

## What's the Use of a Teacher?

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Most of us have experienced at some time that dreadful feeling of being used. No more than a pawn in another's strategic game, we feel manipulated, taken advantage of, and somehow betrayed. It is as if in being used we are no longer subjects, but objects of someone else's will and intent. When others use us as means to their ends, we feel there is no shared moral ground, no intersubjective possibility; it is as if our very sense of who we are vanishes into the instrumentality by which the other defines us. Paradigmatic of immorality, then, why is using others at all useful to education?

Charles Bingham's essay is a response to this question, and I want to thank him for a paper that seeks to push against the boundaries of comfort that so often frame our work. Troubling the Kantian ends-means formula through recourse to what he calls a "pragmatic intersubjectivity." Bingham attempts to wrest "use" out from under its moral shadow and set it in a pragmatic light. Drawing loosely on the pragmatic notion that educational ends are a means for further ends, Bingham puts forth the thesis that using others ought to be "advocated in educational contexts." What Bingham grounds his thesis upon is the social constitution of the human subject. The very process of becoming a subject underscores how others are "used" in the creation of the self. He states that "meeting an other is not an end in itself. One will only flourish as a subject if the other is put to good use." But what does this use look like?

Tracing a line of "anti-Kantian" thinking, through Nietzsche to Foucault to Winnicott, Bingham asserts that these thinkers have offered alternative ways of thinking about the subject as one who emerges in intersubjective contexts where using others is an inherent part of our interrelationality. The Kantian call for autonomy and its implicit stance against using people is here inverted as a call for the usefulness of using people. Like Bingham, I am convinced of the need to explore the use of the teacher beyond a technocratic sensibility. Bingham's turn to Winnicott allows for a sense of generosity to infuse the notion of use, marked as it is by a certain vitality and playfulness. Thus I agree with the underlying principle of Bingham's paper, that the use of the teacher has been long-neglected and is currently in dire need of attention in philosophical work. But in the spirit of furthering inquiry, I also want to raise a few questions about use and its relation to Bingham's argument for a pragmatic intersubjectivity. How does Winnicott's development of the term (which is the fulcrum of Bingham's paper) differ from its common-sense usage? And, is it the case that what Winnicott advocates can be aligned with pragmatism, as is suggested here? And, finally, I wonder if use can really be intersubjective?

Bingham draws on Nietzsche, Foucault, and Winnicott in order to ground his notion of pragmatic intersubjectivity and to dispel the idea that use has no value. Yet, the Nietzsche-Foucault line is of a quite a different nature to me than the point

occupied by Winnicott. What drives the former's work is the formation of subjectivity and in particular the moral subject as one who is constituted by dynamics of normativity. It is the relation of the subject to power and its circulation that maps the course of their philosophical trajectories. Similarly, although in a different vein, Winnicott is also not advocating an intersubjectivity in terms of relations between already constituted subjects; rather his work is more radical in that its focus is on how the use of objects signals the emergence of subjectivity itself.

Winnicott begins his adventure into the formation of subjectivity from the point of view of the infant and its development. His most well-known concept of transitional objects is the place where he attempts to work out those first fragile engagements an infant makes with its world. Transitional objects are, for Winnicott, the first "not-me" possessions.<sup>1</sup> Neither wholly internal, nor wholly external, these objects lie somewhere in an indeterminate space of transition between the subject and the immediate life context in which she finds herself. Not locatable to a specific "thing," such as a teddy bear, or blanket, these objects exist only as a play between the "me" and "not-me." The transitional object is, for Winnicott, nothing short of a paradox. "The baby creates the object, but the object was there waiting to be created and to become a cathected object."<sup>2</sup> Moreover, he continues to depict the ineffability of the paradox:

Of the transitional object it can be said that it is a matter of agreement between us and the baby that we will never ask the question: "Did you conceive of this or was it presented to you from without?" The important point is that no decision on this point is expected. The question is not to be formulated.<sup>3</sup>

The importance of this non-formulation hinges on the unlocatability of the object. It only exists insofar as it can be used or related to by the infant. As Barbara Johnson notes, the object opens a space for experience.<sup>4</sup>

Winnicott makes an important distinction, however, between object-relating and object-using. In object-relating the subject invests herself in the object, largely through projection and identification, and in effect creates an object for her self. Through this, the subject begins the work of crafting a self, and, in addition, the object becomes meaningful for the subject. Yet, as Alice Pitt observes, "the work of creating objects is the work of a subject in isolation even though the objects that surround the subject are involved. A more fulsome practice of self-fashioning requires a move from creating objects to finding them already there."<sup>5</sup> Object-use, then, occurs on a different register; and it is object-use, as opposed to object-relating that allows for the flourishing of healthy development. As Winnicott writes, "the object, if it is to be used, must necessarily be real in the sense of being part of shared reality, not a bundle of projections."<sup>6</sup> Thus, the real difficult work of subjectivity comes from learning to make use of what is already there; creating spaces of experiences through objects that exist also independently from the self. The subject, then, requires separation from the object as well as recognition that the object will survive its aggression.

The using of the object, then, may be characterised as the subject's attempt to learn from the object, and in learning recognizes that the "real" desires of the mother

(or teacher) exist independently from her own and uses this difference as the basis of creating a self. "The object's own properties operate like a third in the relation between baby and object — a third that makes it possible to experience the world, a third composed of the interaction itself."<sup>7</sup> This emphasis on the interaction itself as being important to object-use means that there are ways in which the object (in the figure of the caregiver) has a role to play in facilitation of the subject's experience. How can the mother (or teacher) be of use to the infant (or student)? This is an entirely different question it seems to me than worrying about whether one is being used. As Johnson pointedly remarks, "*willingly* playing the role of the thing" is quite a different matter from the exploitation and use of people which arises in the context of power relations.<sup>8</sup> Even though mothers and teachers do have differential power, it is precisely because of this power that they can allow themselves to be used in ways that are productive for the child's development. Pitt claims that

it is the survival, i.e., the non-retaliation, of the mother/analyst/teacher that allows the child/analysand/student to begin to tolerate and even enjoy living in a world where words do not mean what you want them to and where other people exist whose desires oppose your own.<sup>9</sup>

Object-use, then, requires nourishing what Winnicott calls a "holding environment," a space where the subject can encounter risk without fear of reprisal in the form of a withdrawal of love (in the case of the mother) and of concern (in the case of the teacher) even as the mother or teacher may be angry, disappointed, or annoyed. Thus Winnicott's idea of what is "good enough" is not about the perfection of the mother/teacher, as Bingham rightly claims, but about the capacity to find ways of being used.

With this said, then, my conclusion differs somewhat from Bingham's. In my view, using others cannot become an "ought" of education, turning it into an imperative for student agency. The important thing to remember about using others is that we do so from what is given to us. The whole point is that we need to recognize the difficulties and ambivalences in our relationships in ways that acknowledge both our own complicity and the independent nature of another's desires. Hence I question whether there can be a pragmatics of use. In suggesting that students choose their teachers might we also be encouraging a form of object-relating that does little to help students move beyond their own narcissistic shells? The real question for me is how do teachers facilitate object-use as opposed to object-relating? Being good enough not only means giving up on the ideal of perfectibility but also learning about how to read classroom dynamics less narcissistically (for example, not all student reactions are due to how great or lousy we are as teachers). But most importantly it requires us being able to tolerate being used by students, a position that seems to demand, in its turn, both acceptance and trust — and a willingness to play.

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1. D.W. Winnicott, "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena," in *Playing and Reality* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 1.

2. Winnicott, "The Use of an Object," in *Playing and Reality*, 89.

3. Winnicott, "Transitional Object and Transitional Phenomena," 12.

4. Barbara Johnson, "Using People: Kant with Winnicott," in *The Turn to Ethics*, ed. Marjorie Garber, Beatrice Hanssen, and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (New York: Routledge, 2000), 52.

5. Alice Pitt, *The Play of the Personal: Psychoanalytic Narratives of Feminist Education* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 122.
6. Winnicott, "The Use of an Object," 88.
7. *Ibid.*, 62.
8. *Ibid.*, 49.
9. Pitt, *Play of the Personal*, 123.