(Re)thinking education with Judith Butler: A necessary meeting between philosophy and education (interview with Judith Butler)\(^1\)

Facundo Giuliano  
University of Buenos Aires, Argentina

Vanina Lucila Pozzo (translation)  
University of Buenos Aires, Argentina

Judith Butler (b. 1956, Cleveland, OH) received a Ph.D. in Philosophy from Yale University. She is the Maxine Elliot Chair of the Department of Comparative Literature at University of California, Berkeley; Professor at the European Graduate School in Sass-Fee, Switzerland; and Visiting Professor at different universities around the world. Butler is awarded and distinguished not only because of her academic and research work but also for her social commitment, and has become one of the most prominent figures of the contemporary intellectual field.

Her teachings, which are known globally and have been translated into more than thirty languages, are influenced by a strong commitment to social struggles and the extension of rights. These contributions – which have transcended the walls of the university – have reformulated the philosophical, political, and literary field suggesting innovative, challenging, and provocative conceptualizations that encourage new readings around the human relationships, social institutions, and classic theories that gave birth to them. Her works have been a fertile land on which to broaden the debate, extend the horizons of thinking, and allow resistant and disruptive practices to happen. Her critical analysis on contemporary concerns pierces issues from the ethical to the political and reveals key connections with the social mechanisms of power, subjectivation, language, violence, gender, and the subject, among other themes covered in her prolific work. These issues are also an essential supply for the philosophical, educational, psychological, anthropological, and epistemological thought of our times. Her wide bibliographical repertoire includes works such as *Senses of the Subject* (Fordham University Press, 2015); *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Harvard University Press, 2015); *Frames of War: When is...*

\(^1\) Una versión en español puede consultarse en el número 44 de la revista argentina Propuesta Educativa: http://www.propuestaeducativa.flacso.org.ar/index.php. Agradecemos el acompañamiento de Vanina Lucila Pozzo y Daniela Godoy en esta travesía entre filosofía y educación, por la amabilidad en cuanto al desgravado cuidadoso del material así como también su traducción y revisión técnica.
On this occasion,² we are invited to critically think and rethink central features of contemporary education in a close relationship with the philosophy and illuminated by the reflections that Butler’s work promotes. Throughout the following journey, this philosopher-educator asks us to think about topics that open up to a movement that interrupts normality and offers an invitation to empower ethical-educational action.

² This dialogue complements and is a considerable consolidation of the educational issue that appeared in a first exchange published in the Argentinian journal Páginas de Filosofía, "Redoing Gender in a Postcolonial Key: An Ethical-Political Dialogue from Latin America with Judith Butler." This conversation covered some problems related to her work and the Argentinean context in the Latin-American postcolonial plot. It is available online, both in English and Spanish, at: http://revele.uncoma.edu.ar/htdoc/revele/index.php/filosofia/article/view/977/1002.
Written voices of thoughts that meet: First conversation

Facundo Giuliano: Dear Judith – to begin, what is your point of view about the relationship between philosophy and education? As a philosopher and literature teacher, what is or would be the role of philosophy and literature in education?

Judith Butler: First of all, I have to say that in many places in the world, as you know, there have been changes in philosophy; the whole philosophy process is in crisis. So, it is in the emergency of these new criteria for evaluating education or institutions that philosophy has a difficult time justifying itself. Is it useful? Does it have an impact? Are its results quantifiable? All these questions assume a measure of value of philosophy, and here I wonder if that value can be measured at all.

It seems to me that we have two different issues: one is that the teaching of literature is generally considered to be important, so that even when economic decisions about the University are made, it is said “Of course, literature is very important.” The question is how it is valued in relationship to other fields – and rather how it is understood, like the arts more generally, as ornamental. In other words: “We appreciate literature, it’s good, it moves us, or we enjoy it” but it’s not appreciated as a mode of critical analysis, as a way of understanding how language structures our world and how that way allows us to be transported among worlds and to consider various ways in which the world itself can be constituted. I think there is a great deal of the critical analysis of literature that is understood as important to critical thinking and as important to the task of the University. The University has to be the place where we have open critical debate, and we can’t have open critical debate unless we know what criticism is. And those skills – practices or exercises, like the exercise of criticism – are precisely what it is supported and possible through the University. I would also say that that capacity for criticism – here, thinking about critical literature analysis and also philosophical criticism – is crucial to open democratic debates on values. In what direction we should be going? Do values lead to a good life? And so to a good world? Even for an open democratic system, there has to be literature and there has to be philosophy.

FG: Going through the educational field – and taking into account not only the massiveness of involved subjects but also the basis of your ethical, epistemic, political, and pedagogical reflections and exchanges – what is, according to you, the most urgent issue to pay attention to?

JB: Well, it’s funny. Today [laughing] I’m thinking about the environment and climate change, because, you know, there’s a terrible sun in California. I mean it’s a beautiful sun, people love it and come to California because of this beautiful climate. But day after day, we know that we are losing our water, we are losing our farms, we are losing our capacity to maintain the population – the human population, but also the land and all the living creatures – so sometimes you have to wonder: How do we move from the perspective of pure consumption? Or how do we move from the perspective of daily life when you have
just taken this task as an ordinary way of looking? You have your job and a routine so, to take a more systematic look at the world, when you try to look at it as a system of equality or as a system of exploitation, when you look at the environment and climate change, what is the perspective we need for that consideration?

It means, actually, moving outside of a purely self-interested subjective perspective to learn how to see a larger picture. I really do believe that education allows us to not became a master subject aware of all the disciplines or to just simply stay in our self-interested or instrumental modes of living, but to take into account larger versions of power that have produced the world that we live in. This means that we need precise modes of analysis, we need precise modes of description, we need to see widely, we need translators, and we need to work in the translation all the time so that we can see the globe from different perspectives. One of the great advantages of working with compared literature and working with students who handle more than one language is that they have a perspective of the world just by reading four different newspapers in the morning, and most people do not have that chance. Being able to work with this problem of perspective and being able to adopt a broader perspective or several perspectives and learning how to negotiate that gives us a better chance of grasping the world we live in and of turning it into the task of transforming the world as well.

FG: Taking something from Spinoza – a philosopher you have been particularly interested in since you were young – what is your view of the power in the act of educating? Do you think that the dominant assessment logic is a disempowering factor for students?

JB: The simple answer: yes, the dominant assessment logic is disempowering for students [laughing], there is no question. I laugh because it is so sad, I don’t know what else to do. Spinoza offers us a very interesting problem for education because he begins with the proposition that we each seek to persist in our own being – and that is right, even our ability to persist depends upon a certain kind of contact, what we call potential, which cannot be actualized without a contact, without a reaction from the world that allows it. It doesn’t unfold teleologically, so the question is: What is that contact that allows our potential to be fully realized? That is a question for education. It would be like thinking of education as a scene of an empowering contact, and it is not as if we don’t know in advance that teachers empower students. Teachers are aware of this, although sometimes we notice that students are going in the wrong direction, because we don’t control that, we can’t. All we can do is produce the space for thinking in a key of relative safety within educational institutions, and this must be thought as something that is not always accomplished. It is even a risk of courage, not necessarily popular or rewarded. This could change the modes of thinking, as when reading a book and people say it has changed them, that they couldn’t go back to where they were before having read it. So, some potential was activated in the course of that.
I think Spinoza gives a way to overcome the mind-body dualism, a way to think as a bodily act – and our bodily acts also bring with them certain kinds of thoughts. Nietzsche has this notion as well, but it means that it matters how we are situated in the world, where we are learning, what the infrastructure of learning is. I remember being at a seminar table at the UBA, in a classroom where it felt like a train was coming through the window in any minute [laughing]. You can’t study under these circumstances; you can but it is really difficult. You have to fight the infrastructure in order to learn. It is necessary to have the space for people to sit, to move, to think, to speak, to breathe. You actually need that space, you need a table – or it doesn’t have always to be a table, right? You can walk and learn, you can sit elsewhere, you can be outside, but at a point it gets hard to focus. With Nietzsche, we can think that sometimes you leave the table and the classroom, so that you leave and come back into the room, to reflect. If you stay in the room, seeking to reflect without having left, you have nothing to reflect on. Spinoza gives us a social world upon the body and gives us a thinking body; he gives us a body that can only live and survive thanks to interaction. I think that gives us an erotic and a social conception of education – embodied, corporeal, and social.

**FG:** This last point is absolutely interesting as it allows us to transition to what is next. The educational spatiality has been crossed by performativities that have set normalizing parameters of “excellence” and efficiency from certain regulations, in ways of bodily existence, of projecting languages and ways of being that belong mostly to the white, Western, bourgeois man’s canon. From here, a whole educational tradition has been based on gendered heteronormative practices, which have been the foundation of vigilance and disciplinary measures to any deviation. Concerning this, what is the place you give to education relating performativity and projected normality? If you are familiar with them, what is your opinion about the recent developments that recognize that “every education is sexual” and critically approach pedagogies of sexuality?

**JB:** I don’t know the recent developments that recognize that [said in Spanish] “toda educación es sexual,” but I think that is good, that is right. Whether it is deliberate or not, it is there. Looking from the start, the educational institutions teach you where to put your body: in the chair, on the floor, to sit in a circle. Mostly at kindergarten and primary school when you sit on the floor, there is a shape that everybody must follow and sometimes it is even marked – you have to make a circle – you have to, literally, put your ass in a circle.

It is a kind of education in politics; it is political education and sexual education: this body belongs in this space here and now. If you move to this side or to this side, that’s

---


disobedience, so learning where to put the body and learning how to hold the body is part of a certain kind of *interpellation*, in an Althusserian sense. It is interesting that when Althusser talks about *interpellation*, he mentions two major institutions: one of them is the church, and the second one is the school. At school, you are called in a way, you sit in a way, you raise your hand, you learn all these modes of bodily performativity to learn how to be. It operates on the bus, in the street, and in the family, so it works in public and in private life. It has also regulated the use of the voice: how loud you can be, how soft you should be, the modulation of the voice. Education is training in gender and is training in citizenship, and there are punishments that go along with it; there are also modes of excitement that emerge at the prospect of transgressing those rules. You can develop an entire mode of sexuality that is dedicated to the breaking of the rules in a mad effort to gain some freedom from that kind of disciplinary apparatus. So, I wonder about bodily movements within schools and how tracked they must be. For instance, in France, there are primary schools where when the children move from one classroom to another classroom, they have to be in a single line and stay within a certain track. They have to stick to it and if they cross the line on their way to the classroom or if they go on the other side, they are punished with points so that it is nearly like a *panopticon* in Foucault.

I think that so many of the new standards for reaching excellence depend on students’ bodies becoming really regulated and producing results at a very quick speed. If you are a teacher and you have to produce tests scores at the end of the year to show that you have complied with those standards, you are going to keep your students in a kind of factory line or you are going to try to make them be as productive as possible. There are norms of productivity that enter into this “discipline” of the body, and we also have to think about that sexually repressive or constraining apparatus – and maybe not only sexually, as sexual expression, but as basic freedom of movement. Freedom of movement is necessary for a certain kind of environmental, social learning: think about dance, think about movement technique, any number of collaborative activities. Even art implies collaboration, implies moving in some way that is expressive. So here again, I think we see modes of education that depend on bodily expressivity and bodily movement devalued as subjects; these are subjects that cultivate the body, so it is not properly repressed and properly constrained.

**FG:** *Talking about this: the conquerors or slave holders lived, acted, and enjoyed in a recognized hegemonic circle, under the authority of an extremely powerful “idealities chain”5 from where they extracted the possibility of subsuming their own cruelty under the ways of a “civilization.” What might you say to teachers for them to not fall into these cruelty logics that, in name of idealities, often reduce the other and its otherness to a rule that prevents or shortens possibilities for the subjects to give account of themselves and demonstrate in their difference?*

---

5 For a closer look at this issue, see Balibar, É. (2005). *Violencias, identidades y civilidad*. Barcelona, Spain: Gedisa.
JB: I think the way I can answer to this question, perhaps, is to think a little bit about how cruelty works. Jacques Derrida has been important and I have been reading his work on the death penalty, for instance. In that work, he offers a kind of criticism to those who oppose the death penalty and believe in prison because they think that prison is most humane. What he says is that the death penalty is one way of inflicting cruelty by taking away a life, but prison is another way to do it. One question would be: how is the civilization role-playing inside the prison? Is it a form of cruelty and normalization? How is that linked to the educational projects that also seek to civilize students to provided norms? If you look at the history of colonial domination – in Australia, for instance – many of the schools especially in the 19th century but also in the 20th were involved in “civilizing” the aborigine people. Part of that civilization task for the schools was whitening them with the idea that if they learn to speak “right” or to produce their bodies in the right way or to comport in the right way, they would become whiter; it was a civilization project but also a racializing project.

So, here is the question for me about a queer subject, someone who is potentially non-conforming in his/her appearance or mode of speech, when the teacher takes that kid aside and says, “Listen, I need you to behave, conform to these rules, because this is going to help you functioning in society. Otherwise, you will be in danger when you are in the society. So, don’t wear that dress or don’t wear that hat or speak in that way, don’t move your body in that way. Stay in your chair.” Or, “Speak this way, I need you not to speak this way, you have to speak like me.” This happens a lot, for instance, in the African-American community here in the US. Very often teachers say, “You must learn to speak proper English.” There is no proper English anywhere, any more. English is globally appropriate as a language that does not have one proper form. English has become a mixed, innovative language when talking about its grammar, syntaxes; so when minority children are trained up to speak in a proper English, they are very often being taught how to function in a broader society and how to lose their own ethnic origins, pretending to “be whiter.” It seems that the more proper you are, the more accepted you will be; it is a really cruel reality. And with this, I say we must open our idea of cruelty, because when saying, “We are not cruel because we don’t hit our children” – you can be cruel in other ways.

FG: In that way, we see that in education converges the ethical and political, the public and the private. What can you say about the antagonism that politics poses to education? What happens in this context with the tension between the public and the private?

JB: There is always that antagonism. There are always those who claim that the family is the right place to learn about sexuality or sexual norms, those who claim that religion is the place to learn about sexual ethics or proper social forms for marriage. So, there is always a discussion about it, but that antagonism strikes me as a most important one. I don’t think

---

there should be public control of private life. I don’t like Plato’s republic or his effort to render public all private life, nor do I think that private values or family values or religious values dictate what public values should be, or educational values should be – that can’t happen. I think we need the conflict, I think it’s generative antagonism, so that is important and that is what happens in education.

I remember I was in a literature class, I was teaching the Bible, and we started with an analysis of its very first words. There is a description in the Bible of this chaos and then God says, “Let there be light,” and there is light. So I said, “Who is writing this very first part? Because there was nothing before God spoke, so who is writing those sentences?” There we have a voice that precedes God’s voice. It was a simple literary activity, it didn’t have any particular ethical issue, but a student stood up and walked out of the class because that book is the book of truth and we can’t read it critically and we can’t do that kind of analysis on that book. And in another class, when I was talking about gender, one student stood up in the middle of the class – he looked so upset, but he just stood in a kind of protest – and he went home and talked with his parents. These things happen all the time and what really matters is that it doesn’t turn into forms of censorship, but it can be easily turned into forms of censorship in a school that is privately organized or depends on private donations. Here, we don’t have publicly financed universities anymore, but even in public schools there is a lot of pressure from the community about what can be taught, so there is always that risk of censorship. But it seems to me that those battles have to take place and that they are crucial; the classroom is the place where values grow up, and possibilities for thinking otherwise come into a certain generative conflict.

I think we are not sure how to demarcate the public from the private; I would not accept the tough distinction between them. Sometimes we mean private as family and religion, but I think about privatization, so even the meanings of “private” are not clear. The meanings of private that we can think about in educational institutions and the same with the public, how do they get constituted? Who is in it? Who is outside of it? What do we mean by it? We talk about public values – we can use these terms as simple analytic terms, but we have to interrogate them in the way they work together, in the way they are related to each other, or the way they mutually define or exclude each other.

**FG:** Educational spaces might be one of the first places where life situations that combine an interesting dialectic between vulnerability and resistance can be experimented. You talked once about some tough life experiences regarding your childhood and education, which more than one person has identified with. What is your view about the relationship between education and violence?

**JB:** It’s true. Autobiographically I grew up in a very privileged suburb of Cleveland and I had a good education. I was suspended several times, mostly because I asked questions that weren’t supposed to be asked or because I interrupted teachers. Interruption was a criminal act. It is really funny because in my seminars, when interruptions happen, it is...
sometimes the best part. But yes, I was walked away, I was talked to by the police – I had many encounters with the law, with my family, with the educational institutions, and they were worried that I might become a criminal. But I did see students who were identified as criminals very early, in order to answer the question, “Who is going to be the criminal?” at school. “They are doing criminal activities, they will for sure end up as criminals.” That was definitely part of my own upbringing. I read about radical pedagogy, I was interested in many of the human potential movement writers such as Pablo Freire, who came a little bit later. I think that the most interesting moment to me at those times was when the teachers came and said, “Why don’t we have a tutorial?” They asked the criminal, “What would you like to study?” And of course I had my reading list, I sat and read philosophy, so I was able to enter into philosophy because of my criminal position, which perhaps establishes my own feeling or vision of critical criminality. I made use of my punishments – in other words, punishment was okay, I got to leave school, I got to do what I wanted with my free time. I had to take tutorials, I had to craft my own reading list, so I became something like an independent thinker through these modalities of punishment. It is not that I liked the punishment, but I understood that it set me apart from the institution in a way that it let me gain a sort a freedom. I felt more free having been locked into some room because I was a disturbance in class than I felt staying in class, so in some ways my prison was more productive to me.

But it’s also hard because of violence or vulnerability. I think young people are legally vulnerable to accepting power, educational power. I was also vulnerable to the authorities in my religious institutions, I knew the ability to move out and forward. It depends where and how you stand within the line. It wasn’t physical punishment, it was more isolation or verbal abuse. I don’t think I was hit, but I saw other people being hit, quite physically, and sometimes in some places, there is still that right to do it if you are understood as undisciplinary – and that brings the criminalization problem into primary schools. These methods of punishment are proto-criminalization methods, and even suspension is one, because sometimes it gets you ready for prison.

**FG:** At least from modern times to this time, the school, the university, and the educational institutions in general have become the origins of normality and its hegemony. Today, that seems to be run highly by the dominant assessment, diagnosis, and classification logics that operate through diverse technologies and mechanisms, causing all kinds of pathological or effacing exclusions, categorizations, or, differentiations. How do you think of this historic relationship – always in tension – between education, evaluation, or diagnosis and that today, for instance, shows its effects in the “pathologization of childhood” and leaves little space for resistance?

**JB:** My first thought would be: Where are the teachers, where are the psychologists, where are the social workers who would resist the pathologization of childhood? Who sees that these norms are actually destructive? Do they have a movement, do they have a sort of union, organization, where to have a critical thinking about these norms? The problem is
that as these assessment and diagnosis categories gain more control, there are more jobs for psychologists, social workers, and teachers who say, “I can get a job doing assessment, then I can have dinner at my favorite restaurant in Palermo” – and this is not okay. Many of these roles are based in a strong assessment logic or in pathologization or norm production, and in addition, they are financially rewarded when diagnosing which infant has a problem, which one hasn’t, or who should be put in a special track, whatever that is. So there has to be a kind of critical organization that critiques these forms. Even though perhaps the success of such a movement would restrict those jobs, I think that should be brought into the public and be publicly discussed. I hope there is a way for this perspective to become more widely known, because I also believe that the people who implement this don’t understand themselves as implementing cruelty. It is cruel and it has to be exposed as a kind of systematic cruelty. I don’t know what concrete opportunities there are for that kind of public movement in certain places, but it definitely seems really important.

FG: We might also say that one of the educational ethical-political and historical problems could be focused on the difficulties of its subject. Generally, it has been thought of as given according to a certain technical criteria and curricular objectives, but it has rarely been seen as an “out-coming subject,” open to its own singular and historical contingency. In that sense, how do you look at the alterity in these contexts where a certain control of the performance over the subject is enforced? Can the alterity be thought of as this psychoanalytic idea about sexuality that says this cannot be approached by any norm?

JB: This is the problem with the idea of “outcome” or result. As long as education is supposed to produce results and demonstrate results, the teachers are always forcing their students to produce certain kinds of results. So the real question is: How can we create an education environment where the unexpected result is valued? Because if it was like this, the subject would be understood as someone who experiments. I think there is a sense of the experience that has been lost in the new educational philosophy that is focused on results. We have to think about working with the possible – in other words, pushing open the lines of the possible – to think about what we do. I think they are ontological questions that are opened thanks to this idea of experiencing. I also think of the idea that is implied in the last part of the question, that there is a dimension of the subject that cannot be governed by any rule, and this is quite important for a number of reasons. I think sexuality cannot be fully governed by any rule because it cannot be fully captured. I think there is something about sexuality that – and here, I agree with the Lacanians – does not adapt to social norms or social rules easily, and that non-adaptive function of sexuality is really quite important because it lead us to directions that are unexpected. This could be very important for education, to follow these trains of desire that are not regulated.
Thoughts that meet in written voices: Second conversation

**FG:** We can (re)start with Nietzsche. He said that “there are men who as they open their eyes, they stain with their look.” In contemporary times, often the look is mostly evaluative, fixing boundaries between categories and pointing out the corporealities that “matter” according their materialization of the rules. What is the ethical importance you give to the gaze? In this sense, what happens with the marks or traces that are inscribed on the vulnerable bodies by stigmatizing looks?

**JB:** First of all, I think it is important to remember that power – including discrimination, exploitation, domination, and stigmatization, all those forms of power – takes place through all the senses. Sometimes it is in the way it’s looked at, or the way power structures the visual fields, so that certain bodies are stigmatized, so let’s remember that. Power can work to efface bodies so that we do not see them, or it can work to stigmatize bodies so that we see them in a hyperbolic way, or in a way that fits a stereotype or fetish. A vulnerable population can suffer from being overexposed in the visual field, or being effaced by the visual field, or being regulated according to categories that are restrictive or false in certain ways. The visual field is extremely important and we see it in the media, in television, in advertising – there is no question about that – but we have to remember that our body works through all the senses. I feel that Jacques Rancière has made this point: what we can feel, what we can touch or smell or hear to some degree also comes to our idea of who the people are. Relations of physical proximity have always been at the core of certain systems of racial oppression. Think of the apartheid or the ghetto, physically separated groups; this is a way of making sure that those bodies don’t have to come into close contact. Or if they do come into close contact, it’s through the police; the police mediate the physical contact. So, this is just an example of another way of regulating the senses in the service of a pressure. But I think what Nietzsche is telling us, perhaps, is that when we open our eyes,
we see through lenses that are already disturbing what we see or staining what we see, so that there are implicit evaluative judgments happening within the fields of vision – what we call the “first person,” from this perspective. I see stratification, I stigmatize with my gaze that seems to reflect me as person. So I think maybe we subject Nietzsche to an announcement of power that is focused on the question of how power structures the vision field. If I open my eyes or anyone opens their eyes and sees stratification or sees physically challenged people, it’s precisely because we have entered into a field that is already acting on us, structuring the visual field; it is not only a reflection of myself or any other person’s character. It points out the fact that we are brought into a field that is already structured in certain ways and filled with power, so when we see, we see through this, unless we start looking from a different place, in a way that interrupts.

**FG:** Contrary to the technical conceptions of education – where you plan and aim to get certain observable and ascertainable learning results – from an ethical-political perspective and from an ending philosophy: Can education in general and the learning process in particular be thought of from your notion of mourning, referred to as a process of change and build up whose result cannot be known in advance, that teaches the subjection to ways that cannot be always told or explained, challenging and interrupting self-conscious stories and versions of ourselves as autonomous subjects being able to control everything?

**JB:** It is very interesting to me that you ask this question about mourning. Because it is not usual to ask about it in that way. So let me reformulate it slightly in a way that I can answer more clearly. What does it mean to teach someone that he or she is living a grievable life, a life that is worth grieving? It is a complex thing to say because most of us don’t think about our demise or we don’t ask anybody, “Will you miss me when I’m gone?” When we think of anyone as grievable, what does it mean? I think that, in a very concrete way, this life is valuable and that it deserves support in order to flourish in whatever way it can. There are two points I want to make. First, this idea of grievability – which is a very odd English word and I’m not sure that works in Spanish – I don’t know how you say it, but I think you say something that has the capacity to be grieved. I understand the Spanish for “duelo,” so if you want to say “this person can be grieved” –

**FG:** It could be “hacer duelo por esa persona.” We don’t have “duelar” as a verb, but that would be the idea, the sense, “this person can be grieved.”

**JB:** Okay. What I want to say about this is that if it matters whether a life is lost or not lost, then social structures – education included – will be organized to preserve that life and to allow it to flourish. So, in a way, the capacity to grieve, to say that a life matters and that it would be grieved if it were lost, means exactly that the world should be organized in such a way to preserve that life and let it flourish. It is an anticipation of the future, it is a way of

---

8 Spanish word for mourning.
approaching human life in such a way that you structure the future understanding life as livable and valuable. When we say that a life can be grieved, it is actually to say that a life has a value. When we say it, we ask: What kind of value? An instrumental value? Do we need it for the economy, is it a productive value? A calculable value? There are social conditions of flourishing – and flourishing is interesting as a term, because we would never know the result of somebody’s flourishing. What does it mean for a child to flourish? We have no single idea of what that is; in fact, we are constantly surprised by what it is. You can try to track the child this way, or track the child into economics, or track the child into music, and suddenly they are doing something else. And it is surprising, but it happens precisely when they break that kind of track and find themselves on another path. So, how can it be done at schools? How can we allow that breaking with the track to happen? I think that there is always this incalculable dimension of human flourishing, so we are talking about valuable life and it is precisely this capacity to find a way that is not always predictable.

I think that is part of what we mean by freedom, what we mean by affirmation. It’s not the same as freedom to remake the world in our image or a freedom that involves mastering; it’s about the surprise that happens in the midst of education and in the midst of formation. It’s about a way of responding to the world or realizing what a certain encounter can bring, and that’s very different from autonomist individuality that starts with the idea of freedom as mastery and thinks about the expression of freedom as control.

FG: Following what you’ve said, and taking some ideas from Giving an Account of Oneself and Precarious Life, the formation from the other teaches the own strangeness in the context of an ethical and epistemic meeting, where the exposed bodies can recognize themselves as vulnerables and interdependents. According to this, would you agree to translate, in a pedagogical way, this proposal into an education from the ethical affect? How would the ethical call you make come into play here, to establish public modes of looking and listening that can respond to the interpellation (or agonized cry) of the other who is beyond any representation?

JB: It’s a very interesting reformulation because in Spanish you say [said in Spanish] “una educación desde el afecto ético”9 – taking the ethical affect as point of departure for education, that is how I would translate. Let’s think about that, because however an ethical affect might be conceived, it can’t be taught directly. I can’t come into the classrooms and say, “Today we are going to learn from the ethical affect.” I mean, how do you teach from the ethical affect? It’s funny, it reminds me of Kierkegaard and his problem of education: as there are certain kinds of truths that cannot be not imparted directly, an articulation from a multiplicity of senses is required, taking dialogical situations as departure. For instance, we started our conversation today10 by asking about stigmatization, and I think we could bring

---

9 “An education from the ethical affect” (she says it in Spanish).
10 Here, she means the beginning of the second conversation, which started with the question about Nietzsche, the gaze, and stigmatization.
out any number of visual images that stigmatize people, on the basis of poverty, or because they are living in rural areas, or living in urban areas, because they are thought of from their social class, race, and gender. We can find examples of that, or of the stigmatization of homosexuality, the stigmatization of transgender people, and we can bring that out and ask people to talk about that, about the sense, about their reading. We can read how to read images, but it seems to me that there is a problem, which is those who never appear in the visual field. Now, you might say those who are stigmatized do not appear in the visual field, those who have an image but they are effaced by it. So, that is one problem: the representation is actually an effacement.

There is a second problem: the representation is located in a frame that excludes the possibility of other representations. It might be the same problem, I’m not sure. But, for instance, Argentina is very proud of itself for its gender freedom laws – and it is great, it is fabulous, it is a very important human rights accomplishment, there is no doubt about it. At the same time, I wonder about the image of the homosexual that is being produced by this representation, about the subject of that right. Who is the subject of that right and who is not? My friend Leticia Sabsay has written about this, about the context of Argentina. Are the sexual minorities who are not really qualified to be represented by the public subjects of that right? Does this mean there is full freedom and no violence? Does it mean there is no effacement of other kinds of sexualities, sexual minorities that are not being mentioned? What about sex workers, what about transgender people in poverty or homelessness? Sometimes there are other issues involved there. It is just an example, but I think we have to ask how the frame can exclude or include, so that the frame is always a function of power in that way.

So, how do we teach it? We need work on this material, we need this to come into conflict, and this would be achieved only by moving or letting the interruptions happen, to be interrupted by what it excludes. We may be able to see ethically what our relationship is to the populations we are talking about, and we might be able to include it among those populations. It is about self-other relationships; we may be part of that population at the moment that we look at it, or not realize where we are implicated. But I think that understanding suffering is very hard especially given the dominant media representations of suffering, dealing with sensationalism and its repetitive effect; Susan Sontag wrote about this. It is really interesting because something happens, and then it is over and it is never mentioned again. In a way, we need to stay with the horror and learn to analyze what is going on in the midst of the horror, rather than just undergoing that shock and feeling like, “I can’t stay with that feeling of horror because then my life is not livable.” We must stay with it analytically, so we can be horrified by the killing of black men in the streets in the United States, or we can be horrified by the killing of students in Ayotzinapa. We can scream and get disappointed, but we can also ask about the relationship between the police, the government, the freedom of expression, the military actions, the cartel. What are the forms of power that enable the reduction? We have to stay with the ethical affect, which means a complex analysis at the same time. We don’t allow a kind of Cartesian split
between our emotional response and our analytical capacity to appear; we have to allow them to move together.

**FG:** Previously, we talked about mechanisms such as grading exams. What similarities do you find between these deferred mechanisms (always of the other), and what you have characterized as “condemned” 11?

**JB:** I think of grading or marking exams, or pass/fail tests, or tests that give you a numerical score and then compare you to anyone else. These are very common modes of evaluation, and they are becoming more generalized throughout the world as a consequence of the European Union’s new standards and the global extension of quantitative evaluative methods. I think that for many people – not just young children, but also high school children or adolescents or college students, at universities, graduates – those tests have become a way of understanding who one is. So, one’s sense of self, one’s sense of value as a thinker or as somebody who has something to offer, is very often summarized by those test scores. They can form value and they can form a certain kind of promise: if you do well, you will have a promising life. If you don’t do well, you won’t have a promising life. So, one question is how testing becomes a means of what we call subjectivation, a way of forming subjects who understand their value to be reflected in the tests or in the measurement. If they don’t do well, they are devalued, they are condemned in the sense that they are understood to be less promising or less productive than others, which means a reduction of their own horizon of life; it is the showing of what is possible and what is not possible for that subject. Maybe the subject is condemned as a not very smart person or a not very promising person – and if they accept that, they accept the authority of those who say that, the standards and the judgments made. So, we could say they are condemned, but what worries me more is to think is about the new norms of subjectivation that are internalized: my own value, my own self-sense of value is measurable, and I must keep up with those measures. There is a little difference between condemnation and external authority if thought that way, but we have to remember condemnation by external authority can become an internal principle of the subject; that is what Foucault taught us. And what worries me is that once it is internalized and taught, we don’t see the external authority because it is already the organizing principle of our subjectivity. We condemn ourselves, we measure ourselves, we calculate our value, and that is an enormous problem. So, then the question is: what are the modes of resistance to these forms? I guess my answer to that is that no one can do that alone [laughter]. There have to be communities that produce

---

11 Condemnation works as a way to stand for an ontological difference between judge and the judged, even to purge oneself of the other. It becomes the way in which we establish the other as non-recognizable, or in which we throw away some aspect of ourselves that we place in the other, to whom we then condemn. In this sense, condemnation can work against self-knowledge, in as much as it moralizes a self by disavowing what it has in common with the judged (although self-knowledge is surely limited, that is not a reason to turn against it as a project). Condemnation tends to do precisely this – to purge and externalize one’s own opacity; is very often an act that not only “gives up on” the one condemned but seeks to inflict a violence upon the condemned in the name of “ethics.” For more details, see Butler, J. 2005. Against ethical violence. Giving an account of oneself. New York, NY: Fordham University Press (p. 46).
alternative schemes of value that actively criticize those forms and that provide support for one another. And it is only once we are in those communities of support that any of us have any chance of having the power to criticize and displace those forms of measurement.

**FG:** Historically, modern pedagogy has punished or at least disqualified the mistake/error. Being this part of who we are – as you teach in Giving an Account, taking Foucault and Adorno. Considering that this is a current and persistent problem, how would this ethical-pedagogical issue be re-thought in a way that the constitutive aspects of what we are, as the mistake, are not disqualified?

**JB:** I would like to say one more thing about error. At one point, Nietzsche says, “The truth is nothing other than a series of errors linked together in a certain way.” And that is true precisely because we are perceptible creatures, we are always seeing partiality, and so we say, “This is how reality is.” We are always partially wrong and partially right, and the very capacity to illuminate part of the reality means we always see it from some perspective and with some error in the seeing. Erring is necessary for establishing truths, even in his view, and I think that is especially true about ourselves at the moment we claim. In the Genealogy of Morals we say, “I know who I am,” and we make the claim of self-identity – and at that very moment we lost it, we lost the moment, because we are already something else of what we were at the moment we said “I know who I am.” What does it mean? For me, there is a beautiful sense of humor that emerges from that claim, and I think Foucault carries that humor sometimes – it helps me live, I would be lost without that sense of humor – and maybe we should think a little bit more about humor in education. And what it means to make your mistake and find it magnificent, make your mistake and find it great. A way of living error as a way of accepting our perceptible, limited frame, accepting that as part of what is to be living, to be becoming, to be in process. That is very different from a person somehow lacking, according to the error made. There have to be ways of performatively living out error, and I would like to see a bit more of that and error-living education, quite frankly.

**FG:** Trying to let this conversation open, and in the middle of a grateful feeling for this shared journey, I would like to go deeper into your experience: as a teacher or a student, would you like to share any memory or anecdote regarding your experience in educational spaces?

**JB:** When I started teaching courses about gender, my perspective was not very popular or usual; I think that is not particularly surprising, maybe it is like that somewhere. I remember I was teaching Freud analytically and what it was to be man, to be woman, homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual, and kept linking it with other categories, making it even more complicated. There was a man in the class – I didn’t know him very well – but he suddenly stood up from the table and I asked, “Do you have something to say?” “No,” he answered. So, “Would you like to have a seat?” I said. He did not respond, he just stood, and he was obviously upset by what we were reading or saying. I didn’t really know how to handle this situation, and at a certain point I said, “You are free to leave if you want, or you
are free to join us by sitting down,” and he became furious and he laughed and went to the administration of the university and made a complaint that I had kicked him out of the class. He might have felt threatened about what we were reading; my guess is that he already felt like he was being pushed away by what he was reading, or he was being rejected by what he was reading. He probably found himself in any of the various possibilities we were considering, and it was very threatening to him, so he felt literally pushed out; by standing, he was towering over us, he was disturbing, dominating, the scene and distracting. Now I sometimes wonder if I handled it well. Maybe I didn’t. I was very young at that time, in my twenties, it was one of my very first classes – and maybe I should have let him stand, just welcomed him to stand, so that we could continue reading. Why did I need him to sit? Maybe he provoked me into being disciplinary like, “Here, we sit or leave.” Why? Let him stand! Maybe I should have let him stand.

**FG:** Thank you very much, Judith. After this intense journey, we might say that it has been a lovely meeting between philosophy and education.

**JB:** Yes, dear Facundo. I enjoyed our conversation and look forward to speaking again soon.