What is the Thing in Thing-Centered Pedagogy?

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In advocating for an ontological description of the teacher as a lover of the world, Joris Vlieghe and Piotr Zamojski argue that enacting this unconditional love involves finding a middle ground between teacher-centered pedagogy and student-centered pedagogy, wherein the focus for the teacher and students alike is on *the thing*. Distinguished from objects, things are defined as subject matter to which the teacher directs student gaze, showing that "the thing of study actually 'matters.'"[1] By attending to the thing, students and teachers come under its "material authority," avoiding the problems of teacher- and student-centered pedagogy.[2] Since school is an "attention machine," if teachers can demonstrate their unconditional love for the world by attending to the things in it, students can renew and transform our common world.[3] In this paper, I argue that in limiting thingness to subject matter(s), Vlieghe and Zamojski limit the educative value of thing-centered pedagogy and put conditions on the teacher's love for the world. Troubling Vlieghe and Zamojski's insistence on a singular world and their reading of Jacques Rancière, I draw on Tyson Lewis's and Karen Barad's respective analyses of speculative and agential realism to call for a stronger account of thing-centered pedagogy.

"THE" MATERIAL AUTHORITY

Vlieghe and Zamojski characterize love as unconditional: "a devotion that is not based on any external reason, but that is just for the sake of the thing in question."[4] "Educational love," they argue, requires that this unconditional love for a thing be shared with others, particularly the new generations, so that this thing can be renewed.[5]

On one level, the value of the loved thing is inherent—the thing is lovable in itself, as itself. On another *educational* level, the value is identified as an external value, needing transmission to subsist: a teacher needs to show you to love a thing so that you too can love it. In both cases, the loving or valuing comes from the lover. If we take the thing to be the world, so that love for the world can continue on to future generations and there can be hope that lovers care for the world so that it grows in positive ways, educational love for the thing amounts to pointing to a singular conception of the world and calling on students to adopt a positive orientation toward it.[6]

Vlieghe and Zamojski draw from Rancière in order to illustrate the pedagogical value of shared attention on a singular thing. Using Rancière's description of the teacher, Jacotot, who used a singular text as a means of teaching translation of a language he did not himself understand, Vlieghe and Zamojski highlight the way in which a thing can have transformational powers: if we can all use this *one thing* to learn a new skill, this *one thing* must be important. Of course, it is not the thing itself here that is transformational; Vlieghe and Zamojski are not arguing that teachers should love the singular text Jacotot used, but instead are using Jacotot as an example of the power of singular focus on *any* thing. What is important for their argument, and in drawing on Rancière to illustrate this point, is that the thing which is loved can become an equal authority for the teacher and the students alike. Jacotot did not understand the text, and neither did his students. Equal in their ignorance, the teacher and students attend to the thing and are thereby transformed. Hence, learning occurs. Vlieghe and Zamojski argue that it is by demonstrating and enabling the act of singular focus on a thing that a teacher's educational love can foster in students a love for the world, and thereby a hope for the world's

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renewal.[7] Material authority is thus a means of equalizing teacher and students, of finding that middle ground between teacher- and student-centered pedagogy.

While the ignorant schoolmaster is interpreted as a model pedagogue who challenges hierarchy through his very being, the thing-centered approach is not offered as a Rancierian solution to problems inherent in education or schooling. Indeed, the ignorant schoolmaster is offered as a demonstration of how one can assume equality, or be ignorant of inequality.[8] Yes, Jacotot was ignorant of Flemish, thus traditionally viewed as incapable of teaching the language. Yes, he "taught" it anyway, despite his ignorance. Rancière's point, however, was not that thing-centeredness ensures an ignorance of inequality—only that this particular story exemplifies how one can assume equality. Contrary to the traditional pedagogical assumption that a teacher possesses intelligence and the students do not, the Rancierian alternative is that a teacher is merely in a particular relation to a student such that the teacher can impose his/her will upon the will of the student. Beliefs about intelligence are up to the teacher and the student. Each of us only has our orientation toward the objects of study; we may differ in our positions and in our familiarity with an object, but we are equal in our intelligence and in our capacity to relate to said objects.

To take this Rancierian insight to mean that thing-centeredness is the solution to educational inequality is to misread the Jacotot example. Yet Vlieghe and Zamojski are not starting out with the intention of combating inequality. Indeed, within their larger project of providing an ontology of teaching, the reference to Rancière is given in passing to support the conclusion that thing-loving is a way for the teacher to introduce the young, of innately "unequal" status, to the

world they are inheriting. So if the praise for thing-centeredness need not perfectly align with the Rancierian concern for inequality, what is the payoff of scrutinizing this misreading?

As Vlieghe and Zamojski note, Rancière's advocacy for an ignorance of inequality on the part of teachers is an extension of his critique of the pedagogization of society: inequality is perpetuated by an assumption that the world itself must always be explained, that our intelligence is verified by experts, and that disparities in intelligence account for disparities of all kinds.[9] This pedagogization of society, however, is merely one way that Rancière describes society itself, which he elsewhere argues is necessarily shaped by the police order.[10] The Rancierian conception of our human world entails prescribed ways of understanding, articulating, and moving.[11] The police order is our shared human world, a subconsciously consensual hierarchy operating under the name of democracy, a world in which the only true acts of democracy are those which disrupt the overt mechanisms of democracy, which occur through dissensus or disagreement within norms of language, representation, and being. Within this seemingly negative picture of the world is an undercurrent of optimism: the inequality of society is only possible due to an equality among its participants.[12]

Now, Vlieghe and Zamojski take thing-centeredness as an appropriate action within the unequal relation between teachers and students. They even endorse Rancière's insistence on an underlying equality enabling inequality. Yet Rancière explicitly argues that any pedagogy or teaching method will contradict its aim of establishing equality.[13] Indeed, method is police order. Equality cannot become a universal or a singular pedagogy or method, but can only be assumed in the disparate actions of individuals. If a thing in common is incor-

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porated as a pedagogical method it no longer serves the equalizing role Vlieghe and Zamojski seek; Rancière's Jacototian example is a one-off example, not a model to be essentialized.

Vlieghe and Zamojski are transparent in their intention to weave together ideas from thinkers in order to substantiate a theory of what it means to be a teacher, so there is no problem methodologically with taking only a bit of Rancière and leaving the rest. Recognizing what has been left out from the Rancierian theory, however, can shed light on what may be left out of the emerging ontology of teaching. Rancière's conception of the police order may appear to paint a bleak portrait of our common world. Yet a strength in Rancière's approach is that it *critiques* the common world, drawing a distinction between the police order's attempts to represent truth, and the principle of veracity we each possess, whereby truth is something equally and uniquely internal, never represented.[14] Though he resists formalizing any of his proposals and evades ontological theorization, one might interpret Rancière's theory as a kind of ontology. While Vlieghe and Zamojski lay down groundwork for an ontology of teaching, it seems in this groundwork that *being itself* is taken for granted. In other words, the common world—described as necessarily singular for the purposes of education—is not problematized. Love for the world in this way is love for the given common world; the things in our common world are presented as unproblematic entities in a neutral, shared space. In the interest of affirming and loving the world, and in the interest of evading the problems of both teacher- and student-centered pedagogy, perhaps there is merit to thinking more carefully about our shared world, about being. While Vlieghe and Zamojski explicitly state that they do not want to politicize pedagogy nor critique the world, and instead want to be affirmative, they arrive at their project by critiquing the limitations of both teacher- and student-centered pedagogy. Their

thing-centered pedagogy, however, may unintentionally still be very much teacher- and student-centered. To the extent that perception is taken for granted and subject matter is treated as a thing, Vlieghe and Zamojski's thing-centeredness and love for the world in fact leaves things and the world *out*.

For Vlieghe and Zamojski the thing itself, the world worthy of renewal, is singular: "A true educational stance asserts that there is only one world, our world. And that this world is to be discovered rather than to be constructed from a myriad of personal perspectives."[15] Elsewhere, Vlieghe and Zamojski put it even more strongly: "If there is no common world—there is no education."[16] There is objectivity to our shared world, which obtains regardless of our personal perspectives. It would seem that this is strict materialism, and indeed, the notion of a thing-centered pedagogy implies as much. Yet two aspects of the theory make this materialism problematic: the allegedly intrinsic value of the thing(s) are dependent on attention, and the common world appears to be merely the world of human values. Vlieghe and Zamojski may be okay with this reading, for their goal is not to provide a materialist account of teaching. It is not clear, however, that they have provided a basis for claiming an objectivity to the world. As such, their argument is in danger of supporting a dogmatic and even self-gratifying pedagogy. While one assignment they describe involves having students write declarations of why their area of specialization is an important field—a thing deserving of attention and renewal by the younger generations—this seems to support a kind of fanaticism more than an attentiveness to intrinsic value in the world.[17] What is grounding the value? What prevents this theory from justifying any old fanatic in insisting that children appreciate whatever it is that they happen to like?

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The commonality of the world is central to Vlieghe and Zamojski's position, as is the intrinsic value of things, yet the things of value are determined by attention and love—from those elders in positions of power, positions to which we are not to refer. These elders are pointing to a singularity which they have designated as *the* world, and in it, *the* things. While in my view this starts to feel quite far from a good educational environment, an aspect of the overall theory which does seem educational to me has yet to be addressed: the formulation of the self. Vlieghe and Zamojski discuss this only on the side of the teacher, for that is the focus of their ontology of teaching. However, the ontological assumptions embedded in their discussion leave some hope for avoiding the danger of dogma. In the second half of this paper, I explore the notion of the self in relation to things in order to argue that the only common world that can affirmatively support this ontology of teaching is one which is pre-linguistic, post-human, and admitting of a plurality of worlds. Lewis and Barad, I propose, offer useful frameworks through which to rethink thingness.

SPECULATIVE AND AGENTIAL REALISM

The commonality of the world that can be renewed, I contend, is not one characterized by subject matter, disciplines, bodies of knowledge, or language. Indeed, these are already teacher- and student-centered insofar as they have had meaning attributed to them; this is most obvious if the important thing in thing-centeredness is a subject matter, for subject matters are constructed, delineated areas of study. Instead, the common world that renews itself each moment is conscious experience. A thing-centered pedagogy can be an appreciation of becoming—of our conscious experience of things, and the subsequent and inevitable attachment, avoidance, and meaning-mak-

ing. Tyson Lewis's description of an "aesthetic pedagogy of things" may be seen as synonymous:

> A new educational practice that would route our collective attention away from issues of cultivating human-centered knowledge, skills, and aptitudes toward a perceptual receptivity and attentiveness to things that fall outside our worldly concerns.[18]

Decentering our meaning-making, looking at the world with open eyes, without judgment, amounts to a consciousness of things before they become anything more. In this way, speculative realism disrupts the tendency to turn things into subject matter, to treat subject matter as things. In an educational setting, this supports a kind of disorientation. Attention to things simply as they are, as Lewis puts it, can be understood as:

> An interruption of anthropocentric (human-centered) educational aims, opening up a space wherein the mere thingliness of the thing can appear in its own right. The goal here is not to reduce things to resources that can be studied in order to improve human worlds. Rather it is to let shine the irreducible material power of things.[19]

In this way, there can truly be material authority, rather than authority of bodies of knowledge and sets of practices (subject matters) that are not truly material at all.

If a teacher's love for a thing(s) is truly unconditional, then he/she must let it go, and not try to control its continuity into the future. Vlieghe and Zamojski almost affirm this in their insistence that "an educational attitude testifies to a full affirmation of good in the present," yet they fall back on the idea that teachers should help

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new generations be attentive to the loved things and care for them (while also beginning anew in unforeseeable ways).[20] In order to really affirm good in the present, I argue, one must remember that how the student responds is not within the teacher's control. If the value of the thing(s) is truly intrinsic, it does not depend on a teacher loving it or sharing this love any more than it depends on a student loving it and sharing this love. Try as we may to communicate and renew our particular love(s) for thing(s), we must love unconditionally, and allow others to renew this love as they wish. We must allow for other worlds. The process of education does not need to be linear and unidirectional, for the value of the thing(s)—of reality, of existence—will persist and has persisted in each moment, long before and long after any particular generations' attestations to it.

My suggestion is that the thingness in thing-centered pedagogy be made stronger, such that the educative value exists before the thing becomes a subject matter, a work of art, or a referent; if the things in thing-centered pedagogy are only subject matters and works of art, perhaps it is a misnomer to call this thing-centeredness. Vlieghe and Zamojski write that in giving the world or a thing in it attention, we "give a thing a voice, which means that for a moment we are forgetting about ourselves."[21] This "self-forgetting" is not in the interest of self-lessness, for the teacher is continually engaged in self-formation through these acts of self-forgetting and letting oneself go.[22] By caring for his/her thing of study, he/she is caring for his/herself.[23] Truth here is important for Vlieghe and Zamojski, though it is not the Truth with a capital "T": "Truth is all about striving towards a consistency between one's life and one's doings, and the self one wants to be."[24] Truth in this sense is concerned with authenticity, an unconditional love for the things one loves, and an honesty about what one loves. The self thus exists and dissolves through this act of

love, through this attention, and this is where truth is found.

Despite Vlieghe and Zamojski insisting that there is some common, true world needed for any educative act, I suggest that the common world that should be renewed is the space of meditation itself, a space in which each person (can) find his/herself, recognizing their relation to being, to things. This is a space of giving attention and loving, unconditionally, regardless of what the thing does. This is a space of giving attention and recognizing the self through recognition of the other—what Karen Barad refers to as differential becoming.[25] So it may not be being itself, or things, but becoming—centering on the things and being aware of our relation and connection to things, to the other. As Barad writes, in her defense of agential realism:

> Practices of knowing and being are not isolable; they are mutually implicated. We don't obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because we are *of* the world. We are part of the world in its differential becoming. The separation of epistemology from ontology is a reverberation of a metaphysics that assumes an inherent difference between human and nonhuman, subject and object, mind and body, matter and discourse… what we need is something like an ethi-co-onto-epistem-ology—an appreciation of the intertwining of ethics, knowing, and being—since each intra-action matters, since the possibilities for what the world may become call out in the pause that precedes each breath before a moment comes into being and the world is remade again, because the becoming of the world is a deeply ethical matter.[26]

The teacher and the student can hold space for being aware of things and for holding care, garnering responsibility for this thingness of reality, of the world, of the other, before it is discussed, analyzed,

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and assessed. The world that ought to be renewed is an awareness of our interdependence—in the fact that our selves are constituted by what we place our attention on, by what we call not-ourselves; in the fact that as we assign value to things through our attention; and in the fact that we cannot force others to replicate our perspective nor our value-attribution.

The third option between teacher-centered pedagogy and student-centered pedagogy that Vlieghe and Zamojski offer amounts to teachers perpetuating a singular human-centered world, giving attention to subject matter, and students following in the teacher's footsteps. To make this truly thing-centered, the humans need to take a step back. As Lewis puts it, there is a "unique pedagogical agency of things to suspend human-centered worldliness."[27] Anyone and anything can remind another to be present, to be aware. Children are quite good at this. Non-human animals are great at this. Trees do a fine job of this. The world that ought to be renewed is loving attention to reality as such. We ought to renew a recognition that the ways that things enter into the common world (through perception, conceptualization, and language) and persist through time across generations is *extraneous* to the things themselves. If there is inherent value to being, it precedes our saying so. The ways in which we are all always becoming—this is where we ought to put our love and attention. In the eternally present educative moment, there is no subject matter; there is only attention—a mere relation. Unjudged, uncategorized, unconditional: love.

1 Joris Vlieghe and Piotr Zamojski, *Towards an Ontology of Teaching: Thing-centered Pedagogy, Affirmation and Love for the World* (Cham: Springer Nature, 2019), 8, 24.

2 Vlieghe and Zamojski, *Towards an Ontology of Teaching*, 24.

3 Vlieghe and Zamojski, *Towards an Ontology of Teaching*, 25–27.

4 Vlieghe and Zamojski, *Towards an Ontology of Teaching*, 36.

5 Vlieghe and Zamojski, *Towards an Ontology of Teaching*, 36.

6 Though Vlieghe and Zamojski admit in passing that there can be multiple 'worlds' in the psychological and sociological sense, they assume as a starting point that for the very possibility of education "there can be only one world." *Towards an Ontology of Teaching,* 24.

7 Vlieghe and Zamojski, *Towards an Ontology of Teaching*, 52–54.

8 Jacques Rancière, "The Emancipated Spectator," *Art Forum* 45, no. 7 (2007): 277.

9 Vlieghe and Zamojski, *Towards an Ontology of Teaching*, 14.

10 Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 29; Jacques Rancière, "On Ignorant Schoolmasters," in *Jacques Rancière: Education, Truth, Emancipation,* trans. Charles Bingham, eds. Charles Bingham and Gert Biesta (New York: Continuum, 2010), 14.

11 Jacques Rancière, "The Thinking of Dissensus," in *Reading Rancière,* eds. Paul Bowman and Richard Stamp (New York: Continuum, 2011), 6-7.

12 Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. Kristin Ross (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 72–73.

13 Rancière, "On Ignorant Schoolmasters," 15.

14 Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster,* 58–59.

15 Vlieghe and Zamojski, *Towards an Ontology of Teaching*, 108.

16 Vlieghe and Zamojski, *Towards an Ontology of Teaching*, 159.

17 Vlieghe and Zamojski, *Towards an Ontology of Teaching*, 107–110.

18 Tyson Lewis, "The Pedagogical Power of Things: Towards a Post-Inten-

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tional Phenomenology of Learning," *Cultural Critique* 98 (2018), 122.

19 Lewis, "The Pedagogical Power of Things," 123.

20 Vlieghe and Zamojski, *Towards an Ontology of Teaching*, 162–163.

21 Vlieghe and Zamojski, *Towards an Ontology of Teaching*, 93.

22 Vlieghe and Zamojski, *Towards an Ontology of Teaching*, 37, 104.

23 Vlieghe and Zamojski, *Towards an Ontology of Teaching,* 104.

24 Vlieghe and Zamojski, *Towards an Ontology of Teaching,* 105.

25 Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 185.

26 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway,* 185.

27 Lewis, "The Pedagogical Power of Things," 127.