Difficult Conversations, or the Difficult Task of Facing Humanity

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There are two strands of my work in the field of philosophy of education that I will be bringing into the discussion here tonight. The first is the idea of pedagogy as transformation and what this does to how we think about what we do in any number of cultural settings. The pedagogical space of the gallery or museum seems always to have embedded within it a gesture of initiating some change within the viewer, some transformation of the person’s subject position and understanding of herself. The second is the idea that modern institutions have frequently based their pedagogical practices on an idealized sense of ‘humanity’ and in so doing have created ‘outsiders’ that cannot seem to live up to our idealized notions of what that ‘humanity’ is and consists of. With these two ideas in mind, I wish to respond to the difficulties in facing humanity, particularly of course in relation to the upcoming exhibit and the discussion which surrounds it.

One of the central questions that the organizers have framed this symposium series The Impossible Conversation around is ‘who has the right to speak and be heard in our culture and our society, and how should we constitute ourselves to allow that to happen?’ It is a properly reflective question, I think, calling upon at least three modes of thought: 1) it reflects a political intent in asking “who has the right to speak”; 2) it reflects an existential intent in asking “who has the right to speak” and most importantly, to my mind, it 3) in asking “how should we constitute ourselves” gets to an ethical and aesthetic transformation that needs to take place among those of us who witness and listen with those who are speaking. That is, who is his ‘we’ that gets constituted? Jonathan Cummins’s exhibition ‘When I Leave These Landings’, and the series of talks leading up to its opening, are a stark testament to the complexity involved in engaging anyone in conversation. The pedagogical intent here cannot simply be reframed into a question about ‘us’ versus ‘them’ but how the very encounter between us stages a conversational space whereby the difficulty of witnessing – hearing things we don’t want to hear, confronting things about myself I cannot bear – can turn into the conditions for listening. Such spaces are never only about a ‘them’ who ‘we’ have to ‘tolerate’, instead the space itself creates a ‘we’, a community that resists easy categorization and makes us all participants in a common project. Conversations are not just about people speaking to each other, but about the nature of listening, of receiving, of being open to something or someone outside of myself.

But in what sense is a conversation difficult if not downright impossible? Sigmund Freud once wrote about what he called the three impossible professions: those involved in governing, healing, and teaching. For Freud, these are impossible because at the heart of their enterprises, they seek to influence others who have their own minds – minds which are, of course, not so amenable to influence. I would add that the artist is indeed also involved in a similarly impossible task: In seeking to create a conversation that necessarily provokes and incites emotional, political and moral conflict, the artist’s desire is at the very least to compel gallery goers to interrogate their own assumptions, and to introduce a dose of discomfort in order to get the process underway. However, conversation – or dialogue – is often used in politics generally as a purpose-driven instrument, where reasonable claims are made in the hope of coming to consensus. But the conversational space that this exhibition creates is of a different sort. It is not merely about creating a space of reason, but a space of true conversation, which is one of witnessing, listening, and reflection.
How can any conversation ever be guaranteed to lead to a predetermined outcome – does this not rub against the grain of having a conversation in the first place? Do we always need a specific goal for having conversations – do conversations always have to be about making decisions or coming to agreement, can they not just be about confronting each other? It is precisely this latter aspect of conversation, confronting each other face-to-face, that Cummins’s work focuses on. In this, the pedagogical space of transformation, the space through which we learn to become witnesses and listeners, is a difficult if not at times unbearable space. Nonetheless it provides an opportunity and forum for facing the particularly human face of disruption, resistance, outsidedness, in all its messiness and mundaneness. And this is the case both for those whose testimonies are portrayed in the exhibit as well as anyone viewing it.

It is precisely these types of conversations that are well worth having, it seems to me. They engage us in an uncomfortable practice of what I call facing humanity. So often in an attempt to achieve better social cohesion, projects are designed around what I think are one-sided views of humanity – humanity as something inherently good, as something to be cultivated, as something that needs to flourish. But what kind of idea of humanity is that? To what purpose do we seek to make up for our all too human mistakes by invoking an ideal of humanity that, as an ideal, can never be real, not part of the flesh and blood encounters that make up our social life? An ideal can never face up to the weight that reality casts as a burden upon each one of us. Is this invocation of humanity not merely a suppression of those intolerable aspects of ourselves? And who decides, anyway, how to define this humanity?

Simon Critchley (2007) has recently voiced similar concerns. He remarks that since humanity has been used to justify the exclusion of those with whom we are in conflict, “the slightly further left amongst us should also be careful about invoking the signifier of humanity in any oppositional politics” (143). Humanity, in his view, has been used as a justification for the so-called legitimate annihilation of those whom have been deemed as enemies. Similarly, political theorist Chantal Mouffe (2005) notes that throughout history the “wars raged in the name of humanity were particularly inhuman since all means were justified once the enemy had been presented as an outlaw of humanity” (78). Thus the tendency to use the idea of the humanity as a moralistic ground for exclusion should raise suspicion about our use of the term in all fields of educational, artistic, and political pursuit.

The term ‘humanity’, like so many others in our language, is a rather bizarre one, particularly given its traction within social and political movements, since it so easily reveals itself as an empty concept, bordering on meaninglessness. The poet Fernando Pessoa captures the absurdity well:

They spoke to me of people, and of humanity.
But I’ve never seen people, or humanity.
I’ve seen various people, astonishingly dissimilar,
Each separated from the next by unpeopled space.

The very abstraction of humanity from flesh and blood persons is part of the problem, it seems to me, when we continually invoke it in order to better our human relations. Might it not be possible to instead to better our social ways of life by allowing ourselves to be moved by the singular and the unique, by the face of the other?

It is worth remembering, I think, that historically speaking, the idea of humanity has often appeared on the scene as a sort of compensation for the devastation and suffering humans themselves have been responsible for creating. The various foundational appeals to humanity in documents such as the American Bill of Rights, the French Droits de l’Homme et du Citoyen and the UN Universal Declaration followed precisely on the heels of the devastation wrought by colonialism, the ancien régime and the Holocaust, respectively. Similarly, the European fascination with various aspects of the cosmopolitan project in the fairly recent past has come about in the shadow of the wars and ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia. Even more recent, the urgency with which intercultural and inter-religious themes have been placed on cultural, educational and political agendas is directly related to the highly polarized situation created after the US terrorist attacks and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The idea of humanity seems to have become a sign under which to mobilize forces against our “human, all too human” gift for mutual hatred and destruction. With this said, it would appear that our very hope in promoting humanity is also paradoxically bound up with the idea that our humanity has abandoned us, or more to the point perhaps, has been abandoned by us.
Yet, in appealing to humanity as a ground for non-violence, conflict resolution, or civil peace — that is, as the opposite of the violence which we find difficult to bear — risks, to my mind, the erasure of the very human element to be found in so-called “inhuman” violence, suffering and civil hardship. Indeed, as American philosopher Drucilla Cornell (2003) warns us, while violence is inexcusable on ethical grounds, there is nonetheless a human face that belongs to those who commit it (174). She argues that even terrorists are covered under the Kantian “ideal of humanity” umbrella; for without this protection, she warns, one falls easily into a justification of “inhumanity” itself. Although I am sympathetic to Cornell’s attempts to complicate what has become in the US a black-and-white portrayal of the human-inhuman divide, unlike Cornell, I am not so interested in seeing that everyone is included as part of some ideal of humanity as in proposing that the idea of humanity itself can be rethought as containing the human capacity for violence without seeing that violence merely as the negation of humanity. On this view, an idea of humanity includes within it both the capacity for dignity and freedom as well as the capacity to do harm to others. What needs to be explored further is how conceiving humanity on these terms can effectively motivate us to an ethical position of non-violence. By this I mean an ethical position that does not side-step the very question of violence as a human possibility and that does not return to certain humanitarian accounts of the “goodness” of humankind that merely serve to mask our undesirable elements. Instead, I turn to the notion of the face-to-face relation as expressed by the late French philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas in order to offer alternative understanding of humanity, one that enables the complexity of our lives to exist fully, if with difficulty in conversation with others.

In the conception of the face-to-face relation, Levinas recognizes the potentiality for violence that invites itself as a response to the complete exposure, or nakedness, of the other’s face. “The skin of the face is that which stays most naked, most destitute... The face is exposed, menaced, as if inviting us to an act of violence” (1985, 86). Paradoxically, however, Levinas also states the presence of the other’s face “imposes itself without violence” (1969, 218). What this means is that in my relation to the face, Levinas claims that there arises a possibility for violence at the same moment as it encounters its injunction. That is, the naked vulnerability of the face simultaneously tempts violence as it forbids it through its ethical challenge: “thou shalt not kill.” It is not that violence acts as a condition for non-violence, it is that the possibility for non-violence appears in the space where violence is capable of being committed. Levinas’s task is to depict a relationship of non-violence without banishing or denying the risk of the eruption of violence itself — for without a reminder of such a possibility, non-violence becomes a meaningless signifier; it literally makes no sense. When he writes, for instance, that “only beings capable of war can rise to peace” (1969, 222), he is not suggesting that war is a necessary prelude to peace, but that peace cannot itself be thought without considering our capacity for war. So, too, is the ethical possibility for non-violence unthinkable without admitting of the violent story of human interaction.

One is reminded of the performance piece by Marina Abramović and can see how easily this doubleness comes to the surface. She placed 72 objects on a table beside her and lied down naked. She told viewers she would not move for 6 hours, no matter what they did to her. The objects ranged from flowers and a feather boa to a knife and a loaded pistol. Initially, Abramović noted that viewers were peaceful and timid, but it escalated to violence quickly. “The experience I learned was that... if you leave decision to the public, you can be killed... I felt really violated: they cut my clothes, stuck rose thorns in my stomach, one person aimed the gun at my head, and another took it away. It created an aggressive atmosphere. After exactly 6 hours, as planned, I stood up and started walking toward the public. Everyone ran away, escaping an actual confrontation.” This is not merely a portrayal of the sadistic heights certain people can reach under certain conditions but also I think an occasion where she shows her humility to reveal to others the truth of their own capacities for violence and their inability to face these capacities.

Not only does the encounter with the face tempt a violence that is prohibited, giving rise to the possibility for non-violent interaction — but that the violence also works in the other direction as well. The other actually disturbs the apparent serenity and complacency of the ego’s identity. In facing someone, in facing Abramović perhaps, my own sense of myself is challenged. It is this “traumatic wounding”, as Levinas calls it, that ushers in a renewed sense of responsibility beyond conventional notions of the good.

The Good, he claims, does not come from within. We are not naturally born good, or evil for that matter. The good, Levinas says, comes from the other. It is a goodness only conceived in relation — not in rationality or autonomous freedom. This goodness, moreover, “persecutes” the ego: the I is haunted by it, ensnared within its demand without having a choice in the matter. Levinas writes: “[the good] has chosen me before I have chosen it. No one is good voluntarily” (1998, 11). The Good, in other words, comes before
me, comes prior to any decision I make to be good. What Levinas is getting at here has to do with the way in which the proximity to the other brings about an unavoidable responsibility with no hope for escape. It is not that the I cannot “refuse” to respond to others – we do so all the time in failing to meet the eyes of people who address us in the street, and in committing harms, both large and small. Yet, in Levinas’s terms, the “Evil” that is committed in refusing responsibility reveals that responsibility in spite of itself (2003, 50). Evil is only a momentary refusal of what is a basic (ethical) condition of human subjectivity.

On this view, the Good can neither be taught as a positive moral quality, nor can it exist as that which is intrinsic to the human being. The Good cannot be represented as a principle or as a guide for action. And this is because the Good emanates from within the relation to the other, from within the proximity to difference; it cannot be found “within man himself” or in any ideal that lies outside the human encounter. Since the good is located in the relation between myself and the other, a relation marked by trauma, the Good is not “good”, in our conventional meaning of the term. It is inextricably linked to the very violent structure of facing otherness, of facing another human face. To my mind, Levinas casts goodness in terms of “violence” because there is an inevitable affliction of pain and a consequent experience of suffering, which admits of the difficulties – and indeed traumas – that incur in facing difference. Levinas attempts to recuperate a subject of humanity, but not one sanitized from the sheer difficulties of facing that humanity, both literally and figuratively. While obviously proposing that such a facing is the place where the ethical possibility for nonviolence itself emerges, where the possibility for goodness emerges, Levinas recognizes nonetheless that there is something frightful and awesome to this facing. I think that his work suggests a more complicated picture of what humanity can entail, for it focuses on the specificity of human relations as a condition for respecting human difference, for respecting (and not agreeing with) an other that holds an entirely other position than the one I hold. For Levinas, humans are not humans by virtue of a prior, shared existence in humanity; the ego only comes into being through the traumatic encounter with an other whose existence is radically different from the ego’s own. Thus humanity it is not a preconceived ideal, but is located in the space of proximity where self and other meet.

And this is where our conversations begin, in this space of proximity, where there is an ever-present threat of violence. No wonder conversations are difficult or impossible, for they demand that huge risks be taken, without the assurance that everything will be just fine in the end. And even if we think we fail to communicate and understand one another are not failures of communication and understanding also starting points for other things to happen – ethically, aesthetically, politically?

Facing humanity in all its messiness seriously calls for exercising a certain humility, even when it seems impossible to do so, perhaps particularly when it seems impossible to do so. T.S. Eliot in the Four Quartets claims that ‘The only wisdom we can hope to acquire/ls the wisdom of humility: humility is endless.’ And although this may be all we have before us in our encounters with others, the point, I think, is that such humility bears with it a painful and difficult price, it is definitely not something to be romanticized or treated lightly. It is about the relinquishing of who we think we are when we witness and listen, and who it is we become, possibly, when not only the other has the right to speak, but when each one of us has the right to speak and listen in community, forging a new sense of ‘we’ in the process.


References


Levinas, Emmanuel. 1998 [1974], Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence. Translated by A. Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.


