

# The Subject after Humanism: Towards an open subjectivity for education

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Gert Biesta, in his Invited Distinguished Lecture for the Philosophical Studies in Education SIG at AERA 2011, suggested that one of the challenges facing future education in the post humanism era is that it is no longer possible to cultivate in education the kind of subject theorized by humanism. In modern times, education has often been seen as the enterprise through which a certain kind of ideal person can be produced or promoted. In Kant's words, "Man can only become man by education" (1906, p. 6). Humanism has attempted to identify and theorize an essence of human subjectivity as the basis of knowledge and action. From this perspective, education is based on such a humanist subject. Kant defines the "principle of education" as that "children ought to be educated, ... in a manner which is adapted to the *idea of humanity* and the whole destiny of man" (1906, p. 14, emphasis in the original). Dewey also suggested that education should be understood as a process of "moving from the child's present experience out into that represented by the organized bodies of truth" (1902, p. 11). Thus humanism has been an essential part of modern education.

The problem with such a humanist approach to education is the paradox of "spontaneity and reproductivity" (Schleiermacher, as cited in Biesta, 1998, p. 3), a constant tension between "socialization" or "normalization" and "subjectification" (Biesta, 2011). As Biesta observes, humanism "specifies a norm of what it means to be human *before* the actual manifestation of 'instances' of humanity" (2011, p. 6, emphasis in the original), thus depriving students of the opportunity to become anything different or unique, the opportunity to be free and creative in their own person-making. The ideal or essence of humanity, even though conceived as being free and autonomous in modern times, becomes the norm that students have to be made into. With the "liquidation" of the humanist subject in the post-humanist era, however, the question becomes, what is education to do in addition to qualification and socialization? Can there be a different approach to humanity that escapes the fate of normalization?

One solution suggested by Biesta is that education after humanism should be interested in existence, not essence, on what the subject can do, not on what the subject is, or the truth about the subject. In other words, we should give up trying to, in order to provide orientation or guidance to what we do, come up with a theory, an articulation, of what human subjectivity is. Rather, we should concentrate on what we do, at every moment; on when and in what situation it is imperative that we do something. According to Biesta, this is the way to maintain the subject's freedom and uniqueness, to make the educational mission of subjectification possible, and this is the way inspired by Foucault and Levinas. In this article, I argue that such a focus on existence rather than essence will not help us out of the post-humanist impasse. Locating the meaning of human action only in action itself, or in the imperative to act, either already implies a certain theory of the subject or makes human subjectivity totally accidental and ephemeral. I will analyze Foucault's alleged deconstruction and reconfiguration of the subject and Levinas' approach to human subjectivity and suggest that Foucault's early and later works have already implied certain concepts of the subject and that Levinas' approach to human subjectivity does not, as has often been perceived in educational circles, avoid theorizing about human subjectivity. The problem with the modern notion of the subject is not the pursuit of human essence per se, but the pursuit of a human essence that is fixed, enclosed, unchangeable and thus a norm. Levinas' subjectivity as the dialectic of being and non-being signifies the importance of openness and transformation, but at the same time, the importance of being, of coming to terms with ourselves. In education, we cannot give up the search for who we are, but such a search should not close us off from growing, from changing and transformation, and from being open to other human beings and the world, and that's where we can revitalize education as subjectification.

## Foucault's Deconstruction and Reconfiguration of the Subject

In his 1998 article "Pedagogy without Humanism: Foucault and the Subject of Education," Biesta argues that even though "Foucault's work has been taken as the very subversion of the human subject," his is not "the eventual erasure of man as such, but only the eventual erasure of the modern *articulation* of subjectivity" (pp. 6-7, emphasis in the original). Biesta suggests that Foucault's objection only "concerns any *a priori* theory of the subject, ... since such a theory assumes prior objectification" and thus compromises the aspect of the subject that modern thinkers such as Kant are striving to include: "the theorizing activity of the subject" (p.7). Against the background of the failure and paradox of modern thinking, according to Biesta, Foucault's later focus on the self-constitution activity of the subject not only rejects an articulation of the subject, but also does not take us back "to the analytic of finitude" (p. 7) of the modern subject. Biesta further suggests that from reading Foucault's "What is Enlightenment," it becomes clear that Foucault's "ontology of ourselves" is "a thoroughly practical project" (p. 8) that concerns only a critical attitude for transgression (p. 8), but not a truth about the subject.

Has Foucault really gotten away from an articulation of the subject? Is Foucault's later focus on the constituting activity of the self really different from the modern focus on the "analytical" and "theorizing activity" of the subject? Analyzing Foucault's archeological and genealogical inquiries and his later work on the practice of the self, I will suggest otherwise.

Throughout his archeological and genealogical inquiries, Foucault's analytical focus was indeed never on the subject *per se*; therefore, there was no clear articulation of the subject. Rarely did he explicitly elaborate on his notion of the subject and for the most part, and before his final turn, his focus remains on discourses and power-knowledge relations, perhaps due to his method of archeology and genealogy. Instead of asking what and why the subject, genealogical inquiry asks what has made the subject possible. Starting from the question of how a particular conception/reality of the subject has come to be what it is, this method exposes the conditions and functions of such conception/reality. Following Nietzsche, he asks "who interprets?" or "who speaks?" but such an inquiry "does not produce an answer taking the form of a subject's name, as Foucault indicates when he inscribes the question 'who?' within 'psychology'" (Schrift, 1997, p. 153). For Nietzsche, the "who" is not a subject but the will to power. Foucault, however, is more evasive—he only implicates the subjectless intentions. So we have his circumstantial description of how other factors produced the subject, but we do not have his "theory" of the subject.

But such an approach does not convince critics that Foucault has successfully avoided a theory of the subject. Unlike what Biesta suggested, Foucault does not make the distinction that he is only rejecting the modern western articulation of the sovereign, the founding subject, "a universal form ... to be found everywhere" (Foucault, 1988a, p. 50), but not rejecting "man as such." In his claims such as that "man is an invention of recent date, and one perhaps nearing its end" (1970, p. 387); the subject is only "the present correlative of a certain technology of power over the body" (1977, p. 29); "this real, non-corporal soul is not a substance; it is the element in which are articulated the effects of a certain type of power and the reference of a certain type of knowledge" (1984, p. 177) and "we should try to grasp subjection in its material instance as the constitution of subjects" (cited in Heller, 1996, p. 92), there seems to be a conflation of the modern articulation of the subject and the subject itself. His interchangeable use of terms such as subject, soul, individual, man, and human also seem to cover the whole human reality, except the body. For Foucault's critics, his archaeological analysis of discourse has made the subject "nothing more than the effect of the anonymous functioning of a particular, historically and culturally specific, discourse" (Allen, 2000, p. 115) and his genealogical inquiry has made the subject merely the "nodes through which institutionalized power relations are transmitted" (Schrift, 1997, p. 153)

This is perhaps why a seeming consensus in Foucault scholarship underscores the deterministic, object-like, and passive features of Foucault's subject, where resistance is ultimately just "a ubiquitous, metaphysical principle" (Dews, 1984, p. 91). As Kevin Heller observes, "[e]ven the most cursory examination of the relevant literature demonstrates the existence of a widespread—and almost never questioned—consensus concerning the 'correct' interpretation of Foucault" (1996, p. 78). Represented by

Habermas and Balbus, such interpretation holds that, from Foucault's perspective, "socialized individuals can only be perceived as exemplars, as standardized products, of some discourse formation—as individual copies that are mechanically punched out" (Habermas, 1987, p. 293). Hence, in his archeological and genealogical studies of the subject, a quasi "theory" of the subject does seem to emerge, and it is one that emphasizes the subjection nature of the subject.

Yet Foucault insists that the individual is not purely passive and that individual resistance is always possible and that has led some to believe that for Foucault, the subject is intersubjectively constituted, even though he does give the impression that the soul is not a constituent. Foucault has claimed that "individuals are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising... power. They are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always also the elements of its articulation" (1980, p. 98). We might wonder how the individual can exercise power if she is only produced as the correlative element of power-relations. How can she ever stand outside the existing power relations and articulate her own influence, albeit conditioned by circumstances?

Foucault's thoughts took a final turn when he was writing the last volumes of *History of Sexuality* and giving interviews and lectures, particularly at the Collège de France in the later years. His focus was on the "practice of the self," where the ancient Greeks and Romans actively conducted truth practices to constitute a self that is self-mastered and free or engaged in sexual practices to "constitute themselves as subjects of moral conduct" (Foucault, 1985, p. 29). Men intentionally and voluntarily "set themselves rules of conduct" to "transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an *oeuvre* that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria" (ibid, pp. 10-11). The practice of the self was "a means of developing ...an aesthetics of existence, the purposeful art of freedom" (ibid, pp. 251-252).

From Foucault's description of the practices of control and the practices of the self, the differences seem to be two-fold: instead of being passively constituted by discourses and power-knowledge apparatuses, in practices of the self, the self actively constitutes itself; secondly, the purpose of the constitution of the self is freedom and self-mastery instead of domination and normalization. These ethical practices in Antiquity become the "preoccupation of the final, 'ethical,' phase of Foucault's life-work" (Wain, 1996, p. 359). In *What is Enlightenment*, Foucault systematically re-conceptualizes the constitution of the self and the role the self takes in such constitution. He calls this analysis of the self "the critical ontology of ourselves" (Foucault, 1984, p. 47). In such a critical ontology of our being, we are always working "at the limits of ourselves," "to grasp the points where change is possible and desirable, and to determine the precise form this change should take" (ibid, p. 46). Limitations may be set by the "practical systems," but there is also the "freedom" with which we "act within these practical systems, reacting to what others do, modifying the rules of the game, up to a certain point" (ibid, p. 48); thus "we may work on ourselves as 'free beings'" (ibid, p. 47).

Such an understanding of the self, Foucault contends, is not a preconceived conception of the self, *a priori*, an essence, because if it is, there can be no constitution of the self. In his last interview a few months before his death, he states, "What I refused was precisely that you first of all set up a theory of the subject ...[and] beginning from the theory of the subject, you come to pose the question of knowing. ... What I wanted to know was how the subject constituted himself. ... I had to reject a certain *a priori* theory of the subject in order to make this analysis of the relationships which can exist between the constitution of the subject or different forms of the subject and games of truth, practices of power and so forth" (1988b, p. 10). So according to Foucault, to allow the freedom of self-forming practices, to open the possibility of the aesthetics of the existence and practice of liberty, we have to reject the modern notion of a "meaning-bestowing subject" (Flynn, 1985, p. 534). But in this line of thinking, self and subject cannot be fully disarticulated—they both exist because of and in relation to each other.

Foucault maintains that the self is an *achievement*, not an initial principle (Foucault, 2005); it is not a substance, but a changeable form (Foucault, 1988b), or as Flynn terms it, "fashioned, not discovered" (1985, p. 536), and this is his way of getting away from a theory or a truth about the subject. But by defining the subject centrally by his/her activities of constituting his/her own self, I would argue, Foucault is already

implying *a priori* characteristics of the subject. Based on his description of the self-constitution activity of the self, some have claimed a “performative subjectivity” (e.g., in Butler, 1990). If the self is only a changeable form, not the initial principle, one may wonder how a constituted, changeable form turns back to initiate the constitution, or formation of itself. In Foucault’s description of ethical truth games and the art of existence, behind all the self-creation and self-constitution, there still seems to emerge a subject whose nature is very similar to the modern autonomous subject. Even when he emphasizes that the self takes different forms “when you constitute yourself as a political subject who goes and votes or speaks up in a meeting, and when you try to fulfill your desires in a sexual relationship” (1988b, p. 10), it remains only logical that a hidden center of the self must be behind all the different forms. This description of different subjects reminds us of Goffman (1973)’s presentation theory of the self in everyday life. Even for Foucault, it seems, a certain prior essence or theory about the subject has been articulated, which makes the pursuit of freedom and liberty possible.

So, I suggest that Foucault is not, as Biesta believes, only interested in existence, not essence. In fact, Foucault himself does not think focusing on existence is possible without a prior theory of the subject. In his last interview, Foucault says, “What I refused was precisely that you first of all set up a theory of the subject –as could be done in phenomenology and in existentialism—and that, beginning from the theory of the subject, you come to pose the question of knowing” (1988b, p. 10). Clearly he does not believe that a focus on existence, as existentialists do, will help us get away from a theory of the subject. In Heidegger’s effort to shift the focus from the noun, the essence/norm of existence, to the verb, *Dasein* – “to be” or “being-there,” to the ever- changing, contingent historical possibility of being a human being, he was criticized as not being able to “escape the distinction it was supposed to make: the one between the metaphysical ontological subject of theoretical and contemplative consciousness and the human being as fundamentally ‘thrown’ into the world” (Jagodzinski, 2002, p. 82).

Perhaps Foucault does hint at a certain quasi theory of the self in his later work, which signals a return to the modern free subject. His critique of the humanist subject is therefore incomplete. More importantly, for education, his avoidance of or a quasi theory of the subject that hints at the modern subject does not open up a new approach to subjectivity that helps with the problem education faces: how is education as subjectification possible after the humanist subject?

### **Levinas and Human Subjectivity**

Biesta has consistently claimed that Levinas’ work is acutely pertinent to education because he is “uniquely concerned with the question of subjectivity and the process of subjectification” (2010, p. 293). According to Biesta’s interpretation, Levinas’ approach to subjectivity is centered on “the question of the uniqueness of each individual human subject” (2010, p. 293), and the uniqueness is located not in “characteristics that make me different from everyone else,” but in the “characteristics of situations in which it matters that I am I and not someone else” (ibid.). Uniqueness is only irreplaceability, the non-transferability of my responsibility, the fact that I cannot escape when I am called upon by the other. It “is not essential—it is not about what I have; it is not about some unique essence—but is *existential*” (Biesta, 2011, p. 7, emphasis in the original). With such an existential approach, Biesta suggests, Levinas’ subjectivity successfully escapes the humanist trap of normalizing the self. Educationally, “if this singularity can only be accessed in existential terms rather than as an essence or a being. . . then the relationship between education and subjectivity is not one that can be understood in terms of the *production* of subjectivity, . . . nor in terms of the *promotion* of subjectivity. . . . Education can at most aim to create openings for subjectivity to emerge—openings that always manifest themselves as interruptions of the ‘normal’ state of affairs” (Biesta, 2011, p. 8).

Elsewhere (Zhao, in press) I have argued that such an understanding of Levinas’ subjectivity misses its whole structure. The subject as purely passive and open, as unable to “be,” as responsibility to the other, is only the first phase of the subjectivity Levinas articulates. With the approach of a third party, the “one-for-the-other” in fact appears “in a theme, in the said, [and is] compared and judged in the neutrality of essence” (Levinas, 1998, p. 162). The subject does come to be, but only on the basis of justice and sociality. For

Levinas, the full structure of subjectivity is neither being nor not-being. It is the dialectic of the two working with each other. “Being and not-being illuminate one another and unfold a speculative dialectic which is a determination of being” (ibid, p. 3). The understanding of Levinas’ subjectivity as purely passive and open and the understanding of uniqueness only as irreplaceability and non-transferability misses the dialectic of being, and is “phenomenologically untenable” (Bonnett, 2009, p. 357), as Michael Bonnett contends, because it contradicts our experience. It also results in “a very thin conception of subjectivity” (ibid, p. 367) where we are “left with a sea of essentially ephemeral, un-rooted, actions” (Ibid., p. 366). Such an interpretation of Levinas’ subjectivity also makes the educational mission of “subjectification” difficult, because if there is no subjectivity per se, except responsibility to the other, what is there to be subjectified? As Todd comments, “The problem becomes how can education participate in passivity? Can we educate for susceptibility? Is responsibility something that can be taught” (2002, p. 71)? “[E]mphasizing non-conscious openness seems to leave education with little to do” (ibid, p. 67). Biesta’s proposal that education should aim to “create openings for subjectivity to emerge—opening...as interruption” seems not to lead us anywhere.

But if we understand human subjectivity as the dialectic of being and not-being, as Levinas does, then it becomes a historical process of becoming that is formed and reformed, regenerated and re-gathered for the purpose of justice, and is constantly being disrupted, suspended, and inverted by the presence of the Other. Looking from this perspective, Levinas’ account of individuation is intersubjective and dialectical. Such an account takes into consideration individual growth, sees children’s coming to be as a historical possibility without a final end, and thus allows creativity, difference, and transcendence. Understood this way, Levinas’ approach to human subjectivity is relevant to and provides possibility for the genuine educational mission of subjectification.

### **Subject after Humanism: Towards an Open, Transcendent Subjectivity for Education**

As discussed above, the problem with the humanist subject is not the pursuit of the human essence per se, but the pursuit of a human essence that is fixed, enclosed, unchangeable and thus a norm. To escape the humanist trap that objectifies and normalizes the subject and makes the educational purpose of subjectification impossible, we need a notion of the subject that is open, that allows the possibility of growing, changing, and transformation; and this is precisely the direction Levinas is taking.

As Levinas sees it, the reason we tend to conceive human essence as enclosed and fixed is that in Western philosophy, we have been single-mindedly focused on ego and consciousness to ground human subjectivity. According to Levinas, ego and consciousness are in play when we try to identify, comprehend, and thematize things around us. But to make the subject manifest, ego and consciousness have to totalize and reduce diverse events in order for continuity and identity to be possible. This process is similar to what Derrida describes about presence—we make things appear while they are already disappearing. Such movement of essence as gathering and capturing is seen as truncating and reducing things, the self, and the Other. So when we try to identify the essence of our self, the self is truncated and reduced—lost in “an ideal principle” (Levinas, 1989, p. 89). Subjectivity conceived in this fashion will be deadened, enclosed, and fixed, allowing no room for change and transformation. Such movement of consciousness and ego also proceeds in its conquering, absorbing, and assimilating the Other. It’s a movement that deadens both the self and the Other. That is why the humanist concept of the subject does no justice to the subject and to the Other. According to Levinas, subjectivity is characterized precisely by the impossibility of total manifestation.

Therefore, to break free from such a fate, we have to break the power of ego and consciousness; we have to work with the pre-ego, pre-consciousness experience of our existence. For Levinas, our primordial experience is the experience when we are immediately and concretely connected with the world. Our encounter with the world is what takes us beyond what is “intimate and familiar” (1987, p. 47), beyond the confines of who we already are and what we already know, and towards the strange and the beyond. Our sensible connection with the world leads the I beyond the egoistic interiority—thus we are open and we are free—while our consciousness, our comprehension, reflection, or analyzing of the world may enclose us in our monologue and self-circulation. In this understanding, it is not our free will or autonomy that

characterizes our freedom. Freedom comes as breaking beyond the confines, the prison, of what is already me. Freedom comes as the unlimited possibility of reaching the unknown, of being led by the beyond—hence the paradox of freedom as heteronomy.

Grounding the subjectivity on our “sociality” (Levinas, 1985, p. 60), on the self’s connectedness with the world—the very possibility of going beyond, transcendence, and spirituality—Levinas breaks the spell of the humanist subject that normalizes and deadens the self. In addition, he emphasizes that in our immediate encounter with the world, prior to ego and consciousness, before comprehension and synthesizing, the self meets the Other, and such a meeting with the Other has a profound impact on the formation of our subjectivity. According to Levinas, the call from the Other effectively suspends or “blocks” the formation of the self as a totalizing, egoistic being with an identity. The Other’s naked face, rather than his will or power as a thinking being, his “straightforwardness,” the “absolute frankness of his gaze,” forbids me “my conquest” (Levinas, 1987, p. 55). Under his call and his order, “Thou shall not kill,” I am called out of myself, “in exile,” fissioned and traumatized (Levinas, 1998, p. 103); I cannot “form [my]self,” and I am dropped “out of being” (Ibid., p. 104). In this state of “not being,” or at the edge of destruction, the self has no escape but to answer the Other’s call. Thus responsibility becomes the only meaning of subjectivity. Responsibility becomes “that which founds and *justifies* being as the very being of being” (Hand, as cited in Levinas, 1989, p. 75, emphasis in the original).

Only with the approach of the third party, for the purpose of justice, do consciousness, comprehension, thematization, and being come to be. Grounded on the self’s sociality, which has given rise to responsibility, essence and consciousness maintain their roots in responsibility, which means they can no longer hold their totalizing power. While essence is being formed and is part of subjectivity, it is also constantly being interrupted and reformed. In this way, Levinas makes our subjectivity a historical process of essencing, with no fixed and final essence. Subjectivity becomes presence but at the same time a withdrawing from presence. It forms and comes to be, but stays open to the Other and the world beyond. Such subjectivity embodies transformation and transcendence.

This concept of subjectivity will be essential for education and its mission of subjectification because there is being, appearance, and emerging of the subject. Education can work with students on their very coming to be. Subjectification is meaningful in this sense. At the same time, with the notion of an open, transformative subjectivity, subjectification will not be turned into socialization and normalization. There is no prescribed end or final product. Both educators and students will not know and will not have the comfort of destiny. There will be no destiny, only the call from the Other that disrupts the complacency of our ego and the unbending demand for responsibility that we are perpetually inadequate to fulfill. We can be creative; can be free in the way we respond to the Other, but we are not free to avoid our responsibility. Education can become a process where we, in our coming to be, are constantly led beyond whom we already are.

Emphasizing the importance of the primordial, pre-ego, pre-conscious experience of humans and the profound effect of our encounter with the world before consciousness, Levinas is able to conceive of human subjectivity as open, connected, and transcendental. The self will not be deadened by the self-enclosing ego, but will be endlessly transforming and alive. Such an open subjectivity avoids the pitfalls of humanist essence and points to a different way of cultivating humanity in future education.

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