

Struggling with the reccuring reduction of being to knowing: placing thin hope in aesthetic interventions

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Abstract

This article explores how aesthetic gestures, experiences, interventions might help us make visible certain problematic, enduring, and historically contingent aspects of the troubling ways of being in which we, modern/Cartesian subjects exist in the world. The article does not seek to ultimately suggest some pedagogical strategies or approaches that will help us deconstruct/dismantle these problematic aspects. Instead, it proposes that the common way in which we imagine solutions to our problems, is the very way, through which these problems are being created in the first place. The text pays particular attention to two problematic constitutive characteristics of the modern/Cartesian subject. First is the reductivist insistence on having our being reduced to knowing (Andreotti, 2016) that results in having our relationship to the world mediated (exclusively) through knowledge. Second is our insistence on being able to see/sense/experience ourselves only as separate, presumably autonomous, individuals that ultimately ends up producing us as such..

Keywords: aesthetic; being; knowing; modern subject; separability

Introduction

In order to make the arguments, presented in this article, somewhat easier to digest – though their taste might still remain bitter, I wish to begin by laying bare some of the basic assumptions that guide my work. I hope that in doing so, I can make explicit why I do not believe that the kinds of (institutionalized) education/schooling and educational research that dominate the field today can help us engage in particularly meaningful/sensible/useful ways with the challenges of multifaceted forms of systemic, historically inherited violences and injustices that we incur not just on each other, but also



at the world at large. That we are pedagogically and existentially seriously ill-equipped to deal with our own (collective) shadow may be considered my first assumption.

Such disparate indicators as climate change denial (Norgaard, 2011), continuous over-depletion of natural resources (Meadows & Randers, 2012), accelerated human-induced extinction of species (Dirzo, Young, Galetti, Ceballos, Isaac & Collen, 2014), increasing levels of narcissism and individualism (Kernberg, 1985; Lasch, 1991), rising nationalism, ethno-centrism and popular elections of post-truth leaders across the globe (Peters, 2018) suggest that, if anything, we seem to be getting worse at it. The levels of destruction and violence that we – humans as a species in general, and the Western(ized) world in particular, have incurred on each other and the planet in the 20th century (perhaps the last we were able to observe in whole) are unprecedented in our history. There seems to be very little, if any, evidence to suggest that a reverse trend may be emerging.

My second assumption is that one of the main reasons for our incapacity to deal with the (self)destructive side of our behaviour lies predominantly not in a lack of knowledge and understanding, but in our unwillingness to do so. There are of course always some inevitable skeletons in the closet, but at least in general, we are already well aware of the vast range of harmful behaviour and harmful desires that we exhibit and inhabit.

My third assumption is that because we are trying to live up to the idealized standards of humanity, we are also trying to live up to an idealized standard of our selves. In so doing, we deploy a broad range of (discursive) strategies that protect our idealized-self-image and guard us against facing ‘difficult knowledge’ (Britzman, 1998). Thus, in my opinion, one of the main pedagogical challenges of this moment in time (provided that time is linear) is not how we can learn more, but how to bypass, trick, interrupt and otherwise disrupt the defensive mechanisms that we have built around ourselves that prevent us from sensing ourselves as what we are – (human) beings of this world.

In this article I explore how aesthetic gestures, experiences, interventions might help us to at least encounter certain aspects of our (collective) shadow and the defences that we have set-up to protect it. The idea here is not to ultimately suggest some kind of pedagogical strategies or approaches that will make us “better people”. Instead, I propose that the common way in which we imagine solutions to our problems is the very way through which these problems are being created in the first place. In this, I pay particular attention to two problematic constitutive characteristics of the modern/Cartesian subject: the reductivist insistence on having our being reduced to knowing (Andreotti, 2016) that results in having our relationship to the world mediated (exclusively) through knowledge; and, our insistence on being able to see/sense/experience ourselves only as separate, presumably autonomous, individuals. As these two traits seem to exert such an extremely powerful and restrictive grip on the ways we can see and sense ourselves, I deploy the notion of “thin hope” in the transformative and interruptive potential of aesthetic gestures, experiences and interventions. By thin hope I mean hope that lies not in our deliberate or wilful capacity to change ourselves, but rather in the power of that which exceeds (and at the same time inhabits) ourselves to intervene in ways that change us at the core of our being in spite of our conscious and unconscious refusal to do so. This resonates with Caputo’s (2013) ‘weak theology of perhaps’ that places hope not in what is (present and known), but in the radical opening of the unknown, the unknowable and the yet to come.

The aesthetic of the not necessarily beautiful

The plural meanings, appropriateness and usefulness of the term “aesthetic” have been subject to long-standing and heated debates in various fields of arts, humanities and social sciences. A majority of these debates have converged around the deconstructivist, postmodernist turn that challenges modernist, universalist notions of aesthetics (and beauty) and instead proposes that our notions of the aesthetic are always already socially, culturally, politically and historically situated (Bourdieu, 1987; Eagleton, 1990; Foster, 1983; Shusterman, 1997). Critical scholars in arts education, such as Tavin (2007), have argued that the discourse of ‘aesthetic experience in art education serves specific social and political interests while simultaneously masking those experiences’ (Tavin, 2007, p. 43). For Tavin, our discourse of aesthetics today is still irrevocably tied to the development of 18th century modern, autonomous, self-determining bourgeois subject that is the only kind of subject that is perceived as being fully human. This subject’s full humanity is realized through an embodiment of culturally specific, socialized forms of appreciation, in other words the modern subject is seen as capable of experiencing the world aesthetically. Far from being a neutral term, the aesthetic is thus seen as ideologically, politically and historically laden with modernist, enlightenment-based hierarchies of value and worth that – at least for Tavin (2007), remain ‘indelible’ (Tavin, 2007, p. 43) despite the ‘*ad nauseam*’ attempts at ‘critique and redevelopment of aesthetics’ (Tavin, 2007, p. 43). Somewhat expectedly, Tavin proposes that discourse of aesthetics should be replaced with a postmodern discourse of representation that makes visible the inevitable political and historical contingency of aesthetics. While I certainly agree with the need for a deconstruction of any presumably universal signifiers, such as aesthetics, in this article I wish to propose a different engagement with the aesthetic that does not necessarily map onto either side of modern/postmodern debate. Rather than being interested in the aesthetic content, I try to explore the performative and educational potential of the aesthetic experience. I am thus not interested in what may or may not be considered aesthetic, but rather in what the aesthetic may (or may not) do.

For this reason, I propose a rather “thin” or tentative conceptualization of the aesthetic merely as that (an object, a gesture, an experience) which holds a possibility (and an intention) to interrupt our normalized expectations and codifications about the world and ourselves. An important aspect of this interruption is that it acts upon us involuntarily, pre-cognitively, and as such transforms – at least temporarily, the way we experience our being in the world. Such a notion of the aesthetic has little to do with questions of beauty, taste, or sensorial pleasure and their socio-cultural or political constructions, but more with questions related to the boundaries of our perceptive, cognitive, imaginative, affective and relational capabilities that we have been socialized into (Andreotti, 2016). More specifically, I am interested in exploring how an aesthetic engagement or an aesthetic experience might help us discover and map these boundaries and what lies beyond the limits of what we would usually consider desirable, intelligible, relevant, true, and ultimately, possible. As such the aesthetic does not need to be related to any particular notion of beauty, nor does it have to involve an inquiry into any given art-piece. However, this criterion does ask of it to open a crack in the ways we see and sense ourselves in the world. In that sense a particular work of art might serve as the necessary stimulus for the interruption of our normalized modes of thinking, sensing and being (see, for example, Todd (2015) on the work of Abramović), however, in this conceptualization the aesthetic is not necessarily art-bound, or art-related, though it may be so.

This notion of the aesthetic resonates with (but also goes beyond) Kompridis's (2014) and Rancière's (2004) proposition that the aesthetic is that which is responsible for the 'distribution or partition of the "sensible" – what is given to sense to make sense of, but also what already makes sense, what appears as already (unquestionably) intelligible' (Kompridis, 2014, p. xvii). As Rancière (2004, 2010) in his works focuses predominantly on the role of the aesthetic in the political realm, I do not engage with his work in this text directly, as I am more interested in exploring the existential (rather than primordially political) openings/transformations that can be provoked through aesthetic interventions, for which Kompridis's (2013) analysis of the metafictional novel *The Lives of Animals* provides a much better starting ground. Still, much like Rancière, Kompridis (2014) elsewhere seems primarily interested in how by re-thinking the aesthetic we may expand the realm of what is possible in the political sphere: 'each time modern theorists run up against the limits of extant modes of thinking about the possibilities of political life and the impediments to their realization, they turn to the aesthetic' Kompridis, 2014, p. xvi). In this I read Kompridis (and Rancière) as suggesting a problematic theory of change that proposes an expansion of what is considered sensible/thinkable that would in turn lead to an expansion of political possibilities that could then lead to an expansion of ontological possibilities – a change in ways of being. This reflects a common understanding of how change is enacted, especially in education, where more and better (critical) knowledge is usually considered necessary (and sufficient) for inducing a change in attitudes, dispositions and behaviour that would in turn translate to more profound personal (and social) transformation (Andreotti, Stein, Sutherland, Pashby, Suša & Amsler, 2018). Such a conceptualization of change takes little or no account of unconscious projections, attachments and addictions that prevent us from disinvesting from (harmful) undesirable desires.

Thinking, being and struggling with insistence on intelligibility

Although Kompridis makes use of the aesthetic mostly as a tool for expansion of thinkable/political possibilities that converge broadly along the lines of a Hegelian/Arendtian goal of politics as a tool for achieving 'freedom of subjectivity [...] freedom to change how things are, to change ourselves by changing the circumstances in which we find ourselves – a change in conditions of possibility and intelligibility' (Kompridis, 2014, xiv), he does offer examples of how the aesthetic can be also used to expand different kinds of existential/ontological possibilities that are not necessarily grounded in a primary need for expanded knowledge. This is arguably most visible in his analysis (Kompridis, 2013) of the role of the fictional character Elizabeth Costello from J. M. Coetzee's (1999) metafictional novel *The Lives of Animals* that is 'calling on us to become receptive to what we have heretofore been unreceptive', which means 'becoming answerable to a call to change our lives' (Kompridis, 2014, xxx).¹ In this novel the character Costello is grappling with an existential problem of how to continue living (well) in face of the omnipresent violence and suffering that humans inflicts upon animals (and other humans), a violence that seems to go unnoticed or is brushed aside by a vast majority of people. Her capacity to see, coupled with her incapacity to turn away, to pretend not to see, is pushing her into an existential crisis, where she begins to doubt her sanity and where those around her cannot relate to her concerns.

It's that I no longer know where I am. I seem to move around perfectly easily among people, to have perfectly normal relations with them. Is it possible, I ask myself, that all of them are participants in a crime of stupefying proportions? Am I fantasizing it all? I must be mad! Yet every day I see the evidences. The very people I suspect produce the evidence, exhibit it, offer it to me. Corpses. Fragments of corpses that they have bought for money. [...] Calm down, I tell myself, you are making a mountain out of a molehill. This is life. Everyone else comes to terms with it, why can't you? *Why can't you?* (Coetzee, 1999/2016, p. 69).

Kompridis (2013) argues that Costello finds it impossible to make herself intelligible to others in ways that would unsettle this normalization of violence that she can no longer turn away from, can no longer remain 'wilfully ignorant' (Tuana, 2006, p.11) about. In some ways the example of Costello's struggle can be used to discuss the many layers of complexity and the multiple paradoxes involved in trying to speak across onto-epistemic divides, but she tries to do so using the language and grammar of the same onto-epistemology that she is trying to deconstruct. She tries to make herself heard and acknowledged, to have what she sees validated also by others, but the language (of philosophical argumentation and academic discourse) betrays her, her propositions being ridiculed and dismissed by others as ramblings of an old woman. What deepens her crisis is that she is seemingly caught between two equally terrifying propositions – either she is right (and the world is mad), or the world is right (and she is mad). Not being able to imagine beyond such dichotomies and not being able to maintain calmness in inhabiting a paradoxical position, she is desperate for some sort of external validation, she needs to know how things are. And again, it is precisely Costello's focus on knowledge/thinking that is the source of so much of her frustration, although she intuitively, perhaps unconsciously gestures towards the problem. The following excerpt from Coetzee (1999/2016), used also by Kompridis (2013) in his analysis, can hopefully help illustrate the problem somewhat clearer:

The particular horror of the death camps, the horror that convinces us that what went on there was a crime against humanity, is not that despite a humanity shared with their victims, the killers treated them like lice. That is too abstract. The horror is that the killers *refused to think themselves into* the place of their victims, as did everyone else. They said, 'It is they in those cattle-cars rattling past.' They did not say, 'How would it be if it were I in that cattle-car? They did not say, 'It is I who am in that cattle-car?' They said, 'It must be the dead who are being burnt today, making the air stink and falling in ash on my cabbages.' They did not say, 'How would it be if I were burning?' They did not say, 'I am burning. I am falling in ash.' In other words, they closed their hearts. (Coetzee, 1999/2016, p. 34, italics added)

When Costello suggests that the guards in the death camps 'refused to think themselves into the place of their victims' (ibid.) and when she emphasizes what they said, or did not say (rather than what they felt/sensed/embodyed), her words resonate with the Cartesian maxim of being reduced to knowing (I think therefore I am) and its accompanying logocentric fantasy (I say therefore it is) (Ahenakew, 2016; Andreotti, 2016; Mika, Andreotti, Cooper, Ahenakew & Silva, forthcoming). However, what she proposes that the guards should say – 'It is I who am in that cattle-car. [...] I am burning. I am falling in ash.' (Coetzee, 1999/2016, p. 34), does seem to gesture towards a possibility of a different way of imagining one's self or being. One that is not (completely) bound by the notion of separability that together with sequentiality and determinacy represents one of the three ontological pillars of Enlightenment-based modern world (Silva, 2016). In other words, it sounds as if Costello is aware of the need to move beyond the notion of the body-encapsulated-self, but proposes that we can think ourselves into a different way of

being, rather than exploring (also) the more humbling notion of a need to be changed (by the world) in our way of being first, since we, the presumed autonomous individuals, are seemingly neither willing nor capable of letting go of our insistence on separability. To be pushed towards 'being otherwise' (Andreotti, 2016) by whatever (externally inflicted) crisis or existential interruption seems to be a much more realistic expectation (and even that is a highly contentious one) than waiting for us to be *willing* to change ourselves. Only once we are forced to exist in the world differently, only in extreme situations, when insistence on separability is no longer an option, might we (perhaps) be able also to think (and act) differently. I can, however, provide no guarantee nor proof that this is possible in any conventional sense of the word.

To those of us that have been socialized in the modern/Cartesian mode of being reduced to knowing (Andreotti, 2016; Mika, 2012; Mika et al., forthcoming) it may be very difficult (perhaps impossible) to imagine how a different way of being may be invoked, without (unconsciously) attempting to think/plan/project/imagine our way towards it. Namely, there is an (insurmountable) ontological difference between merely, hypothetically, imagining 'How would it be if I were burning?' and actually sensing another person's pain (of being burned). We may not be able to imagine what that might feel like, because we have been socialized away from inhabiting such sensibilities, or even away from allowing to entertain the possibility of such sensibilities to exist, but would embodying such a sensibility not lead to a profoundly different disposition toward the pain of others? Towards the pain that we ourselves are inflicting? Again, such an ontological shift may not be possible, and certainly is not possible within the framework of what we usually consider to be available roster of existential possibilities. However, there is always the option of more being available than what we can imagine, and, consequentially, allow to exist in our limited construction of what the world is.

Very helpful in extending the range of what we usually consider possible, is Mika et al. (forthcoming) article *The ontological differences between wording and worlding the world*. In this paper, the authors propose a distinction between two onto-metaphysical orientations: 'one that reduces being to discursive practices, which [they] call "wording the world"; and another that manifests being as co-constitutive of a worlded world, where language is one amongst other inter-woven entities, which [they] call "worlding the world"' (Mika et al, forthcoming, p. 1). The first draws its lineage from the long roots of the modern/colonial grammar that can be traced at least as far as Plato and his contention that it is 'through the permanence of the Form that things attain their identity' (Mika et al., forthcoming, p. 6). Mika et al. refer to this as 'metaphysics of presence' where 'the world is experienced by humans *as if it is* fragmented and atomistic, and where each thing in the world is perceived as highly evident and possessing static characteristics' (ibid., italics added). Within this onto-metaphysical orientation, 'language is mobilized in service to this fixity; it is used to describe and represent with truth the nature of things in the world' (ibid.). Language is thus mobilized to lock-down existential possibilities, even in attempts that attempt to deconstruct dominant forms of representation and replace them with marginalized ones. Only that, which is languageable, and therefore thinkable/intelligible, is allowed to exist.

Thus, unlike what is assumed by most theories of the Post (post-modern, post-colonial, post-structuralist), we can neither think, talk nor deconstruct our way out of this onto-metaphysical entrapment, because its totality sets the boundaries of legibility, intelligibility, relevance and existence. Sousa Santos (2007) refers to this problematic mode of modern Western thinking-cum-existing as 'abyssal thinking' that:

consists of a system of visible and invisible distinctions, the invisible ones being the foundation of the visible ones. The division is such that ‘the other side of the line’ vanishes as reality becomes non-existent, and is indeed produced as non-existent. [...] What most fundamentally characterizes abyssal thinking is thus the impossibility of the co-presence of the two sides of the line. To the extent that it prevails, this side of the line only prevails by exhausting the field of relevant reality. Beyond it, there is only non-existence, invisibility, non-dialectical absence (Sousa Santos, 2007, p. 45).

In other words, the metaphysics of presence requires an erasure of that which is absent for itself to remain present, to continue existing. Similarly to Santos, Ahenakew (2016) argues that we cannot (perhaps should not) make the absent/invisible into present/visible (as that would re-trap the absent in the metaphysics of presence and produce other kinds of erasure), but we can make the absent ‘noticeably absent so that it can be remembered and missed’ (Santos, Ahenakew, 2016, p. 333).

In contrast to metaphysics of presence, to ‘wording the world’, Mika et al. (forthcoming) position the onto-metaphysical orientation of ‘worlding the world’, based on Maori philosophy of language ‘that *is* and expresses the worlding of the world’ (Mika et al. forthcoming, p. 9, italics added). They use Te reo Māori (the Maori language) as an example of a language that, in spite of being grafted into non-Indigenous institutions (Ahenakew, 2016) and having suffered by translations into the metaphysics of presence (as the only legible option in academia), still ‘overwhelmingly reveals the complex and interrelated nature of all things within and beyond perception’ (Mika et al., forthcoming, p. 9). In Maori language, the language itself is a manifestation of the entanglement of all “things” visible and invisible, of fullness and emptiness, and that is in stark contrast with the Western/modern notion of separability. As such language is seen as having (living) agency, like everything else, it is not merely a “human invention”, but is co-constituted and constitutive of both humans and everything else in the world.

I can only speculate through rare glimpses in the cracks what an embodiment of such an entangled relationship with everything might feel like as a *lived experience*, what it might be like to inhabit a world that is alive in its totality, what it might be like not to be an “I” in the sense that is familiar to me, and where what I would consider “me” is also somehow within everything else. The little of what does seem clear, is that this really does require what Denise Silva (2016) calls ‘the end of the world as we know it’ (Silva 2016, p. 58), or rather the end of the way in which we were taught to know (and relate to) the world. I wonder what kind of other profoundly disturbing realizations such a way of being might entail. I wonder, how disturbed Costello would be, if she sensed and felt the full extent of the depth of the cut that we have created between ourselves and the world. Would she be able to bear it? Would she still believe that we have lost our humanity or would she maybe feel that humanity is not necessarily something that we should hold in very high esteem? Given that we came here last and left such a horrific imprint, perhaps it is time for us reconsider what it means/is to be human and what kind of attributes we usually associate with humanity.

Shuddering and de-idealizing humanity

It seems fair to assume that any attempt at interrupting our normalized ways of being in the world, of disturbing our carefully crafted innocent self-image(s), of uncovering harmful desires that we know we have and those we do not even know we do, is bound to shake us up. It is hardly surprising that engaging with such ‘difficult knowledge’ (Britzman, 1998) is something we would in general prefer not to do. Here is where an

aesthetic experience/intervention might be of help. It might be of help, because it can catch us “off guard”, it can provoke us into surfacing that within us that we would prefer to keep stored away. In this part of the paper I use the example of Sharon Todd’s (2015) discussion of Marina Abramović’s (in)famous performance *Rhythm 0* to explore both the potential and the risks involved in such interventions.

I begin, however, by drawing on Gert Biesta’s (2015) suggestion that education should be about opening ourselves towards ‘being taught’ (Biesta, 2015, p. 53) by the world, a process that is very different from merely ‘learning from’ (Biesta, 2015, p. 53) the world. Biesta proposes that the main difference between these two approaches is that in learning from the world the learners remain in control of the learning process, they can choose what they will or will not learn by bringing what they learn ‘within their own circle of understanding, within their own construction’ (Biesta, 2015, p. 53), while in the process of being taught, they have no such choice. In contrast to ‘learning from’ the process of ‘being taught by’ is considerably more challenging as it interrupts/violates the perceived entitlement to autonomy/separability of the subject. Such an experience is not necessarily (or at all) pleasant, but it can be profoundly transformative. As Biesta (2015) says, when we talk of:

experiences that *really* taught [us] something—we more often than not refer to experiences where someone showed us something or made us realize something that really entered our being from the outside. Such teachings often provide insights about ourselves and our ways of doing and being—insights that we were not aware of or rather did not want to be aware of. They are inconvenient truths or, in the words of Deborah Britzman, cases of ‘difficult knowledge’ (Biesta, 2015, p. 53).

These inconvenient truths about ourselves and the ways we relate to each other and to the world could be considered alongside Kompridis’s (2013) proposition that we should work on addressing our ‘*failures of receptivity*’ (Kompridis, 2013, p. 20), our failed attempts at answering the other’s need for acknowledgment, particularly when we should respond to something that is voiced in unfamiliar way – that is in ways that disturb how we perceive ourselves and the world around us. Thus, rather than facing the full complexity of what it means being part of the world, to assume responsibility for being of this world and for all inevitable messiness of the human and more-than-human relations, we often choose to turn away from such difficult teachings. Unwilling to face that which we cannot control and that which we *do not want to* (rather than simply cannot) see and feel, we retreat within the comfortable boundaries of the already known, already felt, already sensed, already lived.

Todd (2015) writes of this unwillingness to face ourselves and our shadow as ‘avoidance of shuddering’ (Todd, 2015, p. 53). Drawing on the work of Martin Buber (1923/1958), Todd (2015) suggests that the discomfort and dis-ease that we experience ‘as beings who are both part of the world and yet who seem to experience the world as separate’ (Todd, 2015, p. 53), ‘the sheer sense of being overwhelmed in facing the extent of our entanglements with others and with the enormity of our task within a world that seems so outside the frames of our own bodies and thoughts’ (Todd, 2015, p. 53) makes us shudder at the depth of perceived alienation that we experience between ourselves (or what we call our self(s) and the world). In other words, for Todd, the avoidance of shuddering refers to our unwillingness to deal with the fears, despair and sheer overwhelmingness of realizing that we *are* part of the world. The enormity of the task of facing the world (and ourselves in it) as it is – here and now, makes us persevere in our denial of accepting the responsibility for the ‘enmeshment of self with world’ (Todd, 2015, p. 54), makes us persevere in our upkeep of ‘illusions of [...] separateness and

isolation of our existence' (ibid.). Rather than facing the implications of what it actually means to be part of the world, we might instead choose to 'convince ourselves that the world cannot affect me, so separate am I from it, or that I cannot affect the world since it is only my existence that matters. These various responses seem to suffice until one day, as Buber suggests, they don't[.]' (Todd, 2015, p. 54).

According to Todd (2015), our constitutive denial of the fact of our embeddedness in the world helps us shift our attention away from living in the present and instead orients us towards 'living our dreams of the future' (p. 54). In relation to education, this means that 'education operates within a constructed ideal of humanity defined in relation to the culture and society of which it is part' (ibid.). In contemporary Western societies this ideal of humanity is exemplified by the image of the white, male, liberal, rational, compassionate, tolerant, benevolent, modern subject (Wynter, 2003). In order for this idealization to be maintained, for the socializing function of education 'which is always dependent upon a future-oriented outlook' (p. 55) to continue through various forms of institutionalized schooling, certain less salutary facets of humanity have to be denied as *inhuman(e)*, ignored or seen as pertaining (exclusively) to the societies of Others – those deemed not fully human (Bhabha, 1994). Our languages (though perhaps not all of them) overwhelmingly associate the Western, Enlightenment-based notion of humanity and human(e) behaviour with exclusively positive attributes, contributing to the upkeep of the idealized fantasy of what it means to be human(e). The following excerpt from the Merriam Webster dictionary (n. d.) may serve as an example:

Definition of humane

- 1: marked by compassion, sympathy, or consideration for humans or animals
humane prison guards a more humane way of treating farm animals
- 2: characterized by or tending to broad humanistic culture: humanistic humane studies

Synonyms

beneficent, benevolent, benignant, compassionate, good-hearted, kind, kindhearted, kindly, softhearted, sympathetic, tender, tenderhearted, warmhearted

Antonyms

atrocious, barbaric, barbarous, bestial, brutal, brute, brutish, callous, cold-blooded, cruel, fiendish, hard-hearted, heartless, inhuman, inhumane, insensate, sadistic, savage, truculent, uncompassionate, unfeeling, unkind, unkindly, unsympathetic, vicious, wanton

Although it may be considered inaccurate or even misleading to equate human with humane, I propose this intervention here with the purpose of making visible defensive responses that seek to protect the fantasy image of "good" humanity. As an example of how such protective mechanisms operate, one can observe that in this particular dictionary entry the antonym of humane is not merely inhumane, but also *inhuman*. Inhuman is joined by other telling words such as barbaric, brute and savage that have a long and continuous history of being used as descriptors for various groups of racialized Others. Anger, rage, violence, hatred, viciousness etc. are apparently seen as affective states that have no place in a carefully manicured and idealized notion of humanity as (merely) good-, kind-, soft-, tender- and warm- hearted. This primordial dismissal of violence (in its various forms) as essentially inhuman, lies at the heart of our (collective) unwillingness and incapacity to face-up to the whole of what we are and of what we will consequentially continue to be. As Todd (2015) argues via Levinas (1974/1998), it is only

by facing the humanness of violence that we can admit the very possibility of nonviolence into our lives. When theorizing systemic violence, we often turn to historical examples of large-scale atrocities that were committed either in the name of particular (radicalized) political ideologies, religious stances, or charismatic influence of genocidal leaders(hip). While such analyses provide extremely important insights into how different forms of (gender, racial, religious, sexual, ableist) violence get (re)produced through socially, culturally, legally and politically sanctioned mechanisms, the emphasis on systemic analysis may prevent us from also considering how we ourselves are implicated in the continuation of these different forms of violence – explicitly and implicitly and how we *all* hold the potential to bring out the worst of what humanity can do.

Experiments in social psychology, such as Philip Zimbardo's Stanford prison experiment (Zimbardo, 2011), the Milgram Yale experiments (Milgram, 1974/2009, see also Doliński, Grzyb, Folwarczny, Grzybała, Krzyszycha, Martynowska & Trojanowski, 2017) and artistic interventions, such as Marina Abramović's *Rhythm 0* (Abramović, Vettese, Di Pietrantonio, Daneri, Hegvi & Sanzio, 2009; Todd, 2015), clearly demonstrate that, under certain conditions, "normal" people can quickly resort to acts of unimaginable violence. Unlike Zimbardo's and Milgram's experiments where participants were specifically instructed to assume roles of punitive figures (prison guards, electric shock administrators), Abramović gave no instructions to the visitors of her *Rhythm 0* performance. She simply stood, fully clothed in the Neapolitan gallery for a period of six hours. The room in which she stood contained a table that held seventy-two objects including a flower, feather boa, knife, razor and loaded pistol. (Todd, 2015, p. 56). 'The idea was how far you can be vulnerable and how far the public can go and do things with you, on your own body' (Abramović et al. 2009, in Todd, 2015, p. 56). Although the first few hours passed relatively peacefully, unprovoked violence towards Abramović began to emerge and escalate quickly. By the end of the performance, Abramović's clothes were cut off with razors, water was spilled onto her, she was stabbed with thorns and cut, various acts of sexual violation were performed on her and a gun was pointed at her head. The experiment in vulnerability and humility ended in violence and hostility. As Abramović (in Todd, 2015) puts it: 'The experience I drew from this piece was that in your own performances you can go very far, but if you leave decisions to the public, you can be killed' (p. 57). Todd (2015) sums up the pedagogical significance of what transpired during *Rhythm 0* in the following lines:

This piece should not be read as a cautionary tale of what happens when one shows one's vulnerability (don't be vulnerable, or else!); rather it reveals the complete unwillingness to face the rawness of violence as "human". As a pedagogical space, what Abramović's "experiment" shows is that the transformation of the self as a responsible subject can only come about by recognizing the dark sides of humanity as a beginning for creating change (Todd, 2015, p. 57).

Abramović undertook considerable personal risk when she decided to mount this experiment, and it seems disrespectful to dismiss its teachings as merely a cautionary tale against showing vulnerability as Todd suggests, or as something that has no pedagogical value for "us" – the members of idealized humanity that could never do such a thing to someone else. The question here is not merely what kind of harm and violence are we all potentially capable of doing, but also what kind of harm and violence do we *already* participate in – yet refuse to acknowledge, examine or act upon.

Lisa Taylor (2013) reports on her pedagogical experiments in engaging students in exploring their entanglements with the multiple forms of ongoing colonial violence, and offers an analysis of 'psychic challenges involved in students' adopting perspectives that

radically shift (neo)imperial relations of power/knowledge, that de-centre and implicate them in relation to the planetary South' (p. 59). Similarly to Biesta, she employs Britzman's (1998) notion of 'difficult knowledge' to explore what kind of strategies of resistance learners deploy to avoid facing up to difficult knowledge that interrupts the learner's position of epistemic and ontological privilege. The surrender of this privilege is personally challenging, as it involves both an abandonment of the safety of inhabiting a known world and of a known self (Ellsworth, 2005, as cited in Taylor, 2013):

[i]n order to learn something new, as in previously unthought, we must lose that part of ourselves whose identity depends on not thinking that thought ... that depends on not being the kind of person who entertains such thoughts or understands such thoughts (Ellsworth, 2005, as cited in Taylor, 2013, p. 59).

Ellsworth here suggests an inversion of the usual theory of change where a change in knowledge leads to a change in being. Instead she proposes that a change in being – 'not being the kind of person who entertains such thoughts' *precedes* a change in knowledge, or more precisely precedes the possibility of previously unthinkable and unimaginable to become thinkable and imaginable. Of course, this does not apply to all kinds of knowledge or thought processes – we can learn new things and think new thoughts that do not require any change in our way of being. However, as internally diverse as such knowledge and thinking may be, it is likely not going to be deeply, ontologically different from what we already know. It will merely be an addition of more of the same. It will not make us exist in the world differently, it will not change us in ways that make us 'shudder' (Todd, 2015). It is only when we let go of our assumptions and projections about who and what we are (of our self-image), and surrender the desire for the rewards that are accessed through those constructions, that we can begin to imagine, think and sense 'otherwise' (Andreotti, 2016).

Resistance to difficult knowledge as point of departure, rather than closure

In her article *Against the tide*, Taylor (2013) suggests that instead of trying to repress or morally condemn resistance against facing difficult knowledge that implicates us in a widespread global matrix of violent, unjust, (neo)imperial / (neo)colonial power relations, we should instead consider resistance as an inevitable component, indeed an indicator of engagement with difficult knowledge. As such, resistance should not be considered as a point of closure, but as a point of departure. Further, Taylor (2013) identifies several 'D's of resistance: discursive strategies that learners deploy in order to avoid facing difficult knowledge. She lists denial, discreditation/ doubt, defensiveness, demand of attention, despair, distraction, domination, disconnection, conDemnation, distancing/ divestment/ detachment, deflection and personalization (Taylor, 2013, p. 62) as examples of such strategies. There is arguably a lot we can potentially learn about ourselves and our relations with others and the world, if we can take a step back and observe our resistance strategies from a distance, rather than simply embody them.² However, in order for that to happen, we have to either allow or simply not have any other choice, but to let the world "teach us". Biesta (2018) also writes of the importance of resistance in the process of being taught. For Biesta if we exist as subjects in the world this means that we invariably exist '*in dialogue* with the world' (p. 15, italics original), our existence is not about 'what we have – our skills, our competencies, the things we have gathered and learned – nor about who we are' (Biesta, 2018, p. 15). Rather, it is about 'what we do and about what we refrain from doing. It is [...] not about *who* we are, but about *how* we are

or, more realistically, how we are trying to be' (Biesta, 2018, p. 15). And, because the existence of others places restrictions on our desires, being a subject does not mean that we can simply do what we want to do. Thus, we are required to 'try to exist *in dialogue* with what and who is other – in the world without occupying the centre of the world' (Biesta, 2018, p. 15). As the existence of other compels us to de-centre, the encounter with the world is experienced as resistance against unbound fulfilment of our desires. Biesta's use of resistance is different from the way Taylor (2013) uses the term. For Taylor it is the subject that deploys various strategies of resistance to safeguard themselves against facing difficult knowledge. For Biesta (2018) it is the world (or others) that offer resistance against the subject's desires being met unconditionally (or at all). However, in both cases, resistance is pedagogically relevant because it points to different sets of boundaries. In Taylor's example resistance points to the subject's boundaries of what they are willing to learn/imagine, in Biesta's case the world/others sets external boundaries on what we can legitimately will/desire. Biesta argues that the experience of dialogue – that is, an encounter with others, above all teaches us that the world is *real* and that in this world we '*are not alone*' (p. 16, italics original). Upon realizing this, Biesta suggests that the subject essentially has three choices on how to respond to this realization.

In the first scenario our frustrations against having our desires met push us 'harder and harder to make our intentions and ambitions real' (Biesta, 2018, p. 16), which runs the danger of disrespecting the integrity of the encounter. In the extreme, this can result in 'the destruction of what we encounter, the destruction of what offers resistance. [...] thus we end up in the destruction of the very world we seek to exist.' (ibid.). Historically, various kinds of genocide may be considered as examples of extreme examples of destruction of what offers resistance. Moving away from the extremes we can argue that in more common educational settings, we can still witness more or less violent dismissal of what learners refuse to face (i.e. the limits to our-selves that the world is showing us) that can lead to verbal, physical or other kinds of attack against (often racialized) others, whose existence reminds of the fact that world is not '*our* construction' (Biesta, 2018, p. 16, italics original). Of Taylor's resistance strategies denial, discreditation/doubt, defensiveness, demand of attention, domination, disconnection, condemnation, deflection and personalization could be considered as broadly indicative of such a stance.

The second option is for Biesta an inversion of the first. Overwhelmed by frustration of resistance, we resort to withdrawal from the world. 'We abandon our initiatives and ambitions because we feel that is too difficult, not worth the effort, too frustrating, and so on, to pursue them' (Biesta, 2018, p. 16). This seems to resonate deeply with Todd's notion of avoidance of 'shuddering'. Again, the list of Taylor's resistance strategies can provide some examples of potential indicators of such a stance, such as despair, disconnection, distancing, divestment and detachment.

The third option for Biesta is to try to stay away from these two extremes and try to exist as a subject in dialogue, where dialogue is not understood as conversation, but as an 'existential form, a way of existing in the world – not withdrawing from it – without putting ourselves in the centre of the world but leaving space for the world to exist as well – hence existing *with* the world' (p. 16, italics original). For Biesta in this kind of a dialogue there is never a winner since 'trying to exist in dialogue – is precisely where winning is not an option; it is rather an ongoing, lifelong challenge. It is the challenge to exist with what and who is other; it is the challenge to exist as a subject in the world' (ibid.), to 'exist in a grown-up way' (p. 17). By existing in a grown-up way Biesta means to exist in a way of being where we try to give an answer 'to the question of which of our

desires are the desires we ought to have, which of our desires *are desirable*' (p. 17, italics original).

Resonating with Todd's (2015) exploration of the transformative and educational potential of Abramović's artistic performance for showing us how easily we can overstep the boundaries of idealized humanity, Biesta (2018) writes of the performative aspect of art, of 'encountering the doing of art' (p. 17), where art is seen as an 'ongoing and never-ending exploration of what it might mean to exist in and with the world', 'to be – here – now', to explore 'the encounter with what and who is other' (ibid.). This brings us back to the initially proposed notion of the aesthetic as the experience of the interruption of our normalized codifications about the world and about our role in it. While not necessarily art-bound (as it is questionable what may or may not be considered art) an intervention of the aesthetic into our normalized existence can help us dislodge some of the assumptions and perhaps can help us work through some of our resistance against difficult knowledge.

Still a long way from home

Unfortunately, neither dislodging normalized assumptions and projections (including de-idealizing humanity) as proposed by Todd, facing and overcoming discursive strategies of resistance against difficult knowledge (Taylor), or Biesta's seeking of answers to the question of 'which of our desires are *desirable*' and perceiving art as 'the never-ending exploration of what it might *mean* to exist in and with the world' (italics added) is ultimately how an embodiment of a different way of being may come about. All of the listed propositions can help us have better, deeper discussions that can be very relevant, but they cannot make us feel/sense ourselves in (relation to) the world differently. I am also inclined to believe that the authors themselves might perhaps feel that way too. The same goes for this text. As Mika et al. (forthcoming) argue 'our attempts to deconstruct [the modern grammar and its] tendencies are mostly futile because our own intelligibility is dependent on the grammar and the intellectual, affective and performative economies the grammar itself sustains and is sustained by' (p. 7). Therefore, if this text is at least somewhat intelligible, it must have failed to engender anything that would be significantly onto-epistemically different.

While my intention in writing it was not to propose that there is something specific that we can do about our current predicament, that there is something important and new that we need to know first and that this text might somehow show that "thing", or that we can write in ways that really change something in the way we experience/inhabit our selves, it was nevertheless motivated by a desire to somehow *make* sense, rather than to *sense* sense of what is going on. Most likely, life will feel and be lived no differently before the first and after the last line of this text. Indeed, it would be too much to expect of a text anyhow.

I do wonder, though, what happened for the visitors of Abramović's performance, as that was an event with minimal or no verbal input. Was there something that changed for the visitors and for her too – at least for a few moments? Was it a glimpse of what it feels like to be completely vulnerable to each other that was so unbearable that it resulted in even more violence? Or was it simply a maddening release of what we (un)knowingly suppress daily? Whatever it may have been, it was not something to turn away from. We desperately need to develop stamina for facing both that what we do not want to face, but also that what we cannot know that we may encounter. It seems very difficult to resist the urge of translating the unknowable into knowable (in a way this text is probably an

attempt at just that), but it is only by dislodging the will to know that the unknowable and unexpected may (or not) happen to us.

If, however, that does happen one day, that we are somehow hit by something that profoundly transforms the way we sense ourselves in (relation to) the world, that breaks down our imagined separability, then maybe the thoughts in this text could be of some further use. Until then, they are perhaps no more than a reminder that something else *has always been possible*.

Notes

¹ The character of Elizabeth Costello is used by J.M.Coetzee's as his alter ego..

² One such pedagogical tool that can help us observe our resistance strategies is the pedagogical metaphor of the "bus" that is being developed by the Gesturing towards decolonial futures collective (n.d.). The metaphor seeks to destabilize the need for coherence and unity of the self with the purpose of lowering defenses that we develop in order to protect our self-image. The collective proposes that by imaging ourselves as a bus full of known and unknown passengers, riding on several different decks on the bus, we can learn how to observe the behavior of different passengers on our "bus", without judgment.

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