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ARTICLE



## The three gifts of teaching: Towards a non-ecological future for moral education

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### ABSTRACT

The centrality of learners and their learning in contemporary educational discourse and practice, seems to suggest that the self of the student should be at the heart of the educational endeavour. This is not just an educational programme, but actually an expression of a particular way of thinking about human beings and their position in the world; a way of thinking which, after Levinas, I characterise as ecological. In this paper I explore an alternative approach that centres on the suggestion that everything begins with what is given to us, rather than what is claimed, constructed or interpreted by us. I explore this philosophically through a discussion of ideas from Jean-Luc Marion around the phenomenon and phenomenology of ‘givenness’. I connect this to a critical discussion of the role of learning in education and explore three ways in which teaching manifests itself as a gift that occurs beyond learning.

### KEYWORDS

Teaching; givenness; Jean-Luc Marion; moral education; learnification

‘And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh’.

Matthew 2:11<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

It is one thing to say that we live in interesting times, but yet another to come up with an accurate diagnosis of our historical moment. We are witnessing an intensification and acceleration of the ecological crisis. And we are witnessing a democratic crisis, particularly manifest in the rise of (narrow) nationalist and (right-wing) populist politics. Not everyone agrees, of course, and the disagreement about the truth of the ecological crisis is perhaps the third element characterising our current age—an element sometimes referred to as ‘post-truth’. I am inclined to see ‘post-truth’ not so much as an epistemological issue, but first and foremost as a political one, as post-truth seems to boil down to the claim that everyone has the right and should have the right to their own truth. Seen in

this way, 'post-truth' is closely connected to the claim from identity politics that everyone should have the right to their own identity which may amount to the suggestion that everyone should have the right to their own *world*. Putting it this way, begins to reveal the connection between the ecological crisis, the democratic crisis and the crisis of truth, as all three seem to be, in some way, a denial of the world itself, that is, a denial of reality.

Some see 'post-truth' as the direct consequence of postmodern and poststructural themes that characterised philosophical and cultural discussions in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. From this angle it seems ironic that what, at the time, was presented as a liberating and progressive step, now has become the hallmark of the most conservative forms of politics. To read postmodernism and poststructuralism as forms of relativism is, however, not entirely correct. This is partly because what was at stake in at least some of the work going on under those headings, was *not* the claim that all knowledge is relative to particular frameworks. Here I agree with Habermas (1990) that the pluralisation of worldviews is actually a thoroughly *modern* rather than a postmodern experience. Rather what was at stake, was the suggestion that our first questions are not cognitive questions, that is, questions about knowledge and truth, but thoroughly moral and political ones, which also suggests, that moral and political issues cannot be resolved along cognitive lines but only in their own terms. Postmodern and poststructural thought was, in other words, not undermining ethics and politics but rather taking ethics and politics seriously *in their own terms*. Also, the critique of modernity was not automatically a critique and rejection of the 'project' of Enlightenment. Foucault (1984), for example, made a clear and explicit distinction between the two, arguing against the suggestion that Enlightenment can only be achieved through modern means, that is, through increased control of the physical and social world. Yet for Foucault this did not mean giving up on the 'undefined work of freedom' central to the Enlightenment project, but rather entailed trying to make this work possible outside of and beyond the logic of control.

This begins to suggest, that an adequate response to the issues of our time and, more importantly, an adequate *educational* response, is unlikely to be found in strategies of control, such as getting the agenda for (moral) education right, and using the machinery of educational effectiveness research and of the global education measurement industry for achieving successful implementation of this agenda. Such a direction is precisely one of the main problems of contemporary education, where students, teachers, schools and even entire education systems are suffering under the pressure to 'perform', not just in the domain of cognitive achievement—spurred by PISA and similar systems—but increasingly also in other domains, particularly out of arguments for conservative and progressive character education and 'Bildung', to name two influential rationales. What such forms of strong socialisation often tend to forget, is the simple but fundamental fact of human freedom, and the acknowledgement that education has to engage with this, perhaps first and foremost through encouraging children and young people to come into a relationship with their own freedom (see, for example, Benner, 2015; Biesta, 2017a). This has something to do with Adorno's suggestion that 'after Auschwitz' the 'premier demand upon all education is that Auschwitz not happen again' (see Adorno, 1971, p. 79), bearing in mind, however, Primo Levi's observation that precisely because Auschwitz has happened 'it can happen again' (Levi, 1986, p. 199).

In this paper I therefore wish to look in a different direction that is not about finding a new agenda for moral education and pursuing its effective implementation. Rather I wish

to focus on an underlying and in a sense more fundamental theme which, at this point, I can only describe as the relationship between ‘human beings’ and the ‘world’, knowing that all these terms are contested and should, of course, be contested. My assumption—perhaps it’s better to call it an intuition—is that many of the problems we are currently facing, as practical and intellectual problems, have something to do with this relationship and, more specifically, with the suggestion that in some way everything begins with and somehow centres on the self—which perhaps also means that eventually everything will return to the self. Following Levinas, 1969[1961], p. 35) I wish to characterise this ‘worldview’ as an egological worldview, that is, a worldview that follows or obeys the ‘logic’ of the ego. And what I am interested in and seek to explore, are the possibilities for a non-egological worldview and a non-egological future for (moral) education. This is a difficult project at many levels—for a first attempt see Biesta (2016)—not least because the very idea of a worldview already stems from the framework I seek to challenge, but also because as long as we think that worldviews are simply at our disposal, are simply there for us to choose, we are also still operating inside the logic of the ego. This paper is therefore only a further attempt, not a conclusion. But it is, in my view, something that is important to explore, also because these are not just issues that have to do with philosophy or the philosophical foundations of education, but issues that go to the very heart of the phenomenon of education itself. I present my exploration in three steps. I begin with an indication of where I think that the logic of the ego shows up in contemporary education. I will then explore philosophically what it might mean to start from somewhere else. In the third and final step I exemplify this different starting point briefly in a discussion of (the) three gifts of teaching.

### Learnification revisited

When, about ten years ago, I coined the word ‘learnification’ (see Biesta, 2009), it was first and foremost in order to denote the problematic impact of the rise of the ‘new language of learning’ on the discourse and practice of education. My main concern at the time was that the emergence of notions such as ‘learner’, ‘learning environment’, ‘facilitator of learning’ and ‘lifelong learning’—which had replaced older notions of ‘student’, ‘school’, ‘teaching’ and ‘adult education’—were all referring to education in terms of learning, without asking what the learning was supposed to be *about* and, more importantly, without asking what the learning was supposed to be *for*. It was particularly the absence of a vigorous debate about the purpose of education that worried me most. It prompted me to propose that education should always be concerned with and orientated towards *three* domains of purpose, to which I referred as qualification, socialisation and subjectification respectively (see Biesta, 2009, 2010).

I wish to argue that, ten years on, the learnification-thesis still stands.<sup>2</sup> Talk about learning is still rife in educational circles, new expressions such as ‘deep learning’, ‘brain-based learning’ and ‘machine learning’ have entered the educational conversation, and policy makers continue to produce remarkable and, in my view, completely incomprehensible sentences such as that schools should ‘deliver at least one year’s growth in learning for every student every year’ (Department of Education and Training, 2018, p. xii). While there is evidence of an increasing growing interest in the question of the purpose(s) of education (see, e.g., Hattie & Nepper Larsen, *in press*; Onderwijsraad,

2016), much of what can be found in policy, research, and practice continues to have a rather one-dimensional focus on learning, also due to the dominance of the frameworks promoted by the global education measurement industry. It remains important, therefore, to continue to engage in discussion about the purpose(s) of education.

There was, however, a further dimension to the learnification-thesis which was less prominent at the time (and perhaps also less visible to myself initially) but that, over the past decade, has become an important strand in my own thinking and writing, and also in my own teaching (for the latter see, for example, Biesta, 2015). The key point here is that teaching (and the whole spectrum of intentional educational endeavours more generally) should not necessarily result in learning, which also means that teaching should not necessarily *aim at* learning. The idea, in other words, is that there is more to teaching than learning, just as there is more to education than learning. In order to bring this 'more' to the fore, it is important, therefore, to 'free' teaching from learning (see Biesta, 2015). I found helpful suggestions for exploring this dimension of the learnification-thesis in work from American analytic philosophy of education which, interestingly, largely predated the rise of the new language of learning (see Fenstermacher, 1986; see also Biesta & Stengel, 2016).

The most explicit position here was taken by Paul Komisar, who has argued that 'learning is not what the "teacher" intends to produce' (Komisar, 1968, p. 183) but that the intention of teaching might better be captured in terms of the 'awareness' of an 'auditor'—not a learner or student for Komisar—'*who is successfully becoming aware of the point of the act [of teaching]*' (Komisar, 1968, p. 191, emphasis in original). And this awareness may cover a whole range of different responses, of which learning is only *one* possibility, but neither the sole nor the only one. One important reason for creating a distance between teaching and learning and arguing that there is more to education than learning, has to do with the fact that there is more to *life* than learning. There is a range of ways in which human beings exist—are in and with the world—and the task of education should rather be about opening up this range of 'existential possibilities' (Biesta, 2015) for our students, rather than only providing them with the position of the learner. Yet the point here is not just ontological—it is not just about how we understand our existence as human beings—but also political, particularly in response to attempts by policy makers and politicians to force people into the 'learning position', most notably through the 'politics' of *lifelong* learning (see Biesta, 2018).

It is against this background that, in recent years, I have started to make an explicit case for the *rediscovery* of teaching, which I also see as a recovery of teaching (Biesta, 2017a). This is partly in order to restore teaching to its proper place in the educational endeavour—to give teaching back to education (Biesta, 2012)—and not see it as something outdated and of the past that we should be embarrassed about as educators. And it is partly in order to highlight that what is distinctive about education is *not* the phenomenon of learning—which, after all, can also happen outside of education and can occur without teaching—but precisely the presence of and the encounter with teaching. Whereas learning is *accidental* to education, teaching, so I wish to suggest, is *essential* to education, albeit that the question what teaching is and how it might or should be enacted does, of course, need careful consideration in order not to fall back on narrow and naive notions of teaching as (one-directional) instruction or teaching as (authoritarian) control.

Whereas learning in some way always originates and emanates from the learner, that is, from the one who seeks to acquire knowledge, skills and understanding and approaches the natural and social world as a ‘resource’ where this can be found, like an act of foraging, teaching moves in the opposite direction as it comes to the student from ‘elsewhere’ (and again the question of what this ‘elsewhere’ is requires further consideration, most especially because it is not necessarily the teacher who is the origin of teaching; on this see also, Prange, 2005). Previously (Biesta, 2013), I have explored the latter dynamic in terms of the *gift* of teaching, arguing that it is important to make a distinction between *learning from* (someone or something) and *being taught by* (someone or something). In this paper I wish to continue the exploration of teaching, by highlighting three dimensions of the way in which the ‘givenness’ of teaching manifests itself in education—I refer to them as the three gifts of teaching—and by showing why and how this givenness matters educationally, also for the work of the teacher. In my earlier explorations, writings from Levinas, Derrida and Kierkegaard have been particularly helpful. In the next section I will discuss ideas from the work of Jean-Luc Marion who, in my view, provides a helpful and important next step in the philosophical discussion at stake by zooming in on the phenomenon of ‘givenness’.

## Being given

Over the past four decades the French philosopher Jean-Luc Marion has made major contributions in a number of fields, including the history of philosophy, theology and phenomenology, with clear interconnections between his work in these three domains. Even a proper reconstruction of Marion’s contributions to phenomenology—articulated in three main volumes and numerous other publications (see particularly Marion, 1998, 2002a, 2002b, 2011, 2016)—lies well beyond the scope of this paper. More modestly, I will pick up one theme from Marion’s writing and will utilise one particular ‘way in’, in order to shed some light on the phenomenon of givenness which, for Marion, also has to do with the givenness of the phenomenon.

## Exploring givenness

‘Givenness’ is one of the central themes in Marion’s work, and the question he has been pursuing consistently is whether and, if so, how we can make sense of givenness—although even phrasing the question in that way raises a problem, because if we really try to make sense of givenness, then such givenness does precisely *not* depend on our acts of sense making. This already indicates, first, that Marion’s question has an epistemological dimension, namely whether knowledge is constructed by us—either fully or partially—or given to us. But, secondly, Marion’s question also has a theological dimension, and it may be better to put this question on the table now rather than let it linger in the background.<sup>3</sup> Put simply, the question here is whether revelation is possible or whether everything that comes to us from ‘beyond’ is in some way of our own making which, in theology, is the distinction between natural or metaphysical theology on the one hand and revealed theology on the other. This indicates, thirdly, that Marion’s question also gets us into the field of hermeneutics, particularly with regard to the question as to whether or not the human being is first and foremost an interpreting being—a meaning-making animal or, with the words of

Kenneth Burke, a ‘symbol-using, symbol-making and symbol-misusing animal’ (Burke, 1966, p. 6)—or indeed whether there is something that precedes and must precede our acts of meaning-making. Fourthly, this means that Marion’s question is also the question of phenomenology, starting from Husserl’s ambition to go back to the things themselves rather than our interpretation of these things. Which then, and this is the fifth dimension of Marion’s question, also raises the question of the ‘I’ as the question whether everything starts from the ‘I’ or whether something ‘precedes’ the ‘I’—and what it would take to make sense of what comes ‘before’.

One has to admire Marion for his ambition to engage with this cluster of questions, because just from a first attempt at unravelling all the dimensions of the question of givenness we can see that we are in the middle of the big questions of modern philosophy and perhaps even the big questions of philosophy anyway. Moreover, these questions are not just philosophical—they are not just philosophy’s questions—but are perhaps the big questions of human existence itself. In one sense, then, they are of all times, but they also speak to major contemporary issues. They speak, for example, to neo-liberalism by asking whether the self is indeed in the centre of the world and the world is just there for the ‘I’ to conquer and master—which means that they speak both to the ecological crisis and the crisis of democracy. But they also ask whether a religious worldview, a ‘belief’ in transcendence, is outdated superstition that should have no place in a modern world, or whether the encounter with transcendence is more difficult to shrug off than many might think (see also Biesta, 2017b). And from an educational perspective, Marion’s ‘intervention’ is important because it asks whether teaching is actually possible, or whether the reduction of all education and everything educational to learning is inevitable.

One of the shortest formulations Marion provides of his thoughts on givenness is through the ‘principle’, as he calls it with some hesitation, ‘that everything that shows itself must first give itself’ (Marion, 2011, p. 19).<sup>4</sup> This phrase already contains an important epistemological point, because it suggests that before any intentional ‘act’ of knowing can take place, something must have given itself to the knower (although there are further questions about what the alleged status of a ‘knower’ is and whether we can assume that the knower is already ‘there’ *before* something ‘arrives’—an option Marion denies; see below). Marion emphasises that his principle does not articulate an interest in *what* is given but in the *how* of givenness. Marion is interested, in other words, in ‘givenness as a *mode of phenomenality*, as the *how* or *manner* of the phenomenon’, as he puts it (Marion, 2011, p. 19, emphasis in original). This is not about ‘the immediate given, the perceptive content, or the lived experience of consciousness—in short, of something that is given, but instead of the style of its phenomenalization *insofar as* it is given’ (Marion, 2011, p. 19, emphasis in original). This means that Marion is after a phenomenology of the phenomenon of givenness, so to speak, not an ontology or metaphysics of givenness (see Marion, 2011, p. 20).<sup>5</sup>

What is exciting about Marion’s work is that he pursues this ‘agenda’ in the strictest way possible. At first sight this often leads to counter-intuitive statements and conclusions, but what these statements and conclusions actually do is lay bare our intuitions and question the alleged necessity and inevitability of the presuppositions upon which those intuitions are based—which is what counter-intuitive literally means, of course. One important line of argumentation challenges the (epistemological) assumption that



everything that shows itself is supposed to show itself to a pre-existing consciousness. It will not be too difficult to see that on such a view the phenomenon begins to disappear—or actually disappears completely—because its manifestation, its givenness, is made totally dependent upon the activities of a knowing consciousness. This is the Kantian view of knowledge which does indeed start from a ‘transcendental ego’ that comes ‘before’ the world and that sees phenomena as objects that appear according to the conditions of experience (see Marion, 2016, p. 47).<sup>6</sup> That is why Marion argues that taking givenness seriously means that we have to assume—or perhaps ‘accept’ is the better word here—that the phenomenon ‘shows itself in itself and from itself’ (Marion, 2016, p. 48) which also means that it ‘gives itself from itself’ (Marion, 2016, p. 48), and is not given or assumed to be given by something or someone else.

### ***A third reduction***

It is here that the connection with phenomenology becomes apparent, because, as Marion writes, ‘in its most radical ambitions, philosophy, in the form of phenomenology, has had no other goal than this one: to allow the phenomenon to broaden out itself in itself, and to show itself from itself’ (Marion, 2016, p. 48)—or, in the words of Husserl: back to the things themselves! It is here that we find a second original theme in Marion’s work that has to do with the status of ‘reduction’ in phenomenology and, more specifically, with his claim that phenomenology needs a ‘third’ reduction—not just a reduction to the given object (Husserl) or to being of the given object (Heidegger) but to givenness *itself*. Reduction, as Marion explains, ‘consists in not taking everything I perceive for granted and in not receiving everything that happens to me with the same degree of evidence and thus of certainty but in each case to question what is actually given in order to distinguish it from what is only pieced together, inferred, or, so to say, acquired in a roundabout way, indirectly’ (Marion, 2017, pp. 72–73). This was central to Husserl’s ‘return to the things themselves’, and also to Heidegger’s attempt at articulating the difference between things and their existence (beings and their Being). Yet Marion’s main point—in a discussion that is much more sophisticated than I can present here—is that, in a sense, Husserl and Heidegger didn’t go far enough with their reductions of the given.<sup>7</sup> Marion argues that Husserl ‘stopped’ at the object and Heidegger at the being of the object, but for Marion ‘objectness (Husserl) and beingness (Heidegger) only offer specific and possible cases, but surely not the most legitimate ones, of the naming of givenness’ (Marion, 2017, p. 78). Hence the need for a third, more original reduction . . . namely the reduction to givenness (Marion, 2017, p. 79).<sup>8</sup>

### ***Two attitudes to things***

I don’t have the space in this paper to go into further detail about Marion’s phenomenology of givenness, but wish, in concluding this section, to say a bit more about the encounter with the phenomenon of givenness in more practical or everyday language, and to do so in order to draw out some of the implications for the ‘I’. And all this is important ‘groundwork’ for the exploration of teaching that is to follow, because the very possibility of a notion of teaching—or perhaps we can begin to say: a phenomenon of teaching—in which teaching cannot be reduced to learning but is possible in its own



terms and on its own terms depends in some way on the answer to the question whether givenness can exist in itself, so to speak, or whether it remains dependent on the cognitive acts of the ego. How, then, can we ‘make sense’ (with the caveat mentioned above) of what is happening here, and particularly, what does taking givenness absolutely seriously imply for the self?

Marion’s response starts from the suggestion that we can have two ‘attitudes’ towards things. On the one hand, and this is ‘the most widespread attitude, the one for which we are trained’ (Marion, 2017, p. 83), this consists in ‘reducing the chances that those around us will surprise us; consequently we continually learn how to better control them’ (Marion, 2017, p. 83). In this attitude ‘we really count on being able to anticipate situations and accidents, to be able to react, to control, to correct, to secure’ (Marion, 2017, p. 83). This is a world where we find ourselves surrounded by objects, ‘which, being essentially functional, function because they are intended and conceived to function to our advantage’, and this is done ‘so that we are in the centre’ (Marion, 2017, p. 83). Through this attitude ‘we live in a world that we organize such that we retain from it only those things that can be constituted as objects, only what we can grasp with our intelligibility, under the control of a quasi-master and possessor of nature’ (Marion, 2017, p. 83). We do this, we constitute such an object-ive world in order to rule out danger. Yet, so Marion asks, ‘what does ruling out danger mean if not keeping away from the unexpected’, from that ‘which cannot be constituted as object, that against which one cannot protect oneself?’ (Marion, 2017, p. 83)

While this is all good for thinking ahead, for what can be anticipated, ‘this rationality . . . does not want any of the rest [but] only retains this layer of reality that one can call the object’ (Marion, 2017, p. 84). ‘But the object offers a very thin and superficial layer of things. It leaves to the side . . . everything it cannot foresee, everything it cannot anticipate, what is said to be unknowable’ (Marion, 2017, p. 84). Yet it is precisely here ‘that the given is displayed because it characterizes what among things resists objectification and is given by its own initiative’ (Marion, 2017, p. 84). It is not so much—and probably not at all—for us to ‘find’ the given, that which gives itself. Rather, as Marion explains, ‘in the given, in the phenomenon inasmuch as it gives itself according to its character as nonobject (. . .) a place and moment are described where the ego must know how to allow itself to be found and which it does not decide’ (Marion, 2017, p. 85). In this way the ego leaves its central position, ‘obeys the event, and sees without foreseeing’, as Marion puts it, which is precisely the opposite from the seeing-of-objects. Thus, we encounter a reversal of our objective relation to the world. ‘In the case of the given, we find ourselves commanded by the thing, summoned to come experience it’ (Marion, 2017, p. 85).<sup>9</sup>

Although ‘givenness’ so conceived may give the suggestion that it requires passive receptivity from the side of the ego, Marion stresses that the term ‘passivity’ is not good enough precisely ‘because I cannot remain passive in front of the event: I make myself available or I avoid it, I take a risk or I run away, in short, I still decide, and I respond even by refusing to respond’ (Marion, 2017, p. 85). This means that in order to ‘become passive’ in such an encounter, ‘a certain kind of activity is required; one must leave oneself exposed to things with a certain amount of courage’ (Marion, 2017, pp.85–86; see also Biesta, 2017c). This, then, opens up ‘a different regime of phenomenality imposed on a different regime of subjectivity’, as Marion puts it. Here the subject is no longer *before*

the world, *before* the phenomenon—in space and in time—but rather ‘receives itself from what it receives’ (Marion, 2017, p. 86). The word that Marion uses for this different ‘stature’ of subjectivity, this different ‘stature’ for the ‘I’ is, in French, the *adonné*, usually translated in English as the ‘gifted’.

This reveals that Marion’s attempt to ‘think’ givenness in its own terms—but perhaps we can now say: Marion’s attempt to expose himself to givenness and encourage us to expose ourselves as well—is not just a matter of epistemology, and not just a matter of phenomenology, although the question of givenness opens up these fields in new ways as well, but is also an *existential* matter, a matter that concerns the existence of the ‘I’ or self or subject. That is why Marion emphasises that ‘everything takes on a different meaning if what happens to me is given to me from elsewhere’ (Marion, 2017, p. 38). If what happens to me ‘is a duplication and a product of myself, then even the most marvellous things lose their meaning’ (Marion, 2017, p. 38). But if one instead thinks of the world as ‘essentially an experience of heteronomy, in other words as election, then everything is worth being lived, being expected, being desired, everything merits making an effort on its behalf’ (Marion, 2017, p. 38) Yet before trying to respond to the call ‘there is the more difficult thing, which is . . . to discover that there is a call, that is to say, being able to interpret what is as what comes to us’ (Marion, 2017, p. 39). And ‘this decision to take things as calls . . . decides everything else’ (Marion, 2017, p. 39).

So how then can this help us to get closer to the phenomenon of education and the crucial role that teaching plays within it? Let me consider this question by looking at the givenness of teaching through three ways in which this givenness manifests itself *in* teaching and *as* teaching.

### The three gifts of teaching

I have already referred to the redefinition of teaching as facilitating learning; a redefinition that is part of a more general shift from teaching to learning and one instance of the ongoing learnification of education. The shift from teaching to learning is itself not entirely without reason. It is a response to authoritarian forms of education in which teaching is enacted as a form of control—and there are still too many of those practices around, including those that may look benign. The shift from teaching to learning is also a response to rather poor and unimaginative educational practices that are nowadays often referred to as traditional, didactic or transmissive teaching, although these three qualifications are misleading in my view. And the shift from teaching to learning is also the result of the influence of constructivist theories of learning and social-cultural approaches to education that all, in some way, argue that everything hangs on the activities of ‘the learner’, with or without some scaffolding. In this regard we might say that contemporary education is still remarkably Kantian, and has perhaps even become more Kantian in recent years at least, that is, where it concerns its epistemological underpinnings.

All this has moved ‘the learner’ to the centre of the educational endeavour and has manoeuvred the teacher to the side-line—coach, facilitator, fellow-learner, friend, critical or otherwise, but hardly ever teacher. And it has given the impression that teaching is outdated, undesirable and, according to constructivist ‘dogma’, even impossible. While for some this can mean nothing but the end of teaching, I wish, in this section to point at

three dimensions or ‘manifestations’ of teaching that are not that easy to dispose of, at least not from an educational angle which, as I will argue as well, is fundamentally different from and hence not reducible to learning.

### ***The first gift of teaching: Being given what you didn't ask for***

In learner-centred education we do not just hear that the work of the teacher should focus on learners and their learning. We also increasingly hear that learners should take responsibility for their own learning, should self-regulate their learning, and should take ownership of their own learning, as all this will supposedly make the learning better.<sup>10</sup> Such arguments are not just given in relation to the *process* of learning—if such a thing exists—but also with regard to its *content*. When it is suggested, for example, that students should set their own learning goals, it often also means that students should decide about the content of their learning, that is, about what they should be learning, for example, because they have come to the conclusions that this is their specific ‘learning need’. This line of thinking is further amplified because of the impact of neo-liberal, market-driven reforms of education in which students—or their parents—are increasingly positioned as customers on the learning market and teachers and educational institutions as the providers. The key idea here is that the responsibility of teachers, schools, colleges and universities is to satisfy their customers by giving them what they ask for.

Yet here, I think, the argument breaks down—which is not to suggest that the rhetoric is absent; on the contrary—because an important rationale for education is precisely to give students what they didn't ask for, first and foremost because *they didn't even know they could ask for it*. This is the good old and nonetheless still relevant rationale of liberal education which always seeks to bring students ‘*beyond* the present and the particular’ (Bailey, 1984). But it also has to do with the important distinction between *servicing* the needs of ‘customers’ and contributing to the *definition* of such needs (on this distinction see Feinberg, 2001), in light of which one could—and should—argue that the work of educational professionals is not just that of giving students what they ask for, but to engage, with them, in a process of figuring out what it is they might ‘need’ (just as in the medical profession the work of doctors is not just to give patients what they ask for but rather figure out what it is they might need).

Whereas everyone is of course free to learn what they want to learn, the whole point of education—if we bring together time, resources and people—is to give students *more*, so we might say; to give them what they didn't ask for, were not looking for, were not even aware they might be looking for. This has to do with teaching as ‘turning’ (Plato), as ‘pointing’ (Klaus Prange), or as attention formation (Bernard Stiegler; see also Rytzler, 2017), that is with the ‘gesture’ where as teachers we say, in all kinds of ways: look, there is something there that may be important for you to encounter, explore, have a look at, engage with, stay with, let into your life, and so on (see also Biesta, 2017c). This is the first gift of teaching; a gift for which we need a school, not as a place for learning but as a place where you may find what you were not looking for and may receive what you did not ask for. The school, perhaps, as a place of revelation.

### ***The second gift of teaching: Double truth giving***

If the first gift of teaching lies in the domain of curriculum—of the ‘what’ the student will encounter—the second gift lies in the domain of ‘didactics’ (to use the Continental phrase) or ‘pedagogy’ or ‘instruction’, and is the idea that teaching is fundamentally an act of what Kierkegaard calls ‘double truth giving’ (see Kierkegaard, 1985; Westphal, 2008). Put simply, the idea here is that teaching is not just about giving students the truth, as Kierkegaard puts it, but also about giving them the conditions ‘of recognizing it as truth’ (Westphal, 2008, p. 25; see also Kierkegaard, 1985, p. 14).

There is a complex philosophical discussion in the background (which is actually first of all a theological discussion about the possibility of revelation; see Westphal, 2008), but the point Kierkegaard is making here is actually remarkably practical and ‘down to earth’ and is a very effective critique of the idea that teaching could simply be about giving students knowledge. The whole point, after all, is that in order to recognize something *as* knowledge—or more widely to recognise something as meaningful—one needs not only the ‘material’ itself but also needs to have, and be on the inside of, the ‘frame’ within which something makes sense, can be appreciated as knowledge, and so on. The difficult work of teaching, therefore, is not that of providing students with information, but is that of pulling them ‘inside’ the frame within which such information begins to make sense and is able to make sense. It is precisely this latter act of ‘pulling’ that fundamentally goes *beyond* all the sense making that students are capable of up to the point where they encounter something new, something radically ‘beyond’ their own (current) understanding. This is, therefore, not something students can construct themselves from their current understanding, but is something that ‘breaks through’, so we might say; something that is literally given (rather than taken).<sup>11</sup>

Here, then, do we encounter the second gift of teaching, where we are not just given what lies within the scope of our current understanding, but are given what lies *beyond* that scope, so that new understanding becomes available. And this, to make the point one more time, is perhaps the only thing we, as students—or ‘learners’—cannot construct for ourselves (see also Roth, 2011, for a very detailed discussion of these predicaments).

### ***The third gift of teaching: Being given yourself***

If the first and second gift of teaching have something to do with the domains of qualification and socialisation, the third gift moves us to the domain of subjectification which, as I have briefly indicated above, is the third of the three domains of educational purpose. Although the idea of the threefold purpose of education has been taken up in many contexts and settings, the third domain, that of subjectification, remains remarkably misunderstood, perhaps because of the dominance of psychological modes of thinking in contemporary education.<sup>12</sup> Again put simply, subjectification refers to the existence of the students—or human beings more generally—as subjects and not as objects. Subjectification thus refers to the educational dynamics that have to do with the existence of students-as-subjects, and the word ‘existence’ is helpful here, because subject-ness is precisely to be understood as a way of existing. It is located, in other words, on the existential plane which means that it is a first-person matter—*my* existing as subject is something no one else can ‘do’ for me.

This means that subjectification as an educational dynamic has nothing to do with psycho-socio-neurological development, or with enculturation or cultivation (see Biesta, [in press b](#)). Such processes, which are part of the reality of education, all contribute to the identity of individuals, that is to who they become as a result of interactions with the environment, broadly conceived. One could use the term ‘cultivation’ as an overarching concept here, suggesting that the biological organism becomes cultivated through its interaction with ‘culture’ in the broad sense of the word. All this contributes to the formation of the individual—and can even be understood as a process of individuation, which also means that cultivation is not a process of the production of clones. Yet our existence as subject is not identical to this. To put it briefly, the question of our existence as subject is not about who we become but about what we will do with who we have become. If the first question is the question of *who* we are—the question of identity—the second question—that of our subject-ness—is the question of *how* we are, *how* we will exist, *how* we will lead our life, *how* we will respond to the challenges that come our way. We can put moral terms such as ‘responsibility’ here, but interestingly we can also do without those terms in getting a sense of what subject-ness entails.

Whereas in the English language these differences tend to disappear rather quickly under the one word of ‘education’, the German tradition has the interesting distinction between two modalities of education, that of ‘Bildung’ and that of ‘Erziehung’. Following Benner (2015) we might say that ‘Bildung’ is about education as cultivation, whereas ‘Erziehung’ is about education as subjectification. And the interesting and in my view very helpful phrase Benner uses in this context is to define Erziehung as ‘Aufforderung zur Selbsttätigkeit’. This literally translates as summoning to self-action, but the injunction here is not to be active, and also not to just be *yourself*, but rather to be *a* self—rather than just someone. Positively we might say that subject-ness emerges in response to the question ‘Hey, you there, where are you?’—and this simple phrase captures the ‘essence’ of ‘Erziehung’ rather well. Negatively I am reminded of an interesting formulation Jacques Rancière (2010) has given of the work of the emancipatory schoolmaster, namely as the one who forbids his students the pleasure of *not* being a subject, as it is indeed much easier to let other people decide for you than to have to decide for yourself.

The point I am making here is that our subject-ness is not something that we construct from the inside-out, so to speak, but that it is in response to this question—which can take many different forms and manifestations of course—that the self is given to itself, as Marion might put it. This, then, is the third gift of teaching where we are not just being given what we didn’t ask for, and not just being given the conditions under which we can recognise something as true or meaningful, but where we are being given ourselves, our subject-ness, which, but this takes our discussion well beyond the confines of this paper, is basically an act of emancipation.

### Concluding comments

I have suggested that the self occupies the centre of the modern ‘experience’, so to speak, not just as a self who masters and controls the world—or at least tries to do so—but also as a self who gives meaning to and constructs knowledge about the world. One way to understand the current ‘crises’ we are encountering is that this self-positioning of the self has gone too far, and not just has reached its limits but is encountering limits—first and

foremost the limits the planet imposes upon us, but also the limits which the existence of other human beings and our existence with other human beings imposes upon us. These are very practical problems and also very urgent problems, as I have tried to indicate at the start of this paper. They also pose complex and profound philosophical questions. But what I have tried to indicate as well in this paper, is that they also go to the heart of education where contemporary learner-centred education which thinks that it has successfully ‘overcome’ teaching, is an explicit expression of self-centred or ego-logical ways of thinking and doing. In this paper I have tried to show what the problems with such an approach are, which philosophical questions we encounter when we try to go in the opposite direction, and why such a direction may nonetheless be important, also to retain a sense of education that doesn’t dissolve (itself) into learning. All this suggests a different possibility and perhaps even a different future for moral education, one where moral education is neither reduced to strong moral socialisation—the enactment of teaching as control—nor left entirely to ‘learners’ and their ‘learning’ on the mistaken assumption that freedom is the total absence of control. Rather the ideas presented in this paper hint at a different ‘articulation’ of our human condition, a different ‘account’ of our being-in-and-with-the-world, where we are called by the world and even are called into existence by the world. It is here that our encounter with the experience of being taught opens up new directions for moral education. Although they require further work, I hope at least to have managed to lay the groundwork for such a shift in direction.

## Notes

1. [https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Matthew-2-1\\_2-12/](https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Matthew-2-1_2-12/).
2. The term itself seems to have spread, with, to date close to 10,000 hits in google and close to 700 items in google scholar [accessed 8 August 2019].
3. Marion identifies the issue at stake here in the following way: ‘(A) correct understanding of the concept of revelation must account for the inevitable resistance that it cannot help to encounter. Admittedly, this resistance is not enough to authenticate it, but at the very least a reception without resistance would be sufficient to disqualify it as revelation’. (Marion, 2016, p. 2).
4. The sentence continues, in brackets, with ‘even if everything that gives itself nevertheless does not show itself without remainder’ (Marion, 2011, p. 19).
5. An ontology or metaphysics of givenness would not only try to specify the exact nature of the ‘what’ that is given, but would also try to specify *what it is that gives* this ‘what’. The problem with such an ambition is that it goes ‘beyond’ givenness itself and would therefore cease to be an ‘account’ of givenness itself. Moreover, it would, in its ambition to go ‘behind’ the phenomenon of givenness, deny the very idea that what shows itself must first give itself. It would, in a sense, *refuse* givenness. This is why givenness ‘needs’ a phenomenology, so to speak.
6. The following sentence not only shows the anti-Kantian streak in what Marion is trying to do, but also gives an important reason for his ‘project’, because for Kant the phenomenon in-itself is the very thing that cannot—or perhaps we can say, in order to connect this view explicitly to Kant—can no longer appear. Marion writes: ‘(I)n order that the phenomenon show itself *in itself* and from itself—that is, in principle, in order that it abolish the Kantian interdiction that reserved the in-itself to the thing insofar as it *does not appear*—it is necessary that this appearing not owe its appearing to the conditions of possibility of a foreign experience (that of the transcendental *ego*), but that it draw its appearing from itself, and itself alone; it thus must happen from itself—in a word, it must give itself. (Marion, 2016, p. 48, emphasis in original).



7. 'Husserl sees givenness. He sees that one can only reach givenness via reduction, but to a large extent he stays within the presupposition that the given is a matter of objectness, of a theory of the object'. (Marion, 2017, p. 77).
8. Marion is not suggesting that Husserl and Heidegger didn't see this at all. He, rather, suggests that Husserl already went further than Heidegger in some respects. And Marion also honestly confesses that he only discovered Heidegger's earlier work (particularly Heidegger's 1919 essay on givenness and 'es gibt') after he had written about this (see particularly Marion, 2011).
9. Marion gives the example of a painting in the cloister of the convent of Trinity-on-the-Mount which has a secret point where one must be situated to see the painting. This point, Marion explains, 'is determined by the painting and not by the spectator' so that 'the spectator must obey the painting in order to see it' (Marion, 2017, pp. 84–85). Marion calls the principle at stake here 'anamorphosis'.
10. Note that in much of these discussions the question of what the learning is 'about' and 'for' is not even raised, let alone addressed. Nonetheless it is remarkable—and worrying—how popular these kinds of phrases have become.
11. The concrete example that I have encountered many times as a student was of my mathematics teachers who were able to do spectacular things on the blackboard and, when they met my puzzled gaze, could say no more than 'but can't you see it?' And the whole problem was of course that I was unable to see what I should be seeing—I was outside of the 'frame'—whereas my teacher was inside of the frame and could therefore simply see what he could see. I don't remember my mathematics teachers being very good at pulling me inside the frame. The fact that from a very unsuccessful student of physics in secondary school I became a rather successful teacher of physics was perhaps due to my experiences with the frame and how to get students 'inside'.
12. Misunderstandings are often visible in the language that is used as people tend to avoid the rather 'philosophical' or 'theoretical' notion of subjectification. Hence, I have encountered notions such as personal development, identity formation and even personification as approximations of subjectification. For a response to these understandings see Biesta (in press a).

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