tools in understanding relations. Relational understanding is not the same thing as understanding relations.

How do I know if my classroom relationships are those of trust, respect, or care? The difficulty here is that I cannot know it alone. The language of subject-object epistemology simply does not apply here. The knowledge about relations can only exist as group knowledge, as a multitude of voices engaged in a dialogue. Certain knowledge cannot be held or comprehended by one person. This is, in essence, Bakhtin's theory of polyphony and polyphonic truth that is born "in the point of touching of different consciousnesses."[12] His argument is that the multitude of individual consciousnesses has some epistemological meaning. What could be known by the means of dialogue cannot be known by any other means. This may or not be true about all kinds of knowledge, but it would be very reasonable to suggest that at least with respect to relations, polyphonic truth is a much more workable concept than any other form of knowledge.

Relations thus are not describable by one person. Instead, a group of people can describe relations, and then one person can describe their description. IT is important to understand that one can translate the polyphonic truth into a form comprehensible by one individual. After all, Dostoevsky was a single author of his polyphonic novels. In other words, an epistemology of relation does not totally preclude individual knowledge of relations; it simply requires an intermediary logical step. Instead of "relations – individual knowledge of relations" schema one will have to work with "relations – dialogue about relations – individual knowledge of relations." To know something about relations, one needs to interpret people's interpretations of relations. Rational ways of knowing always imply primacy of immediate, eyewitness account over interpretation of secondary sources. This has to change with relations – the first-hand account is actually deceiving, while second-hand account, if properly constructed, maybe more accurate.

The triad I describe is necessary not to create a theory of educational relations, but also in other direction – from theory to practice. If we are to give advice to teachers about classroom relations, this is all but impossible without including students in some dialogue about relations. Whatever knowledge of relations theorists will be able to generate, is not easily transferable to improve classroom relations; at least not through teachers only. Generally, we write our books and papers for teachers; educational theory never fancied to have students as its audience. I am not quite sure why this is so. No marriage therapist will work on family relations with just one family member. However, we are trying to improve education while speaking to a tiny majority of people involved. Teachers and administrators make no more than 5% of total population of schools. No matter how important their role, we cannot assume that they represent the remaining 95% of the equation. My next project is a book about classroom relations to be read by students and teachers together.

The power imbalance problem

Buber identified the central problem the ontology of relation poses for education, which I will call the paradox of an imbalanced relation. Buber indicated that mutuality is necessary for educational relation. However, he also argued that true mutuality is impossible between a student and a teacher, or between a patient and a therapist, because of the imbalance of authority in the situation of their encounter (1957 dialogue with Carl Rogers).[13] The tragic side of such a situation is that regardless of teachers' intentions the relationship cannot become equal and truly dialogical.

I have to make clarification of the notions of authority and power that I use in two distinctly different contexts and with different meanings, although they are synonymous in the general use. First, I argue that there is a lack of teacher authority in schools, which necessitates developing of the pedagogy of relation. Second, I argue that there is always an imbalance of power in student-teacher relation, which means that teachers have more power. By authority I mean the ability to control student behavior, while the word "power" is reserved to express a more general ability to exercise influence over another person. Yet despite this terminological trickery, there is a real contradiction here. Teachers have very little power over the students *until* they create personal relationship with the latter. Once in the relationship, teachers tend to face the opposite problem of too much power.

The postmodern philosophers made the challenge of imbalanced relation one of the central themes in philosophy. Outside education, many more if not all forms of human relation were found to be imbued with authority imbalances, even those considered to be egalitarian and based on neutral assumptions. Buber's dream of mutuality suddenly appeared to become less and less realistic. The postmodernists discovered so many contaminants in human relations that the pure I-Thou relation took up the air of utopia.

I will attempt to salvage the primacy of relation in the face of the postmodernist critique of power imbalance using Bakhtin's idea of polyphony. Bakhtin's account of author-hero relations in the *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* can be used to outline a solution for the paradox of imbalanced relation. My theory is that in presenting the author-hero relation in the polyphonic novel Bakhtin describes the general way of mutuality in an imbalanced relation. Essentially, Bakhtin disassociates mutuality from equality. The problem of imbalanced relation is not to be countered with power sharing based on considerations of equality; it needs to be addressed with polyphony, the principle of engaged co-existence of multiple yet unmerged voices. Polyphony is a fascinating fusion of ethical and esthetical considerations applied to human relations.

Bakhtin's principle of polyphony offers a radically new way of conciliation of power imbalance with mutuality of relation. According to Bakhtin, an author of the polyphonic novel creates heroes that are fully independent of their creator. The problem of authority imbalance maybe misstated; it is the specific kind of monological authority that eliminates mutuality, not authority itself. The polyphonic authority *creates* mutuality, and only this kind of authority should be used in education.

Classroom as novel

In *The boy who would be a helicopter*, Vivian Paley gives an example of her best teaching moment, a story of Jason and the mother pig.

> "The pig is in a story of Katie's, and Jason is the boy who tells us every day that his helicopter is broken. "Come listen to Katie's story," I call to Jason. "This mother pig does something that reminds me of you." He approaches the story table blowing on his blades, one of the many ways to repair a broken helicopter, and I read what Katie has just dictated to me.
>
> There is the three pigs. And the mother pig is there. Then the wolf huffs down the brick house. And the mother puts it back together.
>
> "That makes me think of the way you fix your helicopter," I say. Jason and Katie smile at each other, and I am a step closer to my vision of connecting everything that happens in this nursery school classroom. My habit of drawing invisible lines between the children's images is, I think, the best thing I do as a teacher."[14]

Paley is a novelist. She has a roomful of characters, each capable of creating his or her own worldviews. What she does is not only to encourage them to tell their stories, but also a way of connecting them together. She clearly exercises a great amount of power (influence) over her students. She is, after all, a strong and creative teacher, which by definition means a person with power. But her power concentrates on encouraging students to write their own stories, which means giving them the tools of interpretation, and therefore power to redefine the classroom relations.

Paley does two things: she encourages kids to write their stories, and provides an opportunity for these stories to meet each other. Thus she shifts the center of gravity from student-teacher relationship onto student-student relationship. She relinquishes her monological authorial voice in favor of polyphonic multiple voices of the novel. Paley thinks of her classroom as a novel, not epic, not drama, not a short story. Her novel is populated with a number of fully independent characters, each with his or her own story to tell, own version of the common events. There are many distinctive yet intersecting storylines. Paley's classroom is an epitome of polyphony. The essence of her teaching is making dialogue possible.

Her authority is based on her usefulness to children – she is the only one who can write, and she can give their story-telling some time and space. "Drawing invisible lines" between students' stories seems to be where her authority is mostly applied. Her relations with children are not easily described in this framework of power imbalance. Rather, they all seek to combine their strengths against the common enemy of isolation, muteness and incomprehension. Their relationships make more sense if described as division of labor. Someone can tell a good story, others can act it out, some can write, while others will dictate. It is within this division of labor that the teacher gets to set some rules, allocate time and resources. She does what others cannot do, but they do what she cannot do. In Paley's classroom, people seek to add their powers, not measure it against each other. The teachers

authority makes sense as a function of that joint power. To get to that point, they need to write a novel.

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