

# Teaching Philosophy as a Pedagogic Practice-ing: Are you the Type of Person that Says, “Everything Happens for a Reason”?

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## **Abstract**

In this paper, I discuss a classroom activity that was intended to create an environment attentive enough for students to scrutinize whether their touted beliefs matched their implicit assumptions. Drawing upon Emmanuel Levinas’s ethics of the face-to-face relation, Carol A. Taylor’s posthuman orientations for pedagogical practice-ings, and Bickel’s and Fisher’s emergent theory of art-care, I explore my pedagogical approach in teaching philosophy to explain how affective encounters in *communitas* between teacher and learners can expand personal understandings and imagine new meaningful possibilities together. These affective encounters serve an ethic of concern where each is capable of a unique response and where each intra-action matters in the process of co-poiesis. For me, these pedagogical practice-ings helped to understand the use of creative imagination and illustrate an approach that was implicit in the classroom activity chosen for reflection.

## **Bio**

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*The extra-credit assignment for a reflective essay was due in our next class meeting for three points. An evening before it was due, I received an email from a student. They would like to submit the assignment but didn't feel safe printing the reflection at home. The content was too sensitive. Would I mind still accepting the reflection that was due for points? Of course. Of course, I would print it myself and accept it for credit. The student received a printed copy with my notes during our next class. A final note included one of gratitude for a reflection that made them so vulnerable.*

*Another student shared in class that they did not expect to hold a theistic worldview. It was a surprise to them, as much as it made sense to say in times of distress that "everything happens for a reason." And after some reflection, it made sense that this would imply the need for something to order those parts, those accidents, those incidents in our lives to an ultimate purpose. Learners in the class appreciated the insight into themselves and mentioned it in most classes thereafter. Every other realization we had together in the class, those two learners would say, was never as bad as the realization from our first day. At the end of the semester, learners were asked to choose two authors from our syllabus and a contemporary moral dilemma to create an imaginative set and scene with dialogue between the two opposing authors. Creating the scene provided students the space to synthesize the course's material with their spontaneous responses from the beginning of the semester and to continue unfolding their own creative possibilities.*

## **I. My Implicit Orienting Pedagogical Practice-ings**

Our deliberations and readings about ontological approaches where pedagogy is seen as relational and ethical informs our work. More particularly, we consider how an affirmative and response-able pedagogy might be enacted—one which shifts beyond distancing and critique, with an openness towards new possibilities through relational responses of becoming-with and rendering each other capable. (Haraway, 2016, p. 20)

**I**n preparation for my class titled, "Philosophy: Human Nature and the Meaning of Life," I knew I had to go big or go home. Everyone expects to take a class with such a title and leave moved, enriched, and hopefully even dumbfounded. In a classroom deep in the city, the class consists mostly of first-generation learners and is shared among many who transfer from inner-city communities. They have ambitiously worked hard to get into this State University, and I often see a lot of effort put in for how to study, how to focus, and how to engage. For their success, I try to meet them where they are and provide tools that match their pace. I also aim to wow them in our first meeting.

They needed to see that they signed up for more than just a dump of information that goes into their brain and culminates with a few tests, memorizing names on a timeline, and a final grade. They should be moved by the questions we explore—to see how they've probably asked themselves age-old questions about why we are here, where we are going as a people, and what our responsibilities are as individuals.

Learners in the classroom have probably asked the same questions that Socrates, Aristotle, Nietzsche, and John Lennon asked before them. Often, we have our own answers to these questions. Are the answers that we tell ourselves consistent? Do they hide biases? Would they be changed if critically viewed?

In the following paper, I closely examine a class activity and final project as a practice that integrates the arts in an interdisciplinary way with philosophical questions to enhance the quality of these learner's lives (Eberhart & Atkins, 2014). These learners' spontaneous responses and culminating creative projects are also viewed through the lens of Carol A. Taylor's (2018) orientations for a posthuman relational ethic. To better understand the process of becoming alongside others in a spontaneous and formative relation between teacher and learners, we practiced imaginative creativity alongside intellectual exploration. Through the lens of art-care theory, which Barbara Bickel and Michael A. Fisher (2023) describe as a processes of *co-poiesis* in *communitas* with others, I will discuss how students alongside myself moved through these processes towards discovering new creative phases with one another.

I started with this: spontaneous response and self-critique. The room on our first day commenced with wonder. Take out two half-sheets of paper and simply write yes or no in response to this question: Are you the type of person who says, "Everything happens for a reason?" I collected one sheet of paper with their answer as a symbolic form of accountability. Learners kept the other paper as a reminder about the position with which they started the class. Some took more time than others to write a response, and that was OK. I told them their responses would not be graded, but that I was working on their philosophical "intuition pump." Learners would soon discover for themselves whether they were oriented to believe in a God, higher power, or as the philosophers call it, an intelligent designer.<sup>1</sup> Individually or socially, we may find meanings and reasons for the events of our lives, but my question meant to probe for a possible critique into whether learners in the classroom assumed that events have an inherent purpose beyond what individuals or societies assign.

Most students' explicit claims were aligned with their implicit belief. If their answer was "no" they weren't the type of person to say that everything happens for a reason, then they most likely didn't believe in an intelligent designer who imbues the world with meaning, or as the ancient Greeks called it the *teleological ends* of nature.<sup>2</sup> Those who answered "yes" seemed comfortable with the idea that yes, the philosopher's intelligent designer that we call "God" exists. These students often come from religious homes or are inclined to believe in things like Karma, reincarnation, or moral retribution for events in a world full of apparent grievances. They would argue that one day these grievances would be reconciled by that which set forth these seemingly disparate pieces, namely by the intelligent designer who put them all together. A very generative discussion followed over the semester about what the nature of God might be, whether this was the only way to conceive of God, and whether these two options had to remain an either/or bifurcation. It was important for me, however, that they know at this initial stage of their learning their basic orientation in the question. It was exciting for students to understand that such a seemingly trivial utterance could have larger implications for their implicit beliefs. The exercise became interesting, and started to ignite sparks of curiosity when what a student wrote did not align with the belief they usually espouse.

One student came from a religious household but wrote "no" on their sheet of paper. They are not the type of person that would say everything happens for a reason. Here was a case where one's beliefs might

change after a critical evaluation. Is this a betrayal? A heresy? A mistake? What went wrong? Did they do the assignment wrong? Maybe they didn't understand the question. My role as facilitator of this exercise, and my use of what I would later come to understand as an attentive and response-able pedagogical tool, was to reassure them that they did the exercise exactly right. My goal was to create a space to become-with-the-other for the possibility of something new to happen (Haraway, 2008). For some, something new did happen in the *poiesis* of their spontaneous response. *Poiesis* in Greek means to come to know by creating in a process that is reciprocal and interdependent (Levine, 1997, 2019). One learner became aware of themselves in an apparent contradiction, and I was there to imagine new creative possibilities alongside them.

Another learner with contradictory views would often proclaim themselves an atheist. They were clearly familiar with post-structural theory and the idea that most norms are social constructs. They wrote "yes" on their sheet of paper. Everything that happens has an inherent meaning or purpose. Of course, the division between atheist and theist isn't so binary as this exercise would make it seem. In our generative discussions during and after the exercise, we clarified that these "reasons" can be attributed by an individual trying to make sense of an event in their past, or by society to find reason in a local tragedy and yield some benefit (i.e., to work towards better gun laws after a school shooting). As represented in various religions and spiritual beliefs, there is the reason, order, meaning, and fulfillment that an im/personal being as such is understood to possess and imbue within existence. There is admittedly a lot of gray area to cover, which we would explore over the course of the term. The exercise, however, means to decenter each participant from their explicit views into an unexpected liminal space in imaginative intuition for a response, to come back with a new awareness of themselves and the consistency of their beliefs (Atkins & Snyder, 2018). Their critical reflections over the semester and final culminating projects to stage a scene between opposing authors in a contemporary moral dilemma, such as the war between Ukraine and Russia (2022) or the overturning of abortion rights in the U.S.A. (2022), through storytelling, drama, visual-arts, and imagery provided the creative grounds to move between entrenched positions.

As one learner told me during that session, they didn't sign up to a class with this title to be taught by rote. They were looking for depth, to be moved, and they were lucky because that was my exact goal. I wanted them to experience the bewilderment that a question about the meaning of life can make us feel. I intended to establish a space for the kind of spontaneous inspiration that can lead to artmaking, and to initiate their curiosity about the answers that other great minds provided to these same questions. If I was lucky then maybe, just maybe, they would feel the conflict in our all-too-human answers for a curiosity that could never be quelled. Our continued reflection through the term on the question of meaning, and exploration of the paradoxical answers was a pleasure in the class overall. We began with St. Thomas as Aquinas' *Five Arguments for the Existence of God* and moved through Descartes' enlightened subject whose ideas touch the infinite, only to make our way toward existentialism and the absurd meaning of life imagined in the post-enlightenment era.

Through these authors' texts over the course of the semester, learners were able to understand different positions in parameters that were relevant to the context of their lives. Even if they didn't agree with the authors' positions, they chose to embody them in the scene of their final project and were responsible to at least understand them. Additionally, the scene enabled them to process moral dilemmas that touched their lives since each group had the freedom to pick which authors, and which moral dilemma they

would use. In this process, they entered creative liminal spaces to imagine how these authors would dialogue in the contemporary world. These presentations spanned from humorous, to dramatic, and poetic at times. In one presentation, Snow White was put to trial for her relationship and impregnation by one of the seven dwarfs. In another, Albert Camus' absurdist position spoke directly to Aristotle on virtue while the war in Ukraine waged outside the coffee shop where they spoke. They set pictures as background images and played sounds such as bombs exploding in the distance. Some came in wardrobes and costumes. Audience members laughed, or cried, and burst into applause when significant moments were felt. Finally, after their imagination was nurtured and activated through the scene to envision new ways of being, they were asked to reflect on the process as part of the assignment. If art results from the demarcation of an experience as special, as Suzi Gablik argues (1995), then the spontaneous responses of the art-making process that began at the start of the term culminated with the scripts that we created together. Learner and writer Brianna Darlene who began the term with religious beliefs submitted a poem for reflection on existentialism at the end of the term:

What struck me most regarding Sartre's philosophy was his opposition to socially imposed expectations and norms. This encourages us to infinitely question the world, and its structures we function within. Reflecting on this aspect of Sartre's philosophy left me to pen this poem. It's meant as a reflection on humanity's [*sic*] authoritative agency to shape society, and the world around us. Existentialism:

Incorporeal thoughts supersede the artifice of sense.  
Executions blade begets Hydra's kin.  
Born of a singular thought condemned,  
By the individual collective—devoted to self-interest.  
Authors of the cosmological compass, guiding our existential ethics.  
The value of a thought, a word, a sound.  
Encapsulated within our self-circumscribed holy ground.<sup>3</sup>

By the end of the course, my hope is that those who tout themselves as atheists would be able to imagine and understand the legitimacy of a position that finds order, harmony, and the matching of actions with their ends. At the same time, theists could also start to better imagine and understand why others may not see the harmony that they take for granted. Every position between these could be negotiated through the scenes they imagined and created to go off-script. They could become enlarged in this process, and I've come to understand that it was my role and responsibility as facilitator to harness their dis/comfort in this very vulnerable and liminal space so that, like Hydra, more heads could prevail to experience and creatively think through new possibilities. Let me explain my pedagogical approach and practice-ings.

## **II. Theoretical Ground for My Pedagogical Practice-ings**

On the ethical plane, the matrixial accessibility to the other implies becoming vulnerable in the Levinasian sense: being exposed to the other, to the point where the Other becomes traumatizing to me. But in the matrixial sphere, what this vulnerability implies is not a sacrifice of myself in a disappearing for the sake of the Other, but rather a partial disappearing to allow jointness. (Ettinger, 2006, p. 144)

Ettinger's (2006) emphasis on *matrixial accessibility* illuminates an elemental connectedness to relate to another that originates in the womb and that facilitates this difficult relation. While parts of us are lost in these self-shattering or traumatizing encounters, another's attentiveness in this joint process recalls a curative possibility. Also inspired by the work of Emmanuel Levinas, my way of being in this world and relating in the classroom begins with ethical responsibility that closely aligns with a response-ability, that is my ethical ability to see and respond to the face of the other, which is a "manifestation of the face over and beyond form [...] To give meaning to one's presence is an event irreducible to evidence. It does not enter into an intuition; it is a presence more direct than visible manifestation, and at the same time a remote presence—that of the other. This presence dominates him who welcomes it, comes from the heights, unforeseen, and consequently teaches its very novelty" (Levinas, 1961, p. 66). The focus here addresses affects often involuntarily received from others and recasts moral responsibility from impersonal calculations to my response in the here and now, on a particular occasion.

Levinas's phenomenology prioritizes that which does not appear and urges us to apprehend the vulnerability, needs, and concerns of the other who we face before we even notice any other empirical features, such as the color of their eyes. In a pre-intuitive and pre-philosophical orientation that comes closer to artistic expression, Levinas continues to give credit to the eye as another mouth with its own form of expression. He writes, "The eyes break through the mask—the language of the eyes, impossible to disassemble. The eye does not shine; it speaks. The alternative of truth and lying, of sincerity and dissimulation, is the prerogative of him who abides in the relation of absolute frankness, in the absolute frankness which cannot hide itself" (Levinas, 1961, p. 66). When I come to that classroom with the multitude of learners, who themselves come with their own masks and histories, I try to remember this teaching. To listen through their eyes which do not only see but speak. The plastic form of the face will not show anyone's inner world, but if I am attentive enough, I might be able to relate, access, or attune to the unforeseen, that which is indubitably present in its remote presence. Sally Atkins (2018) explains that our ability to respond through care and give form to sensory and imaginative experiences of the world together affirms the complications of our lives and moves them toward an aesthetic responsibility that embraces their beauty. A creative moment can emerge between two in an ethical relation, only the markings of this art are made in the new forms of ourselves.

The ethical response-ability that I have is not to fix, answer, or clarify the concerns that I encounter as a paternalistic morality would, but instead to allow another to speak and to practice my listening in a destabilizing encounter. How do I articulate this kind of relation if it cannot be articulated in language or empirical knowledge? I have often asked myself this question as an instructor, and as someone who is sensitive to a Levinasian ethic. Though these encounters make us vulnerable, they also enlarge and transform our sense of self alongside others. In my case, vulnerability and transformation was implicit in my encounters with these learners. I received glimpses and traces of a learner's household so dogmatic that it was threatened by a reflection printed on a piece of paper. Though the view is not so foreign to my own traditional upbringing, a real threat emerged and reverberated personally for me.

Here was an extreme threat I never personally experienced, but now had to sit-with alongside another in the class. Carol A. Taylor is instructive with five orienting practices that can help instructors attune and respond to these kinds of events in the classroom. In her article, *Each Intra-Action Matters: Towards a Posthuman Ethics for Enlarging Response-Ability in Higher Education Pedagogic Practice-ings*, Taylor

(2018) provides a methodology and specific tools to engage classrooms in a way that makes both instructor and learners quite vulnerable with the goal to create a sense of jointness. Before I show how Taylor's pedagogic practice illuminates important aspects of the exercise in my classroom, I want to turn to bell hooks on the revolutionary ways we can engage in *critical (critique) education* that reminds us of the high stakes involved.

In hooks' (1995) call to raise awareness in black subjectivity against the introjected colonized self and the forces of domination, she argues that programs of critical education must be created. To exercise freedom, the imagination must be set free so that "we begin to understand the need for promoting and celebrating creative expression" (hooks, 1995, p. 4). Critical education does not end with the inclusion of minority voices from those who have endured in the margins of history's grand narratives. What resources did these peoples and populations possess to sustain their creative power despite oppressive conditions? Symbols and archaic resonances in art-images initiate processes of unlearning and relearning as a political act of resistance to those colonial and imperial narratives, as well as social imaginaries. Our exercise began with a spontaneous response to a re-orienting question, which like the art-image can provide room for the imagination to dig beyond known versions of ourselves that are often touted unreflectively. If integrating the imagination in an interdisciplinary way with philosophy enhances the quality of life and provides a site to create as well as disrupt toxic cultural habits, then these spontaneous responses provided us a ground to imagine ourselves anew together. As Barbara Bickel and R. Michael Fisher (2023) suggest, a site to "gestate" (p. 33) new ideas could be formed and nurtured in the classroom so that implicit beliefs could match explicit claims, or at least reflected-on for further thoughtful development.

Within the space in my classroom, learners could begin to re-learn and unlearn themselves as part of a world that often gives too much currency to declarative proclamations parroted from dominant narratives, and which are often made without reflection. The activity above may be considered critical education in that traditional pedagogy does not wish to engage spaces that promote unlearning or to engage the imagination in disciplines where the method and material is traditionally prescribed. Philosophy is one of these disciplines, originating in Plato who wished to exile the poets for their free and irresponsible use of language and imagery. The work of poets may usher "mixed" ideas and for that reason they are immoral. Platonic ideals have dictated from the beginning of Western civilization that truth and true forms behind empirical reality are to be recollected using reason. hooks' revolution calls to refashion what is considered knowledge and I chose to proceed through imaginative reflection.

Traditional pedagogical approaches do not promote one to unlearn what has been taught and developed, but to further sharpen and focus the use of reasoned knowledge for that which can be known.<sup>4</sup> There is little negotiation in those fixed truths. On the other hand, and closer to hooks' call for critical education, in what Bickel and Fisher call *pedagogies of unlearning*,<sup>5</sup> the learner and facilitator often experience discomfort, vulnerability, and disorientation "as it requires a letting go of past knowledge that serves to secure the ego, and superego of social status. Our preference for a pedagogy of unlearning and discomfort equally gives care to the learner in their disorientation" (Bickel & Fisher, 2023, p. 135). The process moves from aesthetic creation to an ethical encounter, which makes possible political forms of resistance to traditional pedagogical methodologies. Bickel and Fisher characterize the facilitator in this process as one who would like to access the imagination to create new social norms (imaginaries) and stimulate

co-inquiry, which I do in the domain of teaching philosophy. The type of wonder engaged in philosophical questions is not only used to teach a discipline and its history, but to orient curiosity for new creative possibilities about one's life. My role isn't only to teach facts and content, but to use these age-old questions as a site to unlearn automatic responses and calm a learner's allergic reaction to the other's ideas. I'd like for them to create new imaginaries and if I can make these processes conscious and affectively experienced in the classroom, then it can be the site of a person's "new birth" (Bickel & Fisher, 2023, p. 135). Posthumanist critiques, such as those offered by Carol A. Taylor that I review next, helped me to understand the conceptual contours of traditional pedagogies in order to begin new practices. Bickel's and Fisher's approach to creativity, art-care, *co-poiesis*, and *carriance* further guided me to illustrate how the activity for a spontaneous response and staging a scene opens novel imaginaries for a new tradition.<sup>6</sup>

### III. New Pedagogical Practice-ings

In an ethic that is posthuman for its critique of humanism's focus on the rational capacity of human beings, Taylor (2018) emphasizes the process of intra-actions in the classroom that enlarge pedagogical practice-ings into a response-ability, where the ability to respond is formed in entangled relations between oneself, instructor, and learner. She writes, "the posthuman/new material feminist ethical frames I draw on emphasize a need to focus on actual, material practice—or, rather, what I think of as practice-ings, because all practice occurs as an unfinished unfolding" (Taylor, p. 82). In other words, we become affectively inspired to effectively alter who we consider ourselves, or parts of ourselves, and the norms we traditionally abide. Those in the class who answered contrary to the view they possess of themselves felt the pangs of this birth most acutely. Ethical relations were then activated and materialized in the instructor's ability as facilitator to attune and instantiate the other's concerns.

Taylor's (2018) orientations are considered posthumanist because they offer a harsh critique of the Enlightened tradition of humanism that pivots on the exceptionalism of human reason as the center, source, and authority of ethical reasoning; one charged with at best over-powering parts of ourselves that are "irrational," and at worst puts any non-rational capacity "exiled" and at the disposal of reason (pp. 83-84). Renewed accountability and commitment can be activated for those who have traditionally been othered by the rational human, such as women, differently abled bodies, indigenous cultures, animals, and the natural world. Artistic and imaginative insights could also be valued in the learning process even if they are "other" to reason. Useful for learners in my class was to take accountability for parts of ourselves that may stand in contradiction or tension with other parts, and to explore them with imaginative creativity. In a discussion worth attention about how the liberal and rational ideals fall short but leaving it out in the interest of space, I turn to Taylor's (2018) posthumanist new materialist ethics that replaces the abstract rationality for the messiness of life, where "instead of a dis-engaged ethic of use it proposes an entangled ethics of relation" (p. 86). An orientation that affirms and respects every part of ourselves in a logic of entanglement is useful because we can now articulate concrete practices for instructors who prioritize elements such as unlearning, uncovering, and re-shaping knowledge through non-rational and affective relations.

My understanding of Levinas's encounter of the face has guided my pedagogical practice-ings to go beyond empirical knowledge, and continually leads me to wonder: Ok, so how do I practice this with learners in the classroom? Is there a method to best utilize my position, or remain sensitive to the partic-



ularities of individuals that I encounter? It was helpful then to learn that there are better and worse ways to arrange exercises in my class to pump a pre-philosophical intuition and a spontaneous response. For example, Taylor's first orientation is to affirm the respect and value of all bodies, which ultimately asks us to enlarge our sense of self. Not only should I avoid acting as a *sage on the stage*, but I should dismantle the notion of a self altogether, let alone as a sage to be present on a stage. In the posthuman ethical frame, "all bodies, not just human bodies, matter and count and it is this more expansive and inclusive orbit that can begin to undo the problem of selfishness and self-centered individualism that humanism has wedded 'us' to for so long" (Taylor, 2018, p. 86). With an enlarged sense of interconnection between me and others, I can empathize and sympathize with different parts of everyone. As someone who is both atheist and theist, at different moments, I can find language, concern, wish, and wonder both for God as intelligent designer, and for the absurdly free subject who exists without it.<sup>7</sup> After a learner's baseline assumptions were brought out, evaluated, and critiqued, fluidity between antithetical positions for paradoxical conjunctions was encouraged in our conversations over the course's material. Learners in my classroom longed to understand themselves as they encountered these different positions. With an enlarged sense of self, it was easier to discern where on this spectrum their concerns fell and the authors that they would like to stage with dialogue in a contemporary scene for their final projects.

After the spontaneous responses from our first class, learners relinquished the idea of themselves as a siloed object that exists before its relations. It became possible to appreciate the process of becoming with and through our relations with others in the classroom. In what Taylor (2018) calls a logic of entanglement, every encounter contributed to oneself in a dynamic and ongoing process that was done together, in a process that allowed what mattered to emerge. Will these learners envision a way to defend or augment Aristotle's concept of virtue in one's (siloed) character toward a relational sense of self while bombs drop outside the coffee shop where he is placed to dialogue with Albert Camus? In an echo to hooks, and Bickel and Fisher who do not separate art expression and creative acts from pedagogical and political revolution, here I am reminded of Taylor's (2018) words:

There can be no separation of ethics from epistemology and ontology; instead, there can only be 'ethico-onto-epistemology' in which, contra *Descartes* (who inculcated distinctions of mind/body, subject/object, reason/senses) knowledge is knowing-and-becoming-in-relation' to/with matter and meaning ... Ethics is an ongoing act of accountability in an ongoing relational process of 'worlding' which works outside dualist understandings of ethics. (p. 87)<sup>8</sup>

Put succinctly, what matters to us ends up carrying physical matter in the world. While our "self" is enlarged to account for any matter that is reflective of our meaning, so can our attention become attuned and attentive to what each person uniquely demands. An implicit step is of course to include other species and ecological concerns in what matters. As facilitator of this class, I was tasked with the question: What do those whom I stand in relation to right now demand from this place that I occupy here, even if it makes me feel a threat or discomfort as it did with the learner who wouldn't print the reflection?<sup>9</sup> To hear these demands that non-verbally emanate from the other in a relational ethic is to accept an affective power (Taylor, 2018).

Affective theory provides possibilities to the skeptic of Levinas's notion of a non-empirical face and for instructors like me who wonder how to implement it. How do I come to know, or think through those with whom I stand in a relation that does not default to rational or empirical knowledge? Am I capable

of witnessing their processes, assisting, or diverting elsewhere the calls that I heed from learners? Taylor (2018) pulls on Baruch Spinoza's notion of affect as "power, passion, desire and action" (p. 88) that is more than simply an emotion localized in an individual separate from me. We come to "know" the other's vulnerability through an understanding of affect as a vitalist power, or force, that is multiple, and which binds our bodies together. We can affectively communicate through our incarnate relations (Taylor, 2018, p. 88). In a move that dismantles Descartes' enlightened mind as traditionally distinguished from its body, an "ethics powered by an affective politics figures bodies as porous, as open to each other; as bodies experiencing other bodies in encounters and relations" (Taylor, 2018, p. 88). Honestly, the re-integration of mind and body is so invigorating. My body breathes new life with these ideas. They re-integrate my body and mind that have been kept in strait jackets. I feel I can now accept the breath of another. New modes of ethical becoming-with and doing-with-each-of-our-others emerged for us. In and after sharing the space of our classroom, we imagined new potentialities that uniquely formed and later informed what we were to become.

Bickel and Fisher, like Taylor, provide guidance for how to stand in relation to another that does not default to empirical or rational ways of knowing and the ethical implications of such a relation. Aesthetic imagination and creative art defined as relational and arational utilizes affective domains of healing and transformation for political revision (Bickel & Fisher, 2023). Creativity and the practice of art-care is described as forming an arational relation in co-poiesis with another, where each is provided with "gifts that incorporate but are not limited to sensory perception, intuition, imagination, dreaming, affective knowing, magic, and mythic consciousness, the numinous, and altered states of consciousness" (Bickel & Fisher, 2023, p. 28). If space can be held in this process to gestate the other's concerns for a compassionate relation, then a form of *wit(h)nessing* occurs.<sup>10</sup> Transformation with another through creative means can move non-conscious aesthetic and ethical engagements through these liminal and arational modalities, initially through non-verbal communication, and into the possibility of communal creative action. We created a community in these intimate relationships with others when we imagined, rearranged, and transformed the text, ideas, images and symbols, which is what I hoped to initiate with spontaneous responses and then with the invitation to create a dialogue between opposing authors in the context of a contemporary moral dilemma.

Rather than stay in a discourse and pedagogical approach that values rational calculations of individuated persons, the ethic of concern and art-care focus on the moral-weight each being possesses and demands from my response-ability. All bodies in a classroom become entangled when we attend to their unique capacities, to their affective flows, and to the shifts these produce in our relational, creative, and ethical response-abilities. How a particular learner enables me as an instructor to flourish in a class can feel vastly different from the other sitting right beside them, given each of their histories, their concerns, and how those resonate with my own histories and concerns. Taylor with the help of Karen Barad writes about this enlarged ethical sense-ability and response-ability and how it "recasts ethical agency as an enactment-in-relations amongst all bodies, and not as a 'thing' possessed by a sovereign and bounded human subject which can be deployed 'on' or 'towards' 'others' as if 'they' were somehow 'outside' the self ... (it) is about materializing in the minutiae of our ongoing relations 'an ethical obligation to intra-act responsibly with the world's becoming' (Barad, 2007, p. 178 as cited in Taylor, 2018, p. 90).<sup>11</sup> A new form of time opens between my particular history and others when I call on each individual learner to dig into their past, beliefs, and cultural imaginaries. The process acknowledges the life altering affects and effects that occur in our classrooms.

Bickel and Fisher (2023) similarly speak about the time-space of transformative co-becoming with an unknown other through copoiesis. They cite Ettinger who holds that creativity can move us to create a “work of art to open the world apart in order to embrace new meaning and to transform the world’s frontiers into thresholds” (Bickel & Fisher, 2023, p. 33).<sup>12</sup> For both Taylor, Bickel and Fisher, responsiveness or creativity-in-communion with others are considered life affirming practices spread across space and time that enfold our past to produce future possibilities. In a community, instructors and learners are affected and creatively activated to allow new matter/s to take hold. Often after these kinds of exchanges, I leave the classroom space in a daze, or with amnesia about what exactly happened, but physically charged from our conversations that in somewhat of a delay lead to innovative ideas.

Taylor’s orienting practices challenge traditional discourses about the self, morality, and the pedagogical tools available in institutions of higher learning. They also offer a positive account of ontology, epistemology, and an ethical worldview that more successfully addresses these types of imaginative and affective encounters borne in the classroom. The need to respect and value all bodies that encounter each other in a logic of entanglement, and who are each powered by an affective politics, serve an ethic of concern where each is capable of a unique response and where each intra-action matters. These orientations were helpful for me to understand a pedagogical approach that was implicit in the activity chosen for my reflection here. Of course, it is not the case that I lead an activity to create a bond at the beginning of every class or every term. One might even ask if it is possible at every moment, or every term, to create this environment. It seems apt to call it a matrixial (Ettinger, 2006) bond after we have allowed parts of ourselves the vulnerability to explore and emerge anew in these decentering encounters. It is also entirely possible that decentering encounters are often used implicitly as guiding principles for interactions in the classroom, and that the experience is common, but no language has been developed to describe them. Indeed, most people have stories of *that* teacher who inspired us or of *that* class which managed to broaden our imagination, and upon reflection inspire broader political and social actions as hooks, Bickel and Fisher highlighted. The novelty offered through this conceptual analysis is the vocabulary given to instructors’ actions with others in the classroom, and what is presumed to be true about learners, individuals, humans, and posthumans who are more relational, affected, and imaginatively in-formed than traditional discourses would have us believe.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The Argument from Design or The Teleological Argument (and parts of the Cosmological Argument) for the existence of God moves from the experiential premise that because the world exhibits order and harmony there must therefore be an intelligent designer to have put order to those parts. The argument can be read in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* as the 'Prime Mover' or 'First Cause,' Thomas Aquinas' 5 Arguments, William Paley's watchmaker analogy, and the inherent meaning or purpose which Friedrich Nietzsche leaves us without when he declares the death of God.

<sup>2</sup> See Book 1, Chapter 1 of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.

<sup>3</sup> Used with Brianna Darlene's permission.

<sup>4</sup> In a series of postcards arguably written to another, an other, or even possibly The Other, Jacques Derrida repeatedly offers his interpretation of an image of Socrates and Plato found on a postcard that was later used as the front cover for his book *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* (1987). In reference to Plato's written works based on "Socrates' dialogues," Plato stands behind Socrates as he seems to dictate to his teacher. The image leads us to wonder whether it was Socrates, or Plato his student, that wanted to systematize knowledge in absolute forms and ideals. After all, Socrates was famous for pushing Athenians to be critically minded and to find that real wisdom resides in not-knowing. (See Plato's *The Apology for the Oracle at Delphi's* message to Socrates that his wisdom comes from grasping the limits of knowledge, and his execution for corrupting the youth with this message.) In the image Derrida chose, there is neither a face-to-face relation between Socrates and Plato nor a conversation, but a relation of projection and imposition. Response-ability is absent in the way these characters are positioned, only dictation in what seems to characterize a tradition that begins with Plato and ends with Sigmund Freud. Platonic ideals occluded Socrates' main imperative: to remain open to those questions that cannot have answers (i.e., questions about truth and the meaning of life). The image of these two figures offers an excellent illustration of the shortcomings of traditional philosophy and the Western approach to knowledge that stutters, blocks, or writes one-sidedly. Derrida leads us to question whether it is even possible to break out of this tradition of non-reciprocity and the constraints of abstract, formulaic knowledge. Derrida illustrated the problem of traditional pedagogy and its ethical orientations so acutely for me with this image.

<sup>5</sup> Bickel and Fisher base processes of unlearning on Deborah Britzman's novel approach to education.

<sup>6</sup> Italicized words are attributed to Bracha L. Ettinger's work.

<sup>7</sup> In the interest of space, I'll only state that the whole course was meant to problematize the traditional bifurcated responses of aligning purpose with an intelligent designer, the self, and/or the community.

<sup>8</sup> Parenthes is added.

<sup>9</sup> Find similar philosophical foundations of expressive arts therapy in the works of Paolo J. Knill, Ellen G. Levine, and Stephen K. Levine.

<sup>10</sup> Wit(h)nessing is an important and expansive ethical concept in Ettinger's *Matrixial Aesthetics* (2006), as well as in Bickel's and Fisher's art-care practices (2023).

<sup>11</sup> Parenthesis added.

<sup>12</sup> Ettinger is cited from Griselda Pollack's (2020) work, *Bracha L. Ettinger: Matrixial Subjectivity, Aesthetics, Ethics, Volume 1 1990-2000* (p. 407).

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