**Subjectivity as the Purpose of Education and Teaching**

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**Opening**

What is subjectivity, why should it be the leading purpose of education and teaching, and what does subjectivity-oriented education and teaching look like? These three questions are at the heart of the book *World-Centred Education* (hereafter WCE) written by the educational theorist Gert Biesta (Biesta 2022).[[1]](#footnote-2) For almost two decades, Biesta has been one of the clearest, most profound, and most influential voices in the ongoing debate on the purposes and practices of education (Dijkman 2020). In my article, I present Biesta’s insights into these questions and suggest alternative viewpoints of some of them based on his own theory from the abovementioned book.

According to Biesta, there are generally (at least) two incompatible modes of being in every moment of our lives: existing as an object and existing as a subject. Inspired by Arendt, Biesta characterizes moments of subject-ness as those in which we are at the same time the “originators of our own actions” and “subjected to what the world, natural and social ‘does’ with our ‘beginnings’ (Biesta 2022, p. 3). Existing as an object means that a person does *not*, in Biesta’s way of depicting it, ‘encounter’ one’s freedom to initiate action as an ‘I,’ as a self.

Agreeing with Arendt, he sees a social limitation in that, despite the subject’s freedom to act or to avoid an action, the reality of the action depends on what others, over whom one has no control, continue or do with that action. That is also the justification for using the term “subject.” This term holds these two aspects of the human condition, on the one hand, our freedom to initiate an action, act freely, and refuse to go with the flow, and on the other hand, our existence as subjects means that we are bound to the world’s – physical and social – uncontrolled way of being (Ibid.). Thus, the two factors involved in enacting one’s potentiality of subjectivity are an awareness of one’s freedom to initiate an action and “acknowledging that the world, natural and social, puts limits and limitations on what we can desire from it and can do with it […]” (Ibid.).

By freedom, Biesta means the “mundane experience that in many, and perhaps even all situations we encounter, we always can say yes or no, to stay or to walk away, to go with the flow or to resist” (Ibid. p. 45). Freedom is an existential experience expressed in *how* the ‘I’ lives and leads one’s life (Ibid.). However, again, it also requires recognizing the world within which the ‘I’ exists and which limits that freedom (Ibid. p. 48).

By “world,” Biesta means the branched physical and social network that nourishes and sustains the subject and in which the subject resides (Ibid.). The world has its own way of being, and many of its aspects are beyond our control. Therefore, our actions, which we may initiate freely, are limited by the world and thus can only take place “through” it (Ibid.).

With this understanding in mind, Biesta identifies three overarching purposes of education: qualification, socialization, and subjectification (e.g., Biesta 2010; Biesta 2022). He believes that educational discourse, research, and practice are too deeply immersed in the first two and ignore the third or see it as a luxury. While he sees the first two overarching purposes as legitimate, he believes they should be derivatives of subjectification (Biesta 2022, P. 3).

There are two major reasons for this. First, while qualification and socialization are efficient and practical in terms of results and outcomes, they tend to objectify students, putting them in the existential mode of being objects; i.e., they do not encounter their freedom, and their life seems to them to be the outcome of external forces. This is a danger since we are still in a post-Auschwitz age, an age in which we know from our short history how much evil the objectification of people causes. Second, because the “existential question – the question of how we, as human beings, exist ‘in’ and ‘with’ the world, natural and social – […] is the central, fundamental and, if one wishes, ultimate educational concern” (Biesta 2022, p. 3). Therefore, subjectification as an overarching purpose rises above the other two alternatives.

What characterizes education as subjectification? It is an event in which the student fulfills their potential for subjectivity. This fulfillment emerges from two components. Each is a theme in Biesta’s text. The first, which I term *Theme 1*, is distancing the educational event, what teachers and schools do, from any chance of objectifying the students, from harming their chances to encounter their freedom to step up as a free ‘I.’ In positive formulation, this means creating an educational event enabling them to encounter their freedom. The second component of subjectivity, which I term *Theme 2*, is the idea of the world, its limitations on our freedom, its demands from us, and the amount and quality of our awareness of all this. Biesta figuratively pictures it as attending to what the world is asking from the ‘I.’ In short, Theme 1 is about the worry of objectifying students, and it focuses on encountering freedom. Theme 2 is about the centrality of the world and the limits of freedom.

My central thesis here is that although, according to Biesta’s theory, these two themes are interconnected and balance each other as subjectifying moments arise, he does not give them the same weight when analyzing the historical cases he examines. Moreover, they are not equally weighed when he conceptualizes the practice of teaching and educating aiming at subjectification. In analyzing those cases and conceptualizing the practical vision of education as subjectification, the more significant focus is on Theme 1, and it is not sufficiently clear what the world’s role is and what it means to be attending to it.

I claim this is due to an inner tension between these two themes, which Biesta sees clearly and bridges theoretically but is not reflected in his analysis of the cases and conceptualizing teaching and educating aiming at subjectification. Therefore, based on my reading of his theory, I suggest another way to analyze these cases, with Theme 1, the world, playing a more central role. I do this in the following four sections. Then, after reflecting on the theoretical perspective of my analysis and reading Biesta in the sixth section of the article, where I suggest reading WCE as a branch of moral realism, I reconceptualize the educational implications of teaching that aims at subjectification and the way to bridge between the themes. My reading, I believe, reduces the tension between the themes while staying aligned with Biesta’s theory of education as subjectification.

**The cases of Eichmann and Parks**

In WCE, Biesta examines three historical cases. This examination helps him clarify what subjectivity and education as subjectification mean.

The first two cases that Biesta analyses and compares, those of Adolf Eichmann and Rosa Parks, are components of an argument that he constructs to show the paradoxical nature of education controlled by the principles of socialization. Education as socialization, which aims to introduce the student to the social-normative world in which they live, leads to the paradoxical conclusion that Eichmann’s conduct is a desirable educational outcome. The reason is that the man acted in extreme alignment with the values and principles of the society where he lived and grew up. Biesta shows, through a comparison with the case of Rosa Parks, that the paradox deepens under this concept since the behavior of Rosa Parks, who refused to obey the instructions of the bus driver and the signs on the bus, would be considered, according to education aimed at socialization, an educational failure (Ibid. p. 28). She disobeyed the accepted instructions of the society where she lived. Biesta emphasizes, through this comparison, that socialization as an overarching educational goal should stem from subjectification. Only through education as subjectification can we judge Eichmann's and Parks’ actions according to our fundamental values.

In addition, Biesta uses these two cases of Eichmann and Parks to clarify the meaning of subjectivity. In the case of Rosa Parks, she exercised her subjectivity by the very fact that she exercised her freedom to refuse to follow the driver’s instructions and the posted signs. In Biesta’s words, she encountered her freedom and “did step forward as an ‘I’ – an ‘I’ who asserted that she no longer wanted to be part of the particular societal order she found herself in” (Ibid. p. 29). Adolf Eichmann, on the other hand, did not step forward as an ‘I.’ During his trial, he “said that his ‘I’ was actually not involved […]. He was […] willing to submit his ‘I’ to an external societal order” (Ibid.).

These characteristics of subjectivity emphasize Theme 1, i.e., the worry of objectifying students and one encountering one’s freedom. Theme 2, regarding the centrality of the world and what it imposes on our freedom, does not appear in Biesta’s analysis. We now examine the third case.

**The case of Homer Lane and Jason**

The case of Homer Lane (1876-1925) (David 1954) and his student Jason is much less familiar than that of Parks and Eichmann, so I shall describe it in more detail (Biesta 2022. pp. 41-42).

In this case, Biesta examines the educational attitude and activities of educator Homer Lane, who, in the second decade of the 20th century, established and ran a regional school in Dorset, England. The school, “Little Commonwealth,” was for boys and girls from troubled backgrounds, many of whom were runaways or had a criminal record. The school’s educational mission was to reconstruct the students’ freedom and ability to self-govern. Instead of enforcing behavior through authority, the idea was to refrain from conventional educational practices that seek to control how students live. This method was meant to enable the students to encounter freedom, self-governance, and autonomy as individuals and as a community. The school later inspired A. S. Neil to set up the famous open school named Summerhill (Ibid. p. 41).

At one point, Homer Lane invited Jason, a 16-year-old “tough guy” with a criminal record and a history of running away from school, and two of his friends to sit over tea and discuss an idea Lane had. Lane assumed that Jason was unhappy at school and thus encouraged him and his friends to nominate themselves in the next officer election so that Jason could be part of the school’s leadership team and implement the changes he wished. Jason’s response to that suggestion was that “he ‘would just like to run the place’” (Ibid. p. 41). In reaction to Lane’s question about what Jason would do first if he ran the place, Jason was not sure what to say, and “after some looking around for clues, respond that he would like to ‘smash up those fussy tea-things’ – the cup and the saucers – as they are ‘for women and la-di-da boys,’ but not for boys like him” (Ibid. p. 41). In response, Lane said that since he wants Jason to be happy at school, if smashing the cups and saucers would make him happy, Jason should do so. Then, he handed the poker from the hearth to Jason, and Jason smashed the teacup and saucer and two more that Lane had put in front of him.

In response, the other boys in the room accused Lane of being responsible for what had happened because he had essentially dared Jason to act. Jason agreed with this interpretation, saying that the problem was not the smashed dishes but that Lane had dared him to smash them. Moreover, after one of the other boys discovered that the cups and saucers did not belong to Lane, he told Lane that he had no right to suggest that Jason smash them. At this point, Biesta comments, there was a turn in the situation: Jason became the hero, and Lane “the wrongdoer” (Ibid. p.42).

Next, Lane took his watch, put it in Jason’s hand, and told him, “Here’s my watch, Jason. I dare you to smash it” (Ibid.). Jason hesitated, looked at his friends’ faces, and at a moment, as Lane described, his expression changed, and he raised the watch as if intending to smash it on the hearth. At that point, Lane describes how Jason glanced at him, hoping that Lane would “exercise his authority, and so leave him falsely victorious in the possession of his cherished attitude” (Lane 1928, pp. 167-168, as cited Ibid.). However, this moment of hesitation had brought, in Lane’s words, the real Jason out. He put the watch on the table, saying he would not smash Lane’s watch. The following morning, Jason returned to Lane and asked him if he could work in the school carpentry shop to pay for the dishes that “Lane had busted last night,” as he put it.

For Biesta, the case of Homer Lane is one of an exemplary teacher who helps create an educational event in which the subjectivity of his student is revealed. According to Biesta, Lane’s decisions and actions, the idea that Jason could be part of the way Little Commonwealth was run, the openness to him breaking the cups and saucers, the patient response to Jason’s friend, Jason’s allegations that Lane was actually responsible for what Jason had done, and above all, Lane opening the possibility, in the “here and now” of the event, for Jason to smash his watch are all vivid and precise examples of education as subjectification; i.e., Lane, had created a moment in which he helped his student, Jason, encounter with his own freedom in the “here and now.”

To conclude, as we can see, what makes Parks and Jason characterized as subjects in their respective situations is their awareness of their freedom to initiate an action and to act as an ‘I’ – as the “subject of their own life” (e.g., Biesta 2022, p. 13, or 47). Eichmann, on the contrary, did not fulfill his potential to be a subject because, according to Biesta’s analysis, he denied that he had been free when doing his past actions; Eichmann rejected himself as an ‘I,’ as a subject of his own life, and thus existed as an object (Ibid. p. 38). Therefore, we can generalize and claim that Biesta judges existence as a subject or an object by measuring the amount of (what we can call) ‘*freedom acknowledgment*.’ That is, in analyzing the three cases, he mainly uses Theme 1. However, this is insufficient because it leaves no room for Theme 2. There is no account of the state of mind of these three characters regarding *the limits and demands that the world placed on them* and *how* *the world* functioned in their moments of subjectification or non-subjectification.

Let us, then, learn more about the meaning of Theme 2 in terms of the role of the world.

**The Role of the World**

Biesta suggests the perspective of the centrality of the world against the background of the old, but still alive, dichotomy between “child or student-centered education” and “curriculum-centered education.” In his perspective, a person or a student is not the center of the educational event, nor is the curriculum, but the world (Ibid. p, 3, and see, on this issue, Dewey 1956). Thus, subjectifying moments do not consist only of encountering freedom. They also consist of a special kind of attention that the subject gives to the world.

Biesta figuratively describes the role of the world in the subjectifying event as one in which a person attends to what the world is asking from them (e.g., Biesta 2022, p. 88). In those moments, the subject feels in the spotlight – as if the world directs the spotlight back on them (Ibid. p. 91, 97). In other words, fulfilling one’s potential for subject-ness means that that person opens up to the world and finds themselves in the spotlight – as the addressee of what “the world is asking” (e.g., Ibid. p. 91) or “commands” (Ibid. p. 97) of them. Relying on Roth (2011), Biesta shows that this attention to the world is not a planned, organized, or known-in-advance process but rather a state of mind of opening up, of what Roth names “passibility,” i.e., “our capacity to be affected” (Roth 2011, p. 18, cited in Biesta 2022, p. 93). How can we understand Biesta's figurative metaphor of being in the spotlight of the world, an addressee of what the world is asking or commands?

The state of mind or state of being in which a person opens themselves up to the world is one in which the person directs or attempts to direct their attention to the world and their existential status toward it (Sheldrake 2007, pp. 181-182); Anonymous 2023). This attention is not directed through the perspective of that person’s interests, needs, or desires. Instead, we can say that it is pure attention to the world’s particular way of being and one’s being in and with it (Sheldrake 2007. Compare with Halbertal 2003; Harris 2014; Shapiro et al. 2015; Anonymous 2023). [[2]](#footnote-3)

Such a mental mode opens up the potential to experience two things that are parallel to our themes. First, one sees several possible ways to act in and with the world, i.e., one encounters the space of potentialities and power to initiate an action, namely, one’s freedom. Second, if one is patient and calm and does not immediately use one’s freedom to fulfill one’s interests, needs, or desires, then one will see that each option has a different meaning, quality, and value and that these differences in value and quality are not under one’s control. The value and quality, i.e., the amount of truth, goodness, justice, and beauty that each option possesses, is determined by the world’s being, by the complex event as a whole, and not by what one may need or wish. In other words, attending to the world involves the mental state in which, while one experiences one’s power to choose without the world being able to force or cause one to act one way or another, one also experiences the limit that the world places on one's freedom. This limit is not expressed only as coercion that negates one's alleged possibility – one is not free to fly – but mainly in the inability of the individual to choose the *meaning, value,* and *worth* of one's choice.

Maybe a simple analogy can clarify this. Like a lighthouse that*shows,* among the many possible directions that are open to the free sailor, *the right* direction that the sailor *should* sail to, so is the world to a person in the event of subject-ness. In moments of subject-ness, while one experiences the many possibilities one can freely choose from, without the world – physical, mechanical, or social – enforcing them from outside that way or the other, one also experiences the limits the world puts on this freedom, i.e., that one cannot choose or design the *meaning* and *implications* of each possibility. These different values, meanings, and implications that are beyond one’s control establish an ethical-educational demand to favor one (or set of) option(s) and act to fulfill it(them) rather than others. In many cases, this call of the world to choose one way and not another may seem counter to one’s particular interests, needs, or desires, making it even harder to adopt the mindset of subject-ness.

Therefore, what I believe Biesta is referring to in his outlook regarding the centrality of the world, even though he does not formulate it as explicitly as I do here, is that in different from the dominant relativistic or contingency approach, an adequate mental mode may reveal what is *metaphysically* or *existentially* true, good, right, and beautiful. These qualities are *beyond* our control and are internal aspects of the world’s being.

Later, I will suggest seeing this approach as a branch of moral realism. But for now, to establish my suggestion here regarding the role of the world and clarify it, I would like to refer to Lewis (1974). His “The Abolition of Man” is a helpful source to understand this issue regarding the connection between, on the one hand, our ethics, way of life, and education and, on the other hand, the centrality of the world. Lewis characterizes the world or 'the *Tao'* as

[...] the reality beyond all predicates […]. It is the Way in which the universe goes on, the Way in which things everlastingly emerge, stilly and tranquility, into space and time. It is also the Way which every man should tread in imitation of that cosmic and supercosmic progression, conforming all activities to that great exemplar. 'In ritual', say the *Analects*, 'it is harmony with Nature that is prized.' The ancient Jews likewise praise the Law as being 'true'. This conception in all its forms, Platonic, Aristotelian, Stoic, Christian, and Oriental alike, I shall henceforth refer to for brevity simply as 'the Tao' (Ibid, p. 18).

The Tao is the way in which the world, everything as a whole, “behaves.” This way of behavior is good by definition. Thus, we should be in harmony with it, make it our standard for good living, or, in Arendt’s (1994) words, feel at home within it. If this reality is revealed to us, it is embodied as an ethical-educational demand. I suggest understanding the idea of WCE regarding the centrality of the world and its significance in fulfilling the potential to subject-ness in light of Lewis’ understanding of the Tao.

May I also add that the educational task is life challenging because the awareness of the Tao, or ‘the world,’ does not develop by itself, naturally; it does not just happen as scratching the head, breathing, or eating. The revelation of the Tao, of what the world asks, is delicate and cannot be seen easily. That is one of the reasons why, in many cases, we are deaf to that call and freely choose to act differently from what is right to do. In Biesta’s more general and figurative words, we miss finding ourselves in *the* *spotlight*.

So, it is of no wonder that our civilization marked as legendary figures like Moses, who saw the commandment “Thou shalt not kill,” or Socrates, who saw that he should keep pursuing the quest for the truth even though he was accused of denying the polis’ gods; Jesus, who saw that humans should love their neighbors as themselves even though it is not our first inclination; Muhammad, who saw that seeking knowledge is obligatory; and the fictional lawyer Atticus Finch, who saw that he should represent the African-American Tom Robinson in Harper Lee’s novel To Kill a Mockingbird even though it is going to be a social scandal in the town. Bearing in mind this role of the world in subjectifying moments, let us return now to the cases and suggest an alternative analysis of them.

**An alternative analysis of the three cases**

In my view, Jason (the student in the case of Lane) is experiencing a moment of subjectivity not only because he is encountering his freedom to initiate an action or because Lane did not impose a lesson on him but also because he is experiencing, at the same time, that he is not free to choose *the meaning* or *the worth* of the choice he is free to make. The situation is likewise in the cases of Parks and Eichmann. Parks did not merely act freely and step forward as an “I.” If this had been the sole characterization of her actions, we could have drawn on many other scenarios of free actions that I believe would not work the same point. For example, imagine that in reaction to the bus driver’s demand, Parks had cooly stand up, raise her chin, and slowly exit the bus. Alternatively, imagine her in a Tarantino film, pulling a gun and shooting the driver’s knee. Although these scenarios would also reflect an awareness of her freedom and stepping forward as an “I,” they would not carry the same existential, metaphysical, and cultural value. The reason is that in these scenarios, the protagonist would not be paying attention to what the world was asking of her regarding morality, violence, and reasonable action or to the implications of her choice for her loved ones, her community, and so on.

Therefore, Parks enacted her subjectivity not only by stepping up freely with her “I” (which is a necessary condition for a subjectifying moment) but also – and this is what I wish to add in my reading – because *her free choice was in accord with what the world demanded from her at that moment*. She freely and, in her own view, took it upon herself to do what the world was asking her.

The fact that several months prior to the bus event, Parks had participated in a two-week activistic workshop that included accommodation at Highlander Folk School in Tennessee and that there were prior several other cases of African-Americans refusing to move to the back of the bus (Theoharis, 2013) does not raise any problems with my analysis. The reason is that prior knowledge and relevant conceptual background do not reduce the need for the person to channel their full attention and the right attitude to the call of the world in the “here and now” of the situation. I return to this issue later.

Regarding Eichmann, Biesta believes that he did not enact his subjectivity because, in Eichmann’s declaration that he only obeyed orders, Eichmann did not step forward as an ‘I,’ he had denied his free self and “withdrew his ‘I’” (Biesta, 2022, p. 29). I agree with Biesta that Eichmann did not enact his subjectivity. Nonetheless, my reasoning to justify this conclusion is different than his.

In my view, Eichmann did not enact his potential for subjectivity, not because he did not step forward as an ‘I,’ but because, while he *did* step forward as a free ‘I,’ contrary to Parks and Jason, he *did not* express an awareness of what the world was asking him – he was blind or in denial of the metaphysical, ethical, political, and aesthetic demands of his freedom. His way of life and decisions expressed a total refusal of what the world was asking of him. Furthermore, in this blindness, he did what he wished, in full accord with his racist-antisemitic passion.

Eichmann repeated this blind way of being-in-the-world in his trial. Instead of confessing – one could say that confessing is the ultimate act of attention to what the world is asking – he freely chose to deny his past freedom to choose his actions. This absurdity was an obvious lie. This lack of innocence, honesty, and integrity is a significant indication of sophistication and planning, namely, a person aware of his freedom to choose – of Theme 1. However, like a poker player, he concealed his ‘I’ while negotiating his charges. He declared that he was only obeying orders to obscure his responsibility. Nevertheless, he acted freely;he *chose* to *refuse* to take it upon himself to do what the world was asking him during many important junctions in his life.

However, these free acts are not enough for him or anyone else to actualize the potentiality of subject-ness. What is missing is attention to what the world is asking from the individual and taking it upon oneself to do it, even if it demands overcoming one’s passions or self-interest.

To summarize, Jason enacted his subjectivity not only because he encountered his freedom but also because he saw, by himself, the right choice (not to smash Homer Lane’s watch), took it upon himself, and followed through with that choice (overcoming the embarrassment of not being the independent-do-whatever-he-likes person he thought himself to be). Parks enacted her subjectivity not only because she encountered her freedom but also because she saw by herself what the world had signaled as the right choice,[[3]](#footnote-4) took it upon herself, and followed through with that choice (overcoming the fear of the social and legal consequences). Finally, Eichmann did not enact his subjectivity – not because he did not act freely, but because he *did* act freely but was blind to or in denial of what the world asked him.

In other words, we have two cases (Parks and Jason) in which subjectivity was enacted not only because they encountered their freedom but also because they were mindful of what the world beyond the order of norms, human laws, psychological fear, or earthly authorities, e.g., the local justice systems in the case of Eichmann and Parks, demanded of them. Furthermore, in another case (that of Eichmann), subjectivity was not enacted because while he did encounter his power to initiate an act freely – without the world being able to force him to do otherwise – he denied the metaphysical, ethical, political, and aesthetical limits that are beyond the individual’s particular needs and desires and immediate social environment; he did not see the light of the lighthouse.

Although my reading of Biesta’s theory addresses more specific content regarding ideas and terms such as “reality check,” the centrality of the world that puts us in the spotlight, and what the world is asking, it does not contradict his theory of subjectivity. The advantage of this reading is, I believe, that it uses the two components of subjectivity in a balanced way and that it reduces the inherent tension between the themes of human freedom and the world.

**Moral realism: a theoretical perspective on the suggested reading**

If the suggested reading carries some truth, I also suggest reading Biesta’s theory as a branch of moral realism and ethical intuitionism. Moral realism is the belief in objective moral reality that exists independently of individual or group perspective, attitude, or other humane influences. In other words, the truthfulness of a moral fact is not dependent on any humane perspective (Shafer-Landau 2003, p. 15). According to Parfit (2011), moral realism is the belief that there are normative claims that are intended to state moral truths and *are*, at least some of them, true (Ibid., e.g., p. 263). Ethical intuitionism is one possible epistemological implication of moral realism. “[…] intuitions are mental states in which something appears to be the case upon intellectual reflection […]. When we know moral truths intuitively […] we are directly aware of moral facts” (Huemer 2008, p. 232). It is “intellectual appearance […] whose content is an evaluative proposition […for example,] enjoyment is better than suffering; If *A* is better than *B*, and *B* is better than *C*, then *A* is better than *C*; It is unjust to punish a person for a crime he did not commit” (Huemer 2008, p. 102).

One may ask, what in Biesta’s ideas brings me to suggest reading his theory as a branch of moral realism? Aren’t his ideas, with the centrality of the notion of "subject-ness" and his worries of objectification, closer to a relativistic or constructivist metaethics view, on the far opposite end of moral realism? One may even make it harder for me by pointing at Hannah Arendt, one of Biesta’s main thinking references, who, with teachers as Jaspers and Heidegger from the phenomenology tradition, and her emphasis on the life of action*,* is probably not the first philosopher that comes to mind when thinking of a moral realist philosopher. Let alone that both Biesta and Arendt are not considered analytic philosophers – the philosophical style that dominates metaethics and moral realistic thinking and discourses in the last several decades (see, e.g., Parfit, Shafer-Landau, and Huemer). I will indicate, in short, some reasons for this suggestion.

As I showed, Biesta claims that in a subjectifying moment, a person *sees* by oneself demands from “the world.” The world is real, and these demands limit that person’s freedom. Taking one of Huemer's examples for intuition: “it is unjust to punish a person for a crime he did not commit” (Ibid.), we can see that it is parallel to what Biesta describes as a demand of “the world” that may, in subjectifying moments, limit one’s freedom to choose the meaning and value of actions one is free to take. In this case, the above intuition may limit a person’s free possibility to take revenge and harm an innocent loved one of a criminal who hurt him if he would be able, in the moment of rage, to pay attention to the moral reality and balance the feelings that flood him.

That is how I suggested reading the cases of Jason and Parks. During the event, Jason *intuited* the *objective* moral truth: “it is *wrong* to smash your teacher’s watch even though he opened this possibility for you.” Because this truth is independent and beyond Jason's impulse to smash Lane’s watch, it limits that impulse and helps him overcome the fear of embracement before his friends and Lane.

And so is with the case of Parks. The moral reality was independent of the social norms and the law of Mongomery, Alabama, 1955. Thus, this moral reality could direct Parks to act as she did in the bus event, which differs from the norms and law. As a result of Parks’ *intuiting* the moral fact and reality that “it is immoral and unjust to demand of her, or any other person, to move to the back of the bus because of one’s skin color,” the world had, so to say, limited her freedom. It prevented her from being directed by the fear of being responsible for social and legal scandals and thus to take the easy – more comfortable or less socially and legally intimidating – way out. Nevertheless, the moral truth directed her to overcome her feelings, the law, the authority, the norms, and to refuse.

This analysis shows that it is not groundless to find in Biesta’s WCE a tone that stands up to the most common standard of moral realism – the belief in the existence of an independent moral reality. However, even more, his ideas fit into finer moral realism criteria of *moral rationalism* (Shafer-Landau 2003, e.g., p. 204), i.e., that the moral fact has a special authoritative weight (relative to other facts that are not moral), over the person who perceives it. In this respect, the moral fact functions as a good reason for a person to act by it (Ibid. pp. 203-204); it obliges them as a lighthouse. So, again, these are why it is not groundless to ascribe moral realism to Biesta’s WCE.

I want to address now the claim that Arendt, with her phenomenological-continental background and emphasis on freedom as essential to humans and the life of action, is not among the philosophers that come to mind when thinking of a moral realist philosopher, and it is doubtful if Biesta, who draws upon her, is.

Firstly, regarding her philosophical background and tradition, while Arendt has a continental-phenomenological background drawing upon figures like Jaspers and Heidegger, she is also influenced by A. N. Whitehead (Tamboukou 2016), whose thinking and writing, as a philosopher but also as a mathematician, draws upon and inspired from Plato and his realism (Kennedy 1974).

Secondly, although Arendt makes a distinction between the physical or natural world and the social-political world, a distinction that may suggest that she is far from moral realism, we should remember that moral realism must not in any way cling to naturalism. There is a non-naturalist branch of moral realism (see Shafer-Landau 2003; Parfit 2011; Huemer 2008).

Thirdly, Arendt’s emphasis on *vita activa,* the life of action that directs for increasing justice in the public sphere, can be interpreted in terms of Plato’s realism. In *Republic* Book 4, Plato suggests that a just action is one that creates harmony in the soul, unites its three components or dimensions, and makes it one. This oneness or harmony is not just within the soul as an isolated entity; it is simultaneously a harmony and oneness between the soul and reality (Plato 1969, Rep. 4.443e-4.444a; Anonymous 2019). I want to suggest that this Platonic idea regarding moral wisdom and knowledge of the world has several things in common with Arendt’s idea of reconciling with the world or of being more and more at home in the world (Arendt 1994).

Fourthly, Arendt’s idea of a political mode of existence does not call for one to merge oneself with the *actual* way of life of the society one is part of. On the contrary, the ability to be in solitude and have a significant private mode of existence is necessary for *not* refusing the ‘other’ (Morgan 2016, p. 181). Now, I agree with Biesta (2016), who reads this insight of Morgan (2016) as an indication of Arendt’s presupposition of the existence of a moral reality. It is a special kind of reality, the “reality of being called into question” (Biesta 2016, p. 191). Again, the independence of this moral reality and its authority is what makes education worthy and significant. Otherwise, there is no sense to Arendt and Biesta's call for enhancing within educational institutions like schools, colleges, and universities the opportunity and practice of “*reconcile oneself to reality and*, through this, sincerely try to be at home in the world” (Biesta 2016, p. 191 citing Arendt 1958/1998, p. 58 [sic]).

Fifthly, Biesta and Arendt talk about what “the world is asking” and the call for us humans to reconcile with it. This description of the status of humans towards the moral reality gives an authoritative character to the world, depicting it as demanding or commanding of us. For example, as I tried to show above, this description aligns with Shafer-Landau's (2003) conception of *moral realism* combined with *moral rationalism*, which, in addition to the general characterization of moral realism as independent moral reality in terms of its value and worth, also characterized by the authoritative power of the moral fact, the moral demand of reality, over other facts or aspects of reality, even personal or other interests (e.g., p. 165).

Lastly, the special realistic place Arendt gives to the world can also be seen in her argument regarding the crisis in education in modern society (Arendt 1954/1961). There, she describes the tension in modern society between, on the one hand, reducing the place of authority and tradition (of the past) from the public sphere and, on the other hand, holding on to the obligation of education and teaching as an activity that “by its very nature […] cannot forgo either authority or tradition” (Arendt 1954/1961, p. 195). Because education cannot forgo authority and tradition, she concludes that “the function of the school is to teach children *what the world is like* […]. Since the world is old, always older than they [the young students] themselves, learning inevitably turns toward the past, no matter how much living will spend itself in the present (Ibid., My Italics). Tamboukou (2016) concludes from this that the role of teachers is to “grasp the world” (Ibid., p. 140).

I believe it is clear how finding a moral realism tone in these aspects of Arendt’s ideas is possible. The world into which we are born is already there, including the meanings of our actions and their moral value. This reality is independent of our interests and will, and we are bound to its meanings and authoritative call and demands. And that is also what makes education inevitable, even though we live in a modern world where tradition and authority are supposed to be replaced by the “new” and “the future.”

One last comment to another possible doubt. Readers who think that these indications are also applied to Kant’s Moral metaphysics, which, among some moral realists, Shafer-Landau is one of them, is considered constructivist, i.e. unrealistic in terms of morality; let me just say that the metaethics of Kant is complicated and there are other ways to see it (see, e.g., Stern 2012).

I assume there are many other possible ways to interpret WCE. For instance, some would not see any tension between how Biesta analyses the three cases and his idea of subject-ness. Others, probably, would see the tension as I do but would not suggest, like me, solving it by seeing Biesta’s idea as a branch of moral realism and suggesting different analyses of the cases according to it. Nevertheless, one good reason to read him in that manner is to enhance the place of the commitment of the book’s title, the centrality of the world, in analyzing the three cases and in the approach by which teachers and schools think of the educational events and create them.

To conclude this section, I would like to stress that unlike relativistic subjectivism and constructivism, which places the human attitude as the source of what is worthy and meaningful, for a realist, like I read Biesta, although one has the power to act as one wants, one *is not free* to choose the *meanings* of one’s choices. One should see for oneself the unchangeable metaphysical, ethical, political, and aesthetical aspects of reality and (directly through one’s *nous*, intuition, or reason) *see* what one should do, as well as how and why; one can see that the meaning, value, and quality of one’s choices are not under one’s control as either an individual or as a society or culture. Therefore, as I read WCE in a subjectifying moment, a person intuits by oneself demands from the world, accepts them as obligations, and tries to follow them as best one can. The individual that is in a state of subject-ness (Parks or Jason, in our cases) encounters their freedom to act as they wish but also sees that the moral operating system of the world within which they act will judge their action – a judgment beyond their freedom and control.

**The role of the world in education and teaching aiming at subjectification**

In picturing the practices of education, teaching, and schools aiming at subjectification, Biesta draws from, among others, Plato. Plato says that teaching does not lie in “producing vision” in the student’s soul, “but on the assumption that it [the soul] possesses vision but does not rightly direct it and does not look where it should […and thus good education is the] art of […] the most effective shifting or conversion of the soul” toward more truthful aspects of the world (Plato 1969, Rep. 7.518d). Thus, according to Biesta, the active role of teachers and schools is the act of *pointing* (Biesta 2022, pp. 76-78).

There is no need to say that pointing is a metaphor for the countless ways to redirect attention from one place to another. For example, Plato suggests and uses pedagogical tools such as the general demand for redefining everyday known words or abstract words such as truth, goodness, virtue, and justice. He also recommends teaching abstract issues such as geometry or telling allegories (e.g., Plato 1969. Rep. 7.523-527).

All of these are pedagogical means of “pointing,” redirecting attention toward more genuine aspects of the world. Thus, the teaching activity of pointing, as Biesta describes, encourages students, while maintaining their freedom, to direct their attention to the world (Biesta 2022. p. 87-88). As such, this educational and teaching idea is in perfect alignment with Theme 2.

Another practical pedagogical idea related to teachers and schools that coheres with Theme 2 and the role of the world is “interrupting” (Ibid. p. 36-37). By interruption, Biesta means that teachers and schools should suspend their students’ obvious, usual way of thinking and everyday perspectives, thus enabling them to attend openly to the world beyond their immediate, familiar surroundings. For that to happen, teachers and schools should “slow down” time and return schools to their original purpose, which is, as their name in ancient Greek, *scholé*, suggests, to be a place for free time or leisure that aims at elevating the soul (Biesta 2022, pp. 36-37, 50-51; and see also Anonymous, 2018 and Anonymous 2023). Thus, teachers and schools are responsible for enabling the world to interrupt students’ familiar way of life, just as the world interrupted Jason’s and Parks’s familiar everyday surroundings, way of life, and behavior.

As Biesta aptly discusses (Biesta 2022. p. 86-87), this pedagogical picture of pointing and interruption (which I paint only a part of) implies that teachers and schools should do the following in advance. (1) They should think of *the direction in which to point: what various aspects of the world (the subject matter or the curriculum) should be at the center*. (2) Moreover, to interrupt, teachers and schools should also think of a way to determine the routine direction of their students’ attention (e.g., football games, Instagram, or the weather forecast for the coming days) and (3) they must think of the way they can encourage their students to redirect their focus, even for a while, and give it to, e.g., some social or physical aspects of competitive sports in general, to the industry of social networks, to some physical and astronomical aspects that have a crucial effect on the weather, or at some aspects of modern human civilization that also have a crucial effect on the weather. Moreover, teachers and schools cannot think about these issues without (4) holding an assumption regarding what demands the world will place upon those students who will open themselves up and follow the direction pointed to by their teachers. In addition, (5) they must have at least an idea about who their students are at that specific point in life and how they might carry out the actions the world directs them to.

However, all these instructions for teachers and schools that give a significant place to Theme 2 are in tension with Biesta’s description of Theme 1 – the theme concerned with creating educational events that objectify students. Biesta worries that while wanting their students to attend the world, be open, make good choices, hold the best intuitions and knowledge, and gain the right skills, teachers will determine rigid objectives and predetermined outcomes and thus forget that their students are subjects who decide what to do with what they believe the world is calling them to do.

This worry is, perhaps, why, although the pedagogical ideas of pointing and interruption highlight the role of Theme 2 in education as subjectification, Biesta again focuses on Theme 1 in clarifying these ideas. For example, consider the following paragraph, which draws limits and indicates a specific direction for the practice of interruption:

[The interruptions] are meant to call the I who is trying to be, who is trying to be someone, who is trying to flourish, grow and learn *into the world* […]; they are meant to call the “I” into its own existence, bearing in mind that it is entirely up to the “I” to decide how to respond to the call. The work of the “I” after all is ultimately and radically the work of the “I” itself. It is the work that no one else can do for the “I” (Biesta 2022, p. 37, emphasis in the original).

The prioritizing of Theme 1 over Theme 2 is also reflected in the general idea of the beautiful risks of education in the last section of Chapter 4. The beautiful risks are the risks that come from leaving the educational event open in terms of its outcomes:

[T]eachers who think that they can state at the start of a lesson what students will have experienced, encountered and achieved at the end of the lesson, could as well be teaching without any students in their classroom. Even good and meaningful qualification  
and socialisation need to leave room for this risk because without it there is no  
room for the student (Ibid. p. 55-56) […]

From the perspective of subjectification, we want our students to go their own way, we want them to take up their own freedom and “own” it in a grown-up way, which means that they may go in a very different direction from what we envisage for them, up to explicitly refusing the future we may have had in mind for them. This risk is there as well in education, and it is one of the reasons why, from the perspective of subjectification, we should be mindful that our intentions as educators are broken intentions, […] not accidentally broken but structurally broken (Ibid. p. 56).

That is, teachers and schools should let go of their attempt to control the situation and plan and know in advance what the student will see, understand, and do. They should refrain from imposing their ideas regarding what the world is asking from the students. Biesta argues that leaving this space for the students is essential for them to enact their subjectivity (Ibid. p. 56) even though their decision may not be effective in terms of the results and outcomes (Ibid. and see also Biesta, 2014).

Biesta criticizes the attempts of common educational research (which, knowingly or not, promotes education as qualification or socialization) to reduce this critical and beautiful risk to a minimum (Ibid. p. 55).

[T]he educational work of education is never about determining what our students should do when they encounter the question. The educational work of education in other words is not about making the student into an object of the educator’s judgment, but about encouraging them to become a subject of their own action, that is to attend to their own subject-ness, and their own freedom (Biesta 2022, p. 101).

Thus, Biesta presents Lane as an exemplar of education as subjectification (Ibid. p. 92) because Lane created a situation that opened possibilities for Jason to initiate an action without determining in advance what Jason would do when he gave him the poker from the hearth or handed Jason his watch. Namely, he took a risk as an educator – a beautiful risk.

To conclude, just as when applying his idea in analyzing the three cases above, when applying his theory of subjectivity (that principally consists of two themes) to conceptualize ideas regarding the practice of education, teaching, and schools, Biesta places a much larger focus on Theme 1, i.e., the focus is on the worry from educational events that will objectify the students. Theme 2, the role of the world as a limiting function that, in principle, is an essential component in the emergence of subjectivity, stays in the shadow.

Concluding section: freedom, the world, and subjectivity

I agree with Biesta that good education should not force students to choose one way or another, and I agree with him that the educational event must open the door for the students to see the world themselves and what it calls each one of them to be or do in their particular situation and who they are. Nevertheless, I wish to emphasize that, as I see it, education as subjectification does *not* mean that teachers and schools should put on hold what *they* believe to be the best option or choice, which is determined by their best knowledge and understanding.

As I understand it, the bridge between the two themes is that teachers and schools are part of a continuous shared quest regarding the world and what it is calling us to be and do, and, to the best that they can, they aim to show their students – point toward – what they have found from this quest up to this point and what they believe the world requests from us in general and from each person in particular moments of one’s life. This act of pointing should start as an invitation to students to see these things for themselves and discuss them openly.

In other words, the bridge between putting the world in the center and maintaining students’ freedom calls on teachers to create a situation in which what the world asks becomes the subject (not the object) of the educational event. The attempt to see (both together and by themselves) the metaphysical, ethical, political, physical, emotional, social, and aesthetical aspects of reality and its potentials, including what it seems to demand from us (and from each student and teacher as individuals), should be the subject of contemplation, discussion, and action in the educational event.

Of course, teachers should remember that they cannot both enable their students’ freedom and subjectivity and see the world in their place. Teachers should also remember that forcing students to do one thing and not another harms their potential for subjectivity and their ability to see for themselves what the world is asking them. Nevertheless, the fact that someone (a teacher, friend, parent) is pointing toward an aspect of the world before you does not mean that you, the addressee of the communication act, if following the “pointing finger,” becomes an object of an external force and does not see it freely *by yourself* when you do (Biesta 2022, p. 87). Thus, Rosa Parks saw *by herself* what the world requested of her in the situation on the bus even though she had been taught to see it several months earlier in an activistic seminar (Theoharis 2013). Likewise, Jason saw *by himself* what the world requested of him, even though it was Homer Lane who, as I show below, redirected his attention to that request*.*

Moreover, when Plato’s Socrates stood before the Athenian assembly, he, as a teacher, pointed toward the world and its call for the Athenians to improve their way of life by educating their soul rather than following their desire for richness and reputation (Plato 1966, e.g., Apol. 28-29). Socrates hoped that the assembly and, in general, the people of Athens would see this calling of the world by themselves. And indeed, some people in Athens, including young Plato, followed the direction Socrates had pointed and freely saw what the world requested by themselves. Plato’s Socrates used the same educational act in countless discussions.[[4]](#footnote-5) He did not conceal from his interlocutors what he saw as the right and good option in the world.

However, the pointing teacher should always bear in mind the limitations of what they see and be open to being mistaken. Thus, while pointing his interlocutor’s or students’ attention to what he believes to be the better option, Socrates always leaves room for himself to be wrong and hence always demands that his partner in the dialogue check his thinking.

That he is guarding the freedom of his interlocutors is also manifested in the fact that Socrates is routinely failing. His interlocutors do not see by themselves what Socrates is pointing at. When that happens, and this is a fundamental lesson for teachers aiming at subjectification, Socrates accepts, for the sake of the philosophical discussion (i.e., for the sake of the educational event), the partner’s assumptions and point of view and tries, from that perspective, to redirect their gaze at the best option available under the given assumptions and viewpoint, which, for the time being, cannot be changed.[[5]](#footnote-6)

Creativity in redirecting a student’s gaze to what the world is asking is, as I read it, the pedagogical idea in the case of Lane and Jason. When handing his watch to Jason and daring him to smash it, Lane does not lecture him that the world is asking him not to smash it. However, that does not mean that Lane did not point to what the world was asking Jason and encouraged Jason to see it for himself and accept it. In my view, by handing Jason his watch, Lane *pointed* *out* *to Jason*, redirecting his gaze, something like this: “Please, dear Jason, *see for yourself* that while you have the ability to smash my watch – nothing in the world can stop you from doing that – the world is asking you not to smash my watch but rather to return it to me, although it will be an embarrassing moment for your ego.”

Therefore, *freedom*, from this perspective, is *the* *possibility of seeing the world by ourselves*. It is founded on (1) our mental or existential powers to see it and (2) the fact that no one prevents us from using those powers. *Subjectivity* *is the existential mode of being during efforts to actualize our freedom*, i.e., *to attend to the world with the purpose of seeing these aspects of the world by ourselves*. *Actualizing our subjectivity to the fullest degree consists of seeing de facto some aspects of the world by ourselves, attending to what these aspects ask from us, and accepting that request upon ourselves as our obligation*. Hence, education as subjectification is the never-ending goal that every person in a given educational event pursues in an effort to see the world by themselves, attend to what it asks of them, and be encouraged to take it upon themselves as their “I”’s obligation.

To summarize, in his theory about education as subjectification, Biesta addresses two themes from which such an educational event emerges: freedom and the distancing of education and teaching from any act of objectifying students (Theme 1), and the world, its limitations on freedom and its placement in the center of the educational event (Theme 2). Based on how Biesta analyses the three cases and conceptualizes ideas regarding the practice of education, teaching, and school aiming at subjectification, we see that Biesta focuses more on the role of Theme 1 than Theme 2. He also focuses on Theme 1 when he brings up concepts such as teaching as summoning, giving the students what they did not know they could ask for, and teaching as pointing (concepts that should balance and bridge the themes).

Biesta’s worries about objectifying students are understandable since we are still in a post-Auschwitz age, living in an impulsive society and dealing with the inner educational paradox that raising people to fulfill their subjectivity can result in their objectification. Nevertheless, as I attempted to show, there is still a way to focus more on what the world is asking and keep students’ freedom. I showed this by reading Biesta’s text from a classic point of view (i.e., Socratic, Platonistic, Aristotelian moral realistic, and ethical intuitionistic).

From this perspective, I suggested an alternative analysis of the three cases and the practice of education, teaching, and schools aiming at subjectification. The main idea is that freedom from this perspective depends not only on the power of the person to decide by themselves what to do but, more importantly, that they have *an opportunity* *to see the world and its potentialities – aspects of truth, goodness, justice, and beauty – by themselves*. In other words, freedom is a human state in which we have the ability (founded on (1) our mental powers and (2) the fact that no one prevents us from using those powers) to see by ourselves what the world is asking from us: the different (ethical, political, physical, aesthetical, metaphysical, existential, social, spiritual, and so on) meanings, quality, and value that are beyond our control and that our possibilities carry.

Finally, subjectivity is the existential mode in which we are in an effort to actualize our freedom, i.e., attending the world with the purpose of seeing these aspects of the world by ourselves. A high degree of subjectivity is to see, *de facto,* some aspects of the world by ourselves, attend to what it asks from us, and take that upon ourselves as our obligation.

The beauty of subjectifying educational moments lies in the spiritual effort of the teacher and student to rise together to the highest possible existential mode.

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1. Biesta prefers the term “subject-ness” over subjectivity in order to prevent a reading of it as an epistemological category, which overlooks the existential meaning of being a subject. I, too, intend that meaning, but I also interchangeability use the term “subjectivity,” which is more prevalent in the discourse. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. See also Kant’s idea of a potential outlook of an object as beauty and perfection without having a prior concept or an external purpose but rather with an internal purpose (Kant 2001,e.g., p. 111); And see Gillis (2016) on the influence of Kant’s Critique of the Power of Judgment on Arendt. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Again, the long seminar that exposed her to the activist world and her awareness of previous cases of the refusal of the driver’s demand to move back do not in any way weaken the fact that she saw it by herself. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. For example, in the Meno, before trying to define what a form is, he asks Meno to follow his definition and see what he thinks of it; in the same dialog when he talks with Meno’s boy, Socrates draws the length – the answer – of the lesson he teaches the boy, and urges him to *see* the correct answer *by himself* and to point at it. Additionally, in *Republic* book two, Socrates points to the healthy and just city (*polis*), the same city Glaucon named in contempt a city of pigs. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. E.g., in the above situation with Glaucon, where Socrates goes on to find the justice in the pompous and luxury polis. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)