Philosophical Inquiry in Education

Unlocking the World: Education in an Ethic of Hospitality (Claudia W. Ruitenberg)

Marina Schwimmer

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Review of

Unlocking the World: Education in an Ethic of Hospitality

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MARINA SCHWIMMER

McGill University

Contemporary ethics in education most commonly rely on a modernist conception of the subject, which values principles of autonomy, virtue and care. As Ruitenberg points out, this conception of subjectivity has been the target of many philosophical critiques in the past decades, especially from continental philosophers, because it relies on the questionable premise of the subject as self-presence, consciousness and mastery. However, because many educationists consider these critiques to be either overblown, relativistic or simply unproductive, they have refused, or failed, to take them into consideration. Relying in large part on Derrida's work on hospitality, *Unlocking the World: Education in an Ethic of Hospitality* undertakes the important task of addressing this failure. It convincingly shows the value of an ethical framework that assumes a decentered subject and what such a framework could look like in educational contexts.

The book is written in a very clear and even pedagogical style. Several useful distinctions are made (invitation/visitation; inclusion/welcoming; alterity/difference, etc.) and numerous concrete practices (related to multicultural, postcolonial or LGBTI-friendly education, for example) are examined. From a theoretical perspective, this style might in one sense seem inhospitable in the context of Derrida's emphasis on openness, play and indetermination. However, Ruitenberg's straightforward style perhaps creates another form of hospitality, which is also of importance in education: it opens Derrida's philosophy of hospitality to a fairly large audience of students, educators and other people interested in ethics and education. It should be added that the book should also interest more specialized scholars in the field at least for two reasons. First, it opens interesting avenues for thinking about some concrete implications of Derrida's philosophy for educational practices, especially by making some of Derrida's unpublished work on hospitality accessible. Second, it participates in the ongoing debate about the (a)political nature of Derrida's work.

The book comprises six chapters and a welcoming foreword by John Caputo. The first three chapters describe the nature, features and cultural implications of an ethic of hospitality. The latter three look carefully at the way an ethic of hospitality could be translated in the curriculum, in pedagogical practices and in democratic policies, especially in postcolonial contexts.

In the first chapter, Ruitenberg presents a conception of education as operating on a threshold. Education is both about introducing newcomers to past knowledge and traditions, and leaving a space open for them to introduce newness to the world. Drawing on Hannah Arendt's (1968) notion of natality, Ruitenberg argues that "education should be concerned with opening the world, with unlocking (or 'disclosing') it and making it available to children as their world" (p. 4). Education should not be about imposing pre-existing orders on children but about enlarging their understanding of them and allowing the

possibility to act upon them. She then introduces the notion of hospitality, drawing on the work of Jacques Derrida, as a purposeful metaphor for understanding the responsibility adults have, and educators particularly, to unlock the world for children. She acknowledges that Derrida's framework is greatly indebted to Levinas's work but preferred to turn to the former because she finds it more workable in concrete educational contexts. Unlike other ethical frameworks, the ethic of hospitality is not centered on the predefined responsibilities of the autonomous and rational subject, but revolves around the general responsibility, or as Ruitenberg puts it, the "ethos," of sharing the world with newcomers, of being open to their otherness, to the unknown, even if this means that the world as we know it, and perhaps as we might want to keep it, may be challenged (p. 16). This commitment to the possibility of change is most welcome in an increasingly sceptical and disenchanted world.

With a concern for acknowledging the complexity and inherent tensions constitutive of an ethic of hospitality, Chapter 2 provides an analysis of its core features. It first analyzes three impossible ethical demands entailed by the ethic of hospitality: the demand of addressing a guest who cannot be known in advance; the demand of protecting a home that must be surrendered to the guest; and the demand of giving without reciprocity. The chapter then analyzes questions about the nature of the non-reciprocal relation between host and guest. She claims that this relationship is not epistemic since hospitality does not, and cannot, require knowing the other. On the contrary, it requires a giving with no assurance of the result or destination. But she adds that the fact that students are fundamentally unknowable should not mean that the teacher should not want to know anything about them (p. 33). This is one of the first appearances of a certain indecisiveness regarding the status of the subject's identity, which she seems to cultivate and which will resurface over and over again in the book.

Chapter 3 opens on a consideration of the meaning of otherness in an ethic of hospitality. Ruitenberg argues that otherness need not be limited to the idea of *alterity* (i.e. the impossibility of knowing the other), but may also entail the idea of otherness as cultural, racial or gender *difference*. This consideration provides an entry for discussing issues related to the feminization of teaching, inequalities, cultural differences and the role of languages and mother tongue in education. She discusses how an ethic of hospitality should not be thought of as being attached to a specific gender, culture or language, but how specific (gendered, cultural and linguistic) contexts do influence enactments of hospitality. That is to say that in each particular context, the guest "is a singular other who needs to be received singularly" (p. 58). There is a fundamental tension here, which will be discussed more directly by the author in Chapter 6, between the idea of hospitability as an ethos of responsiveness to an unknowable singular *alterity*, and that of responsiveness to the other's singular *difference*. Here, the meaning of singularity seems to be drifting. And it is not clear how one is to approach a different (gendered, racialized, etc.) other without first having to categorize her/him as other, and without assuming that in some way their difference is identified, understood and de-singularized.

Following a discussion on the translational nature of the language of hospitality, and of language in general, Chapter 4 presents a conception of teaching as a critical translation of an inheritance. This provides the background for her discussion on the curriculum: "A hospitable curriculum offers a necessarily delimited course of knowledge into which students can be invited but also recognizes the permeability and openness to change of its own boundaries" (p. 72). In other words, a hospitable curriculum encourages the socio-historical understanding and questioning (or deconstruction) of its foundations, and is always opened to re-appropriation. Ruitenberg adds that a hospitable curriculum would not be conceived only as a vehicle for acquiring specific knowledge, but would rather allow some time and space for the free "study" of things. Study, in Jan Masschelein's (2012) phrase, is about "putting things on the table," disconnecting them from their normal purpose in society, in order to free and renew their use or meaning. It is knowledge for the sake of knowledge, not one that is motivated by external factors; it addresses the students and invites them to

dwell. Unfortunately, this section seems a bit rushed. One is left wondering how a school curriculum based on study would be structured and organised. These questions are partly addressed in the following chapter about pedagogy.

Chapter 5 mainly focuses on pedagogical gestures considered hospitable. Ruitenberg chooses to speak of gestures because she refuses to categorize certain pedagogies as hospitable and others as not. Even child-centered pedagogies, which may seem perfectly suited for hospitality, can turn out to be the very opposite, especially when they fail to "unlock the world" for students. In contrast, direct teaching, even if often perceived as encouraging passivity in learning, can be very hospitable, especially when it consists in presenting thoughts for "study." An important part of the chapter looks at Derrida's published and unpublished lectures on hospitality from 1995 and 1996 (Derrida, 2002; Derrida & Dufourmantelle, 2000), which serve as an example of such study. What is particularly interesting here is the attendance to a lived practice of hospitable teaching, which illustrates it and analyzes its possible meanings. The analysis generally remains in the context of higher education. It would be interesting to further explore how this approach may work in primary and secondary schools.

The question that seems to underlie the whole book is only addressed head-on at the very end. Chapter 6 is about the articulation of the *law* of unlimited hospitality (the ethic) with the *laws* of hospitality that are always conditional (the politics). Derrida's thought can be considered political in that it is founded on a faith in justice, however it does not translate into political action very well. Deconstruction consists of shaking the boundaries of dominant discourses, institutions and norms in order to open the possibility of thinking and doing outside those boundaries, which also means to open the possibility of something still unknown and unforeseen. Since it is not possible to rule and plan for the unknown and unforeseen, deconstruction cannot participate in defining laws without contradicting the meaning of its gesture. On the one hand, Ruitenberg acknowledges this when she states there is a certain irreducibility between ethics and politics: "An ethic of hospitality, as I have discussed in this book, always remains – and must remain – suspended between '*the* law' and 'the laws' of hospitality, between the two forces of the absolute gift and the reasonable calculation" (p.116). On the other hand, she insists that the two are not in absolute opposition. To argue this, she recalls Rancière's criticism of Derrida's apolitical perspective: Derrida fails to address questions of democracy and of government here and now, which means he avoids the question of equality (Rancière, 2009). According to Ruitenberg, this should not suggest an incompatibility between Rancière and Derrida because they both actually insist on the presupposition of equality, of a common unsubstitutability, in humankind. She acknowledges that they are looking at this from "different ends of the telescope" (p. 126): Rancière is looking from the perspective of the oppressed (with their needs for actual democratic laws) whereas Derrida is looking from the perspective of those (anyone really) in a position to offer hospitality. But it seems that Derrida adopts an ethical perspective, and not a political one, precisely because the idea of a political project predefined by the goal of equality is in opposition to the very project of deconstruction. Derrida's "democracy to come" cannot be predefined; it is a promise of a form of justice that cannot be imagined in advance.

In all, I strongly recommend this book. It provides an accessible but sensitive account of a counter-discourse too often dismissed in educational circles. It also provides a very nice example of how engaging and fruitful the tension between continental and analytical philosophy may prove.

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About the Author

Marina Schwimmer is a postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Integrated Studies in Education at McGill University. Her current research seeks to locate the presence of the personal growth ideology, one that is distinctively New Age in style, in Quebec's educational discourses. She is particularly interested in the translation processes that occur between educational researches, policies and practices. She can be reached at meschwi2002@yahoo.fr