

Teaching and the Dynamics of Recognition

Chris Higgins

Teachers College, Columbia University

INTRODUCTION

I doubt if anyone will object to the idea that the practice of teaching is animated by an ethos of service. After all, what are the helping professions about, if not helping? The modern, Western notion of altruism, though, inevitably entails ideas of sacrifice: we give to the other rather than taking for ourselves; we overcome our inclinations to do our duty. This suggests that teaching is not only as an altruistic endeavor but as an ascetic one. Now this is a more controversial claim, but why should it be? Asceticism is a pervasive theme in past and present discourse about teaching, surfacing again and again in the writings of philosophers and the talk of school people.

For instance, I will consider Martin Buber's claim, in the essay "Education," that teaching involves a "lofty asceticism."¹ But we need not have looked that far. Consider the remarks made this summer by New York City Schools Chancellor Harold Levy. Levy welcomed the first cohort of NYC teaching fellows to the practice of teaching and to the New York City schools with these words: "You're not in it for the money; you're not in it for the glory.... You're in it because you have a sense of duty. I cannot thank you enough."² Certainly, if *glory* is what one wants, then teaching is not the right choice, in our time and culture at least. But somewhere just south of glory lies a more modest desire, the desire for recognition. In the movies, students stand on their desks in recognition of Mr. Keating and perform Mr. Holland's long-deferred opus. But what should real teachers do with their wish to be thanked? If Jessica Benjamin is right—and I tend to think that, in large measure, she is—recognition in some form is *a*, if not *the*, fundamental human need.³

Nonetheless, I believe Levy when he says that, even in his position, he cannot thank teachers enough. The undervaluing of teaching in our society is systemic and has deep historical roots. Teachers are denied sources of recognition inherent in most professions, receiving, on the contrary, powerful daily messages that what they do is unimportant. This message is sent through cultural memes like "those who can, do," through the dilapidated state of most schools, and through low salaries. Ironically, teachers only show up on the public radar when there is a "crisis" in the schools. And it is not only the culture at large which withholds recognition; the culture of the schools itself contributes to making teaching thankless work. For instance, most teachers work in isolation. When administrators do observe them, teachers report feeling, more often than not, misrecognized by empty praise or high-stakes criticism.⁴

Of course, teachers do not really work in isolation: they are surrounded by students. In some ways, too, it might seem that students are in the best position to see and affirm the importance of the teacher's work. This last hope for confirmation of the teacher and his work is dashed by the essential asymmetry of the teacher-student relationship. Students are, on the whole, uncannily blind to their teacher's

needs, feelings, and accomplishments. And if Buber is right, this fact is not to be bemoaned. It is precisely one of the most important responsibilities of the teacher not to ask her students to take care of her in this way.

In what follows, I want to complicate Buber's understanding of this altruistic asymmetry, by putting it in dialogue with Benjamin's more dialectical version of intersubjectivity. Benjamin shows that recognition *from* the other and recognition *of* the other are thoroughly intertwined. Thus, she gives us reasons to doubt whether the one-way recognition Buber imagines is even possible. Nonetheless, she develops her account of mutual recognition precisely in conditions of extreme asymmetry, in the early relation of mother and child. Benjamin not only leads us to doubt the possibility of an ascetic stance in teaching, but provides us with a language for articulating why such a stance is undesirable. At the same time, there is an important insight in Buber's account that must be preserved. The challenge will be to develop the Benjaminian corrective without lapsing into the untenable position that students should take care of their teachers in the same ways that teachers care for them.

THE SPECIAL ASYMMETRY OF THE TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP

Mid-way through his 1925 Heidelberg lecture, Buber declares that "the relation in education is one of pure dialogue" (*ED*, 98). As the discussion unfolds, however, it becomes less and less clear what Buber could mean by "pure," since he delineates not one but several variations of the dialogical relation. Furthermore, the teacher-student relation is shown to possess only two of the three dialogical qualities he lists. According to Buber, teaching certainly possesses the first and most important of these elements. This is what he calls "inclusion" or "experiencing the other side," and it alone constitutes a sufficient condition for dialogue. "A relation between persons," Buber writes, "that is characterized in more or less degree by the element of inclusion may be termed a dialogical relation" (*ED*, 97).

What Buber means by inclusion is not hard to grasp even if it is difficult to realize. Plowing through life in our everyday mode, we experience others, and the world in general, in a one-sided manner. We feel what it is like, for example, to behold or use something, to avoid, touch, or converse with someone. For Buber, though, it is not only possible, but paramount, that this normal consciousness be occasionally interrupted by a kind of perceptual doubling. This "experience of the other side" comes as a shock, as we suddenly become aware of what it is like for the other to be beheld, used, avoided, touched, or conversed with. Here is one of Buber's examples:

A man belabors another, who remains quite still. Then let us assume that the striker suddenly receives in his soul the blow he strikes: the same blow; that he receives it as the other who remains still. For the space of a moment he experiences the situation from the other side (*ED*, 96).

Passages like this tend to divide Buber's readers. Many readers will want to say that this is closer to science fiction than to philosophy. Without denying that Buber's writings do have a "had to be there" quality, though, inclusiveness only seems like mystical mind-reading if one starts from the Cartesian premises of a mind which knows itself with some certainty, perceives the physical world through a glass

darkly, and has no access to other minds. For Buber, mind comes into existence in an intersubjective field. It is only later that we gain the concept of the “I” and begin to experience in the subjective-objective mode which he calls I-It.⁵ In the example above, the man initially sees himself as the subject of the berating and his companion as its object. When he suddenly awakens from the dream of I-It life to the pungency of the relational, he experiences the “beratedness” of a common event.

Perhaps another example will help us see how familiar this experience really is. What I have in mind is humor. Cartesians must have a hard time understanding how one member of a group can so often cause a spontaneous uproar with a single comment or gesture during the flow of conversation. It cannot be a matter of luck, as if the joker herself found something funny, and it just happened that everyone agreed. Nor is it easy to imagine this as a feat of cognitive prowess, as if the joker had time, in the instant between comments, to consider what she knows about each person’s sensibilities in order to craft a comment witty to all. Humor seems less mysterious if we posit that the group is participating in a common event, becoming like-minded through conversational rhythm and other rituals of communion. In group life, everyone is on the same page and the joker merely points to something on the page or suddenly flips it. In other words, the spontaneity of humor attests to the fact that the joker feels the other side of her audience concretely enough to tickle it.

But of course, this same phenomenon, of having an instantaneous, felt read on how one’s comments and actions are likely to be received, occurs just as clearly in teaching as in humor. This is not to deny that jokes and lessons occasionally fall flat, but we must reckon with just how often teachers do reach students with an interpretation, hook them with a question, or inspire them with a challenge. This is why Buber says that inclusiveness is not disruptive “of the realm of education, as for other realms, but is actually constitutive” of the practice of teaching (*ED*, 100). According to Buber, the teacher’s whole practice should be informed by her ongoing attempt to complement her efforts to educate a student with efforts to “experience the pupil being educated” (*ED*, 100). In other words, this is Buber’s solution to the problem faced by all modern educational theorists: how to legitimate pedagogical influence in an age that prizes individuality and authenticity. Buber does not deny that teachers do or should influence students, but he posits inclusion as a constant guide and check to teacherly influence. Without such palpable instruction in the sensitivities and needs of the student, the teacher’s quest to select and represent the “effective world” to and for the student becomes arbitrary, willful, and illegitimate. Here is Buber’s famous description of the teacher’s duty to feel the other side:

Without the action of his spirit being in any way weakened, he must at the same time be over there, on the surface of that other spirit which is being acted upon—and not some conceptual, contrived spirit, but all the time the wholly concrete spirit of this individual being who is living and confronting him....He is of all men the one for whom inclusion may and should change from an alarming and edifying event into an atmosphere (*ED*, 100).

For a good teacher, then, openness to the other side cannot be just an occasional event. It must be woven into one’s very practice. Like the atmosphere in which a joke goes over, a dialogical teaching practice occurs in an inclusive atmosphere.

Any relation that is inclusive counts as dialogical for Buber, but there are different qualities of inclusiveness for Buber and therefore different types of dialogue. In the passage above, Buber introduces the quality of concreteness. In some dialogues, all we experience of the other, even if we still experience this palpably, is the other's point of view. In such conversational encounters, we feel the force of the other's convictions, but we do not really experience him "concretely" as an embodied person with a history and complex inner life. Buber gives a nice example of this in the later essay, "Dialogue," when he describes how he and a Christian minister barely avoided a falling out. Buber had made an inflammatory remark about Christ, but just as tensions something shifted in both men and the minister announced "it is gone."⁶ Such a conversational encounter in which differences are transcended counts as dialogical since inclusion occurs, but for Buber, it is not fully dialogical, since it remains abstract. The other who is included remains to a certain extent "contrived." For Buber, teaching is not only deeply inclusive, but quite concrete: the teacher senses the whole, living child before him.

It is no doubt this combination—inclusiveness to the degree it becomes an atmosphere and concreteness—that leads Buber to praise teaching as a relation of "pure dialogue." What is strange about this remark, though, is that while teaching can pride itself on a concrete inclusiveness, it lacks the quality of mutuality. The dialogical event between Buber and the minister, for instance, may have lacked concreteness but since each man included the other it was mutual. Though teacher and student do participate in the "common situation of 'educating' and 'being educated,'" Buber writes,

This mutuality—this is what constitutes the peculiar nature of the relation in education—cannot be one of inclusion, although the true relation of the educator to the pupil is based on inclusion. No other relation draws its inner life like this one from the element of inclusion, but no other is in that regard like this, completely directed to one-sidedness, so that if it loses one-sidedness it loses its essence (*ED*, 98-99).

Though the teacher always strives to understand, to feel what it is like to be the student of the teacher, the student is never asked in turn to experience what it is like for the teacher to be the teacher of that student.

Indeed, "in the moment when the pupil is able to throw himself across and experience from over there," Buber writes,

the educative relation would be burst asunder, or change into friendship... We call friendship the third form of dialogical relation, which is based on a concrete and mutual experience of inclusion. It is the true inclusion of one another by human souls (*ED*, 101).

Thus, whenever there is inclusion there is dialogue, but since there are various types of inclusion, there are different forms of dialogue:

BUBER'S QUALITIES OF INCLUSION AND VARIETIES OF DIALOGUE

| | One-Sided | Mutual |
|-----------------|--------------|-----------------|
| <i>Abstract</i> | ? | 1. Conversation |
| <i>Concrete</i> | 2. Education | 3. Friendship |

Buber uses these two distinctions, abstract–concrete and one-sided–mutual, to generate three forms of dialogue. If there is a “pure” form of dialogue, then, it would seem to be friendship, which lacks neither concreteness nor mutuality. As if saving the best for last, Buber concludes his typology with friendship, which he calls the “the true inclusion.” That Buber sees abstraction and one-sidedness as defects, even if non-fatal ones, is further supported by the fact that he does not even bother to name and consider the type of inclusion/dialogue that is abstract and one-sided.⁷

Buber argues that teaching involves a lofty asceticism because teachers cultivate an atmosphere in which their wills and desires are constantly checked by their experience of the other side. To manipulate or enjoy one’s students, Buber reasons, involves a “falsification” of one’s role, besides which “all quackery appears peripheral” (*ED*, 95). In hoping that teachers do not use or abuse their students, Buber says nothing very controversial. At the same time, we must wonder whether a teacher can truly rejoice in her communion with students if she never feels acknowledged by them in return? Buber knows very well that it is not only the child who longs for communion “in face of the lonely night” (*ED*, 88). Today’s teachers are yesterday’s children, longing not only for communion, but confirmation, in who they are and what they do. Does Buber imagine this asceticism as a price of maturity? Is the need for confirmation one of those “childish things” that we must “put away” once we become adults and offer our help to the next generation? Is this something that an adult can renounce? Is teaching under such conditions sustainable? These questions take on a new meaning and force when we turn from the work of Buber to that of a later intersubjective theorist, Jessica Benjamin.

MUTUAL RECOGNITION IN ASYMMETRICAL RELATIONSHIPS

In *The Bonds of Love*, Benjamin sets out to think Hegel and Freud together and to go beyond both. In particular, she wants to join Hegel’s dialectical, intersubjective account of human consciousness to Freud’s insight that the infant does not initially know where it ends and its mother or the world begins. According to Benjamin object relations theory from Freud to Mahler is governed by the “assumption that we grow out of relationships rather than becoming more active and sovereign *within* them, that we start in a state of dual oneness and end in a state of singular oneness” (*ED*, 18). Such theories may understand the infant’s individuation as a relational process, but they remain one-person psychology, neglecting both the child’s interest in the world of others, and the role of the mother’s subjectivity in the process of individuation. Drawing on the work of Daniel Stern and D.W. Winnicott, Benjamin sets out to construct a genuinely intersubjective account of human development. In such a view, Benjamin writes, “the issue is not only how we separate from oneness, but also how we connect to and recognize others; the issue is not how we become free of the other, but how we actively engage and make ourselves known in relation to the other” (*BL*, 18).

For Benjamin, this need to be known by the other, what she calls recognition, “is so central to human existence as to escape notice.” (*BL*, 15). Comparing human development to photosynthesis, she says that recognition is akin to the sunlight fueling the process (*BL*, 22). Recognition is a constant and crucial presence in human interactions, though it can take many forms: “to recognize is to affirm, validate,

acknowledge, know, accept, understand, empathize, take in, tolerate, appreciate, see, identify with, find familiar, ...love" (*BL*, 15).

To see what these things have in common, and to see why recognition is so important to human development, we have to understand recognition in relation to what Benjamin calls assertion. The idea is that a sense of self is connected with a sense of agency and authorship. From our earliest moments, our ability to recognize what we are doing or feeling, or even that we are the ones doing or feeling it, is leveraged off the recognition of others. If "the infant reaches excitedly for a toy," Benjamin writes, "he looks up to see if mother is sharing his excitement; he gets the meaning when she says 'wow!'" (*BL*, 22). In this way,

A person comes to feel that "I am the doer who does, I am the author of my acts," by being with another person who recognizes her acts, her feelings, her intentions, her existence, her independence. Recognition is the essential response, the constant companion of assertion. The subject declares, "I am, I do, and then waits for the response, "You are, you have done" (*BL*, 21).

By noting the interplay of assertion on the part of the child and recognition on the part of the parent, Benjamin has already lifted us clear of the crudest versions of individualism. No one pulls themselves up by their own bootstraps, unless they have first had their booties lovingly pulled on for them. And of course the rugged individualist needs you to hear his story, needs you to recognize his struggle and his independence.

At this point, however, Benjamin's account is only relational and not yet intersubjective, since it still does not take the subjectivity of the mother. One of Benjamin's most important insights is to see that this is not simply an addition to the story of assertion and recognition but a necessary component of it. Here is how Benjamin puts it:

Recognition is that response from the other which makes meaningful the feelings, intentions, and actions of the self. It allows the self to realize its agency and authorship in a tangible way. But such recognition can only come in turn from an other whom we, in turn, recognize as a person in his or her own right (*BL*, 12).

This is Benjamin's innovation: to see that there is a need to recognize as well as a need to be recognized. The problem is that if we include the subjectivities of both the child and the mother, both the need for recognition and the need to recognize, the developmental narrative that emerges is not a simple, linear one. Like a good Hegelian, Benjamin tightens the dialectical knot as follows:

1. *Child's assertion of self*: In the search for authorship and a sense of self, the child asserts himself, let's say by opening a cupboard. But the child needs an outside perspective on this action to help him determine its meaning and import.
2. *Mother's recognition of child*: Thus, the opening of the cupboard becomes an enactment of the burgeoning self of the child only insofar as the mother recognizes it as such. Perhaps she exclaims: "wow, look at what you did—you opened the cupboard!"
3. *Child's recognition of mother*: In this case, the mother is not just "mirroring" the child. She is herself "another subject whose independent center must be outside her child if she is to grant him the recognition he seeks" (*BL*, 24). Thus,

the mother's recognition of the child can only "make a difference" to the extent that the child has already recognized the mother as someone different.

4. *Mother's assertion of self*: This means that, however much she may have achieved a sense of self in her previous relationships, she must establish her separateness in relation to her child, someone with whom she identifies. She must learn to assert and enact her own self within the relationship. But for these assertions to have meaning, she needs to be recognized by the child as another subject.

5. Return to step #1.

In short, there is no selfhood without recognition, and there is no recognition without mutuality. Therefore, according to Benjamin, one-way recognition is an impossibility, even in the stark asymmetry of the parent-child relationship:

In this sense, notwithstanding the inequality between parent and child, recognition must be mutual and allow for the assertion of each self. Thus, I stress that mutual recognition, including the child's ability to recognize the mother as a person in her own right, is as significant a developmental goal as separation (*BL*, 24).

In positing this new goal of mutual recognition, Benjamin hardly imagines a simple, linear path of development. The logic of recognition is clearly circular, but not all circles are vicious ones, and Benjamin offers us a vision of the circle as a productive one. Over time, mother and child may develop an increasing sense of separateness from each other, and thereby take ever greater delight in the increased richness that contact with the differentiated other brings. The fact that we must acknowledge our dependence in the very moment we seek to establish our independence (since we need the other to recognize our assertions of independence) is not a simple contradiction according to Benjamin. It is a paradox, the tensions inherent in which we must learn to live with.

Benjamin also has a keen sense of how difficult is to live with these tensions. She notes, for instance, our tendency to disavow our dependence and assert ourselves imperiously, place ourselves at the center of the world, and make the other serve our needs. Tragically, though, strategy for coping with our anxiety about our dependence negates the agency and independence of the other which we need if their acts of recognition are to confer a sense of reality on our self assertions. "As life evolves," Benjamin suggests, "assertion and recognition become the vital moves in the dialogue between self and other"; certainly there are times when we find a balance or a rhythm in this dialogue (*BL*, 22). At the same time, it is often the case that this dialogue lacks vitality, say, when we exchange hollow pseudo-recognition; and it may break down altogether in a cycle of mutual negation and ever louder, but empty assertions. In large part, *The Bonds of Love* is the exploration of how the search for mutual recognition can spiral into relations of misrecognition and domination.

One way to ease the tensions in this constitutive human paradox is to deny the subjectivity of one of the participants. Thus, Benjamin worries that it is more than a coincidence that "no psychological theory has adequately articulated the mother's independent existence." The fact that, in one developmental theory after another, the mother is not "regarded as another subject with a purpose apart from her existence

for her child,” may reflect a broad cultural coping strategy (*BL*, 23).⁸ It is problematic that psychology represents mothers as mere appendages of their children, but what is most troubling is that “often enough, abetted by the image of mothering in childrearing literature and by the real conditions of life with baby, mothers themselves feel they are so confined” (*BL*, 24). It “is no simple enterprise,” Benjamin writes, for mothers to hold on to their sense of their own quest to experience, develop, and achieve within the practice of mothering. And yet, as Benjamin eloquently reminds us, the stakes here are enormous:

It is too often assumed that a mother will be able to give her child faith in tackling the world even if she can no longer muster it for herself. And although mothers ordinarily aspire to more for their children than for themselves, there are limits to this trick: a mother who is too depressed by her own isolation cannot get excited about her child learning to walk or talk; a mother who is afraid of people cannot feel relaxed about her child’s associations with other children; a mother who stifles her own longings, ambitions, and frustrations cannot tune in empathically to her child’s joys and failures. The recognition a child seeks is something the mother is able to give only by virtue of her independent identity (*BL*, 24).

In the *Bonds of Love*, Benjamin argues convincingly for the importance of recognition in human life and that mutuality is essential in the dynamics of recognition. A relationship in which recognition flows in only one direction is dangerous and ultimately unworkable. But why should we think any differently about the ascetic teacher described by Buber as we do about the ascetic mother pictured above? In this case, Buber’s asceticism would not be nearly as lofty as he thinks. Can we commensurate the important insights of these two thinkers?

CONCLUSION: MUTUAL RECOGNITION IN THE TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP

Though Benjamin’s concept of recognition may not be entirely commensurable with Buber’s notions of inclusion, there is a strong similarity between the concerns of these two intersubjective thinkers. They concur that recognition has a central place in human development, and they agree as well on the idea that paradigmatic growth fostering relationships, like parenting and teaching, include various asymmetries of age, experience, skill, knowledge, and role. In other words, neither would advocate that the young should care for adults in the same ways or even to the same extent that parents and teachers care for their charges. Where Buber and Benjamin differ is on whether recognition is one of these role specific actions. Buber may very well be right that relationships, however educative, in which symmetry and equality are prioritized are better characterized as friendships. But Benjamin convincingly shows that mutuality of recognition is not only compatible with but constitutive of the most asymmetrical of relationships. Buber’s basic intuition is a sound one: our development is partly predicated on taking certain aspects of our facilitating environment for granted. Few things are as frustrating and potentially damaging to the developing person as being asked to parent one’s parents or teach one’s teachers. At the same time, Buber is wrong to think of the teacher’s need for recognition as dangerous in this way.

As the student gropes to define herself in her school life, she looks for a picture of herself in the recognition of teachers. She may feel that they do not know her if their picture of her differs too widely from the self-image she has developed in her previous relationships. But she will also tend to assimilate her teachers’ perspectives

to her existing self-image. Every teacher has had this experience of not quite recognizing himself in the “teacher” that one of his new student’s is trying to impress, challenge, or connect with. For such a student to feel recognized in a way that makes a difference, she will have to learn to recognize the teacher more and more for who he is.

Recognition in teaching includes an element of mutuality if it exists at all. Teachers feel recognized by students whose work demonstrates an understanding of assignment or course, and respond with feedback that is recognizing. Students feel misrecognized by grading and return the favor with misrecognizing course evaluations. In the latter case, it is not simply that teacher and student mark each other down, but that each backs away, step by step, over the course of the relationship. The vital dance between assertion and recognition breaks down and each is left asserting in an unsatisfying manner that she knows best how to understand and assess what has transpired in their educational interaction. The teacher discounts the evaluations and the student discounts the teacher’s comments, and both have lost the opportunity to feel confirmed in who they are and be challenged to grow by seeing themselves in different eyes.

Is the growth of the teacher and her need for recognition beside the point? Here is where we must follow Benjamin and part ways with Buber or any other thinker who counsels asceticism in the helping professions. Benjamin is right: the trick of wanting more for one’s child or students than one allows for oneself is difficult to pull off. We must learn to live with the tensions that are caused by acknowledging the paradoxical truth that the teacher is there for the students and also exists for herself. It is probably no coincidence that philosophers and school chancellors alike feel comfortable preaching asceticism in this most feminized of professions. But if we want to raise and educate whole human beings, and not another generation of petty tyrants and all too willing servants, we need to acknowledge the subjectivity of the mother and of the teacher, and affirm the need for both to be recognized for their work and growing selves.

1. Martin Buber, “Education,” in *Between Man and Man*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (Boston: Beacon Press, 1926/1955), 95. This essay will be cited as *ED* in the text for all subsequent references.

2. Quoted in Abby Goodnough, “Sensing Higher Calling in the Classroom,” *The New York Times*, 1 August 2001, National: New York Region.

3. See Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination* (New York: Pantheon, 1988). This book will be cited as *BL* in the text for all subsequent references.

4. See, for example, Susan Moore Johnson, *Teachers at Work: Achieving Success in our Schools* (New York: Basic Books, 1990), 265-76.

5. For Buber’s description of the development of the “I” see Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970), 80.

6. Martin Buber, “Dialogue,” (1929) in Smith, *Between Man and Man*, 5-6.

7. One example of such a relation might be that of reader to text. In moments where a fusion of horizons occurs, the reader includes only the *weltananschauung* of the authorial voice, and of course the text does not literally experience anything.

8. See also Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976).