Towards a Curriculum of Vulnerability and Blandness:
Insights from Levinas and Classical Chinese Thoughts

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Introduction

The 2011 French feature film *The Intouchables* offers an inspiring account of a rare encounter, not only of bodies and minds, but also tangled class and racial politics. In an unmistakably simple plot, directors and film writers Olivier Nakache and ÉricToledano take the audience to an unlikely relationship between Philippe, a French aristocrat paralyzed from neck down, and Driss, a Black ex-con from the projects, who is hired as his live-in caretaker. As the film begins, Philippe and his assistant are interviewing candidates in his luxurious Parisian mansion. Driss, recently released from incarceration, has no intention of being hired. He only wants a signature to prove his failure of job search so that he can continue receiving unemployment benefits. Extremely casual and flirtatious, he manages to annoy everyone yet raises Philipp's eyebrows. The next day, Driss comes back to collect the signature and finds to his astonishment that Phillip has decided to give him a trial. Among all applicants, Philippe chooses Driss, the frivolous and even crime-prone, and allows him into the inner chamber of his life. Thus an unexpected journey awaits both.

One of the most critically acclaimed French-language films in recent years, the movie depicts the exiles of two troubled and vulnerable souls. As the film unfolds, we see the evolution of a heartwarming relationship where interpersonal encounters and discursive forces, hospitality and vulnerability infuse each other. Like Philippe's physical paralysis, Driss is socially "disabled" and utterly vulnerable to life's fickle comings and goings. From an immigrant Senegalese family, Driss lives the everyday realities of drugs and gangs, and becomes homeless after his foster-parent, who is exasperated for not seeing him for six months, orders him to leave. Through the care encounter, both protagonists discover an entirely new dimension of their own existence, and recast an unlikely relationship into one of mutual enrichment. Their sociability emerges when another human being is in crisis.

Taking up the feature film *The Intouchables*, this article will first explore the fruitful notion of "vulnerability" through a Levinasian lens to rethink how human relationship generates its own gravity even in most unlikely circumstances. Secondly, I will explore the moral and philosophical visions expressed in Chinese classical thoughts, especially the motif of blandness, to provide another "witnessing lens" to vulnerability. By reading

Emanuel Levinas and classical Chinese thoughts, I suggest that an ethos of vulnerability and blandness could open up a nurturing space for potentials and renewals, so that the necessary conditions of justice and ethics may emerge across social differences and in educational practices. Lastly, I will discuss the curriculum implications gained through a positive appraisal of the motif of vulnerability and blandness—not as deficiency but the path to unimpeded growth and potentials.

A Difficult Cosmopolitan Project: Vulnerability in Levinasian Ethics

It seems almost commonplace for humanitarian (including educational) projects to speak of vulnerability as the central target of elimination. Vulnerability is intuitively conceived as a synonym for weakness, impotence, and victimhood, as the consequence of various institutional and social oppressions. I propose, however, to consider vulnerability not as one of the limits of human existence, but as the very condition of how to live as humans. Put it psychoanalytically, vulnerability is experienced as one experiences the insuppressible presence of the self; and vulnerability binds us in moral obligations towards one another. However, the path to the other is not always self-evident in our daily spontaneous acts. For instance, when we condemn the exclusion from history of the minoritized others—the women, the Jews, the black, the homosexual, etc.—our cosmopolitan narrative often inadvertently "incarcerates" them as a constitutive outside against which humanity has defined itself. Such is the striking doubleness of the Enlightenment project that seeks to include the others *in* an expanded cosmopolitan utopia but never completely *of* it. The cosmopolitan project, as Gilroy (2000) contends, becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy that concerns itself with the forms of universal humanism yet strips away all histories of social violence in most embodied ways. As Kennedy (2011, p. 375) also asks, "[o]f what use is the ideal of common humanity when injustice and atrocity is very much experienced in the particular—on my body, or against my family, my community and those others I recognize as like me?"

Mindful of the danger of the cosmopolitan rhetoric, which is often construed in a self-referential system of abstraction and identity politics, Levinas starts instead with the most tangible and bodily—the face. The Greek word for face, *prosopon*, means also a mask, something more than what is revealed to the eyes. To Levinas, the path to the other is frequently blocked in our reducing the face of the other to that which meets our gaze—the expression of the eyes, the wrinkles on the forehead, the color of the skin, etc.—and by our stripping away the fullness of the face via categories, concepts, and descriptors. What is at stake for him is to take "face" as a point of anchorage and to re-open the question of ethics against the universal humanism of Enlightenment. The philosophical and ethical preeminence of the face—beyond representation and irreducible to the naming of the women, the Jews, the black, the homosexual, the disabled, etc.—gives rise to the singular affirmation of the existence of the other.

Built on Husserlian phenomenology, Levinas revives ethics in the most sensuous and concrete, rather than through metaphysical and logo-categorical abstraction. He gives an account of ethical sensibility in which goodness is irreducible to knowledge of the sovereign Cartesian subject, but awakened by the vulnerability of the other, as the suffering for the other's suffering (1991). Levinas seeks to understand vulnerability as a mode of relating to others prior to consciousness, will, or intention, by offering oneself to be "bound to others before being tied to my body" (Levinas, 1998a, p. 76). In other words, the alterity of the other "animates" the ethical senses through a *pre-reflective* intentionality, in the very

immediacy that precedes conscious reflection (Drabinski, 1999). That is to say, ethics is born as an *affection* rather than a *reflection*, without reducing the other to comprehension and representation in the I's intentional efforts. Thus ethics is beyond sovereignty, beyond the torsion of language where "sovereignty is operative" and where "the saying of ethics, as for the other, necessarily lapses into the said of cognition" (Young, 2009, p. 222).

Now, if we recall, we can hardly characterize Driss as intentionally good-willed. His deeds, if anything, derive from his self-interested effort to simply—exist. However, this effort at existing has covered something up, something unstable and always already at work, something like a pebble in one's shoe that makes one unable to stand still and propels one to always take another step. The pebble in the shoe captures Levinas's observation of the paradox of being human: a self-interested effort at existing, and at the same time, a discomfort with oneself in the effort of existing (Burggraeve, 1999). Such a discomfort, Levinas calls the miracle of the human, opens up the ethical care for the other, who is always under the menacing annihilation of the face encounter that reduces it to what "the face" gives us "to see." Ethics, put in a double negative, is the discomfort and "the inability to remain indifferent to those who suffer" (Joldersma, 2009, p. 207).

This returns us to the difficult educational task to nurture the humbleness of putting oneself in another's place and allowing within oneself the other's distress and pain. Too often our curricular text is cluttered with matters of conscious will, the sovereign subject, and abstract ideal of humanity and justice. While the juridical concept of justice remains within the bounds of metaphysics, the Levinasian ethics calls the subject outside the ontological framework and identity politics. Whereas metaphysical ethics is understood as a reasoned duty and thought-out principle that collapse the other into the same, Levinas "identified one's response to the Other as initiating the ethical moment—a movement that takes ethics outside and away from the thought-out self" (Tarc, 2006, p. 289). It teaches us ethics does not begin with what we make of the other; it begins with the other. It is the sensible embodiment of vulnerability that fuels the "memory of servitude" to others (Levinas, 1998b, p.149) and ignites the subject's relation to alterity beyond its identity.

Many philosophers have spilled ink on the problematic of otherness/alterity/ethics, in the larger movement seeking to trouble the universal humanism exercised in language, social programs, and state laws. Levinas certainly has his place in this movement, yet his critique of the imperialism of universality is neither through the deconstruction of language nor the promotion of incommensurable singularity. His originality lies in his speaking of otherness as infinitely vulnerable, as the ethical anchor through which the claims of universal can be called into question (Goux, 2011, p.387). To encounter alterity, Levinas (1991) contends, is to encounter the other whose vulnerability demands ethical care without the exercise of the I's cognitive and representational impulses, such that "[e]thics is the awakening of subjectivity in the absence of interpretational consciousness (Nortvedt, 2003, p. 227).

Ethics takes place precisely when the "I" loses her/his grips on the world—affected by *cogito*—and is being *appealed to* by the other in the concrete experience of vulnerability. Ethics is experienced bodily, through which the vulnerable other is elevated to a status of height and takes precedence over thinking. The height of the other orders us to approach her/him with humbling proximity, with incomplete knowledge that retains the other's unknowability and sacredness, and with a suffering upon the other's destitute call. This is not intended as the Good Will within human reason, for the other encountered is

always already a trace of what has never been present in the consciousness or reason (Nortvedt, 2003, p.228).

Judith Butler's moral philosophy, describing vulnerability as constitutive of the human, gives us a different entry to Levinasian ethics. In her more recent works, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005) and *Precarious Life* (2006), Butler elaborates vulnerability as a starting point for ethical relations, for the appellation or naming of, say, the women, the Jews, the black, the homosexual, etc. categorically renders one's social existence dependent upon and bonded to others through linguistic normalization (Mills, 2007). For Butler, norms are inherently violent and the subject is effectively constrained yet dependent on such violent normalizations—or the "exclusionary matrix"—for its own emergence and existence (1993, p.3). The repetition of norms and normalization is part of a regulatory force that produces the bodies it governs, through which one both establishes oneself as abjected being in complicity with norms, and effects a disindentification from the norms through performative politics.[2] Vulnerability per Butler is discursive *ambivalence* of the subject in its dependency on normative violence for its constitution, such that "[o]ne comes to 'exist' by virtue of this fundamental dependency on the address of the Other" (ibid. p.5).

What for Butler is linguistic vulnerability inherent in the subject's coming-into-noticeability, is, for Levinas, an extra-linguistic responsibility that summons one to embracing the face of the other phenomenologically. For Butler, normative violence in speech is a mode by which vulnerability is made apparent and which gives rise to ethical responsibility. As such, the "face" cannot simply appear as a face without the intervention of normative intelligibility that establishes what is to be seen from the face. In other words, the face of the other depends on normative violence to enter into ethical relationship. While for Butler it is the dependency on language, for Levinas it is the categorical responsibility to vulnerability—a response before the order is pronounced and understood via language—that the subject is hailed into being.

Certainly, Butler's conception of vulnerability deviates from Levinas's in a number of ways. One important point of conjunction, however, is this: While Butler speaks of social death, or "abjection" that the subject suffers as a result of its dependency on linguistic violence, she converges with Levinas's reading of the face encounter as a failure to fully allow the subject to appear more than what the skin and flesh gives the eyes to see, more than, say, a Black, a woman, a homosexual. The world-making and reality-conferring capacity of the norm, which for Butler (inspired by Foucault) is a repetitive violence of language,[3] for Levinas (inspired by Husserl) necessitates the interconnectedness of one human being to another, the incompleteness of such relation, and the "re-saying of the saying of the said—infinite, as ethics" (Levinas, 1998b, p. xv).

In *The Intouchables*, both Philippe and Driss are vulnerable—one physically and the other socially, economically, and racially—and to varying degrees, struggle with their own plights. As a caretaker, Driss does not act out of the abstract ideal of sympathy or hospitality. In fact, it is in his lack of sympathy toward the paralyzed that he recognizes the other's "face" more fully. In Philippe's conversation with his friend, he reveals deep dismay at the impersonal sympathy leveled at his disability by his previous caretakers, and instead, cherishes Driss's bold ignorance of this vital element of his identity. Despite the "incivility" of Driss, Phillip finds an unchecked sentiment that enables him to surrender to his own pain and paranoia, and surprisingly, to discover something new. Driss is irrepressibly outspoken, mischievous, and quarrelsome: his arrival is nothing but strange to Philippe's world. Yet that strangeness summons Philippe to respond to its claims, and at the

same time, to be ready to be claimed in new and strange ways. In that rupture there is a warm embrace, an intimate crossing of social, cultural, and racial thresholds that Philippe finds wonderfully refreshing. He is led by Driss to put some order to his life, opening to the latter his troubled existence and at the same time putting himself in the care of the latter. In their ongoing interplays, both recognize each other as accomplices and allies; their vulnerability communicates strength and inspires faith in each to be at ease in another's care and to inhabit a scene of their own making.

Driss and Philippe exist in an aporetic relationship to one another, through irreconcilable differences as well as shared commonalities of inhabiting the zone of intouchability. In every respect of social status, wealth, prestige, and temperament, they are strikingly unequal. Yet in a very real sense, both are living outside the social or corporeal norms. Their relationship is hardly characterizable as hierarchical: despite the extreme wealth and status differences, Philippe, with his natural faculties almost nil, relies on Driss in every minutia of daily living: from medical matters to letter writing to phone conversation, from eating to undressing to excretion, from the most refined sociality to the most rudimentary animal needs. In such a relationship of undecidability, ethics becomes an aporetic encounter that "bears the contradiction of deciding with undecidability, of speaking to the Other's unspeakable experience" (Tarc, 2006, p. 297). It beckons one to pass through non-passable edges of language and non/reason in metaphysics. Ethics thus is the movement through irresolvable aporia where the knowing of the other has to be (re)learned over and again, in a position of infinite waiting and becoming.

Pedagogy of Blandness: Vulnerability in Classical Chinese Thoughts

Following the discussion of vulnerability as Levinasian ethics, this section will explore the moral and philosophical visions expressed in Chinese classical texts to provide another "witnessing lens" to vulnerability. In ancient Chinese thought, I argue, the image of the vulnerable is expressed through the motif of blandness—as in the lingering sound of music and in the spartan landscape painting, which assumes an aesthetic elegance. Vulnerability is approached as a natural state of things in which all partakes in the flux of transformation, as the meditative flow of the inexorably passing world. As much as vulnerability, blandness is a notion of indirect signification and can be a useful analytical tool in recasting the kind of questions that philosophy of education and ethics write large can pose.

Why China? As Jullien and Marchaisse (1994: 247) remark, China stands as an elsewhere beyond the framework of Western thought, yet the *elsewhere* must not be confused with *difference*, as China is no more different from the European sphere than it is similar to it. By reading Levinas and Chinese classical texts together, I hope, offers a productive dialogue between two distinct systems of thought to see what opens up for education and ethics in our time. If the encounter with alterity is what animates the Levinasian ethics, ancient Chinese thought may lead us to question the binary of self and alterity altogether, for it is not a philosophy that concerns with dualist ontology or metaphysics, but honors the presence of absence, flux within stability, stability within flux, and metaphorically, the lingering flavor of blandness.

French sinologist Francios Jullien, in his widely acclaimed essay *In Praise of Blandness: Proceeding from Chinese Thought and Aesthetics* (2008), charts an exceptionally rich journey in exploring an unusual notion in Chinese thought and aesthetics, i.e. the motif of blandness. Blandness, commonly referring to the absence of flavor, character, or color, is often considered a negative quality in Anglo-Francophone

contexts. A deceptively simple concept, however, blandness, or *dan*淡 in Mandarin, possesses a special significance in the development of Chinese culture. Associated with water (as suggested by the radical 氵 on the left), *dan*淡 takes up a felicitous overtone as the fecundity of the ordinary and the elemental capacity of renewal from which all flavors derive. Just as water is transitory without form and malleable by the force of every obstacle it encounters, blandness preserves an elusive value and propensity of things by avoiding the fixity of meanings in particular flavors, characters, and colors, and by nurturing the potentiality for immanence.

Blandness, at first sight, is not an easy value to embrace, as it is contrary to the pleasure of the taste and our inclination towards indulgence in such pleasure. Yet according to Jullien, blandness is a positive quality where all currents of Chinese thought—Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism—converge, as the undifferentiated foundation of all things and their fullness of potentials. In landscape paintings, blandness is a motif that artists in as early as the Tang and Song dynasties strove for to depict concrete experiences without reducing them to particular signs or meanings. A classical Chinese landscape is usually no more than sketchy brushstrokes of airy mountains, expanse of water, sparse vegetation and rocks, and thatched roof as hints of human presence, in diluted ink and with narrow range of colors. Playing with the limit of our perception, the bland unburdens the artist from differentiation, from having to compel attention with elaborate details, to achieve a state when "all landscapes blend together and assimilate each other" (37) in expansive movements of meanings. In a landscape of great simplicity and sparseness, nothing forces itself onto the gaze, and the gaze is not frontal but sideway glance of what is fleeting and on the verge of disappearing. In the quiet fascination of blandness, more is preserved, unsaid, and undone.

The open-ended dynamism of blandness is the embodiment of both the Confucian Mean （中庸） and the Taoist Way (道), and reflects the Chinese philosophical striving for *plenitude*, rather than abstraction (Versano, preface to Jullien 2008, pp.13). The Taoists and Confucians pursue the roots of all existence—or the foundation of Heaven and Earth (天地之本)—not through inquiring into what truly is (the being-in-itself or pure idea as in the Greek thought). Rather, their approach is a celebration of the original nature, as inhered in change, where all things flourish and through which the world unfolds in unceasing renewals. This detachment of ancient Chinese thought from the abstract concept of truth and truth-based reasoning—which underscores the entire foundation of West philosophy—is nontrivial. It reflects the inclination of the Chinese philosophers and laymen to shun abstract theorizing in favor of the practicality and plenitude of the everyday (Hansen 1985: 491; Munro 1969:55). The perceptible dimension of reality is never superable by metaphysical paradigms of rationality. Instead of seeking transcendental meaning from the day-to-day empirical flux, the programmatic orientation of the Chinese thought opens directly onto flux itself, "[bestowing] on becoming the logic of its own transpiring" (Jullien 2008: 49). The origin of the flux is the flux (the nature) itself, and as such, the concept of truth is unnecessary and discordant with flux's polyvalence and indeterminacy. As the Taoists claim, no Tao is constant as no name is constant, and there is no constant way, or Tao, to be constructed (see Lao Tzu 2002). What is real is *wu*无 (i.e. nothingness) that, paradoxically, preserves the fecundity of actions. Consequently, what is truly flavorful is the bland that preserves the fullness of tastes by not fixating on any particular flavor.

The dualistic framework that underpins much of western philosophical tradition, what Derrida (1976: 22-73) calls "the metaphysics of presence,"[4]is unthinkable in ancient Chinese thought, in which essence, presence, and absence are not discrete realms but an organic whole mutually generating and co-emerging. In such ex-linguistic realm, the sign is an absolute *violence*, rather than a *signification*, of presence, as every sign *actualizes by excluding* one another, thus "fixes" and "strangles" the infinite possible. To Taoists such as Chuang Tzu (1968), to valorize binary oppositions of signs is to see reality partially, as binaries are constructed to explain the world in particular (oppositional) way and fail to recognize that oppositions are often accomplices and supplementarity. As Chuang Tzu commented, "He [The Sage] too recognizes a 'this,' but a 'this' which is also a 'that,' a 'that' which is also a 'this.'…A state in which 'this' and 'that' no longer find their opposites is called the hinge of the Tao" (1968, chapter 2, cited in Yeh 1983:104). In such ex-linguistic realm of the Tao, presence is undiffered and vulnerable flux, where the not-yet, the becoming, and the extinguishing are all but the same Great Matrix.

While the derridian *differance* punctuates the boundaries of alterity and sameness by allowing the movement of traces, while the Levinasian ethics undoes the Cartesian subject by offering itself up to the others before being bound to itself, the Taoists depend on the Way for deliverance from dualism. In the Way, the elusive value of blandness casts into doubt the dualistic logic by the simultaneous presence and absence of taste, the fullness and vacancy of flavors, and the simplicity and abundance of motifs. Through the lingering flavor, the dualism of self-alterity disintegrates, as difference and sameness no longer stand in opposition to each other, but rather abide within the plenitude of the co-producing *yin* and *yang*, which enables an infinite opening onto the richness of human experience and togetherness.

It is through the bland that the vulnerability of immanence is preserved, rather than eliminated, as vulnerability inhered in flux is subject to indeterminacy and can never affirm its ever-changing presence. To illustrate this point, a bland sound is vulnerable in the sense that it does not seek to project an acoustic sign to declare its presence; it retreats into diminishing traces, dying out over the longest possible time. As such, the dualism of presence and absence is effectively challenged.

> We hear it still, but just barely; and as it diminishes, it makes all the more audible that soundless beyond into which it is about to extinguish itself. We are listening, then, to its extinction, to its return to the great undifferentiated Matrix (Jullien 2008: 79).

The disturbances of the acoustic signs only fluctuate momentarily, until the threshold of silence is obtained and inner equilibrium of harmony is reached. The moment before the sound exerts its particularities, the process of the sound's own fading, and the soundless beyond are stages when flux of existence is unified in the "great Matrix," when the real, the absencing presence, the emptying essence are overlapping and synchronic for *yin* and *yang* to communicate spontaneously. The Taoists achieve a state of harmony by being attuned to silence, blandness, and nonsaying, rather than to emphatic, contrastive, definitive signs and discourses.

As such, the metaphysical hierarchy of being-nonbeing, presence-absence is undone. The system of signs and saying/seeing as presencing is actively suppressed in Chinese philosophical enterprise, especially that of Tao, which seeks to refrain from saying and avoid the fragmenting of plenitude in actualization. As much as the "face" for Levinas is vulnerable to the predicative discourse—for instance, to the linguistic demarcation of a

Black, a Jew, a disabled—the ancient Chinese philosophers were wary of the artificial rupture of the transitory plenitude by the violence of signs. As each actualization is a negation of other possibilities, the plenitude is vulnerable to such actualizing rupture.

In the context of both Levinasian and classical Chinese thought, vulnerability is not something to dispel, but a rich link with the world, intimate involvement with the great process of things, and the potentiality of the world's unending renewal. The possibility of renewal is articulated by Levinas as vulnerability in the face of the other, which, by upholding the other in a dimension of height, both disrupts what the face gives us to "see" and sparks the renewed presence of others in each encounter. In classical Chinese thought, the potentiality lies in the Great Mean (中庸) that nurtures the full capacity of things to come about and ensures that Heaven and Earth are in their proper place—the place of centrality (正)rather than waywardness and partiality. The Great Mean has little to do with humility or mediocrity, to hide out in the middle road so to speak, with which it is often characterized, unduly, as the banal virtue.

The virtue of the Sage and the Heaven lies in not deviating from the potential of the world and of man, as it is the source and efficacy of change. The virtue of the Great Mean recognizes the universal immanence through which change is diffused and nonspectacular in the longue durée of history, identical with itself and not corresponding to a distant will of God, and blending in as the normal state of affairs without extraordinary markers or flavors. In other words, the virtue of the Great Mean is in tune with the most subtle becomings manifest in the day-to-day, rather than seeking abrupt, substantial transformation. Thus the Taoist principle of human relations is one of spontaneous guilelessness where the dignity of the person lies not in him/her being autonomous and rational agents, but as part of human togetherness uncluttered by intentions, unburdened from any specific flavor, and unimpeded by any intervention.

Importantly, vulnerability is not an inert quality trapped in fragility and incapacity to act. It does not accept passively the world as it is, that which we might not have chosen but nonetheless thrown into, but welcomes the other's arrival with amazement and awe by putting oneself into a position of unknowingness, in an almost sacred sense. Such vulnerability counteracts the gesture of closure that "no sooner have we arrived than we are told that the world is tired of us; it has seen the likes of us before" (Levinson, 1997, p. 441). Similarly, the motif of blandness does not indicate an inability to distinguish or appreciate flavors. The *whatness* of the bland is the very indeterminacy, the very lingering that keeps the overdetermined flavors at bay so that the fullness of flavors may flourish.

As such, vulnerability and blandness opens subjectivity onto inderdependence, presents us from slipping into particularity and partiality, and provokes a deep moral tenor both through the Levinasian "awe" with which we approach the others and through the Taoist "blandness" with which we strive for the true flavor. As much as the "face" resists being inserted into abstract categories of identities, the bland resists the taxonomy of particular flavors or seasonings. As much as vulnerability, blandness expresses our being in the world at its most radical by rendering the world less determined, with the presence already ruptured by absencing, signs already imbued with nondistinction (Jullien 2008: 140). Vulnerability and blandness does not lead us to a transcendental beyond in another world as the beyond is always already contained within the flows of things.

Curriculum Implications: Vulnerability as Subjectivity, Blandness as Nonaction

What is to be gained by reading Levinas and classical Chinese thought together? As curricular texts, they provide an insight that education is a deeply philosophical and ethical matter. Both call for a different conceptualization of social progress, one that takes issue with the teleological view of the "indefinite perfectibility" of human world (Arendt, 1977, p. 176), and takes into account the human conditions of flux and indeterminancy. While Levinas redirects philosophy from the *essence* of being to the *crisis* of being, from the question of *what-is-being* to the question of how to respond to *being-in-crisis*, ancient Chinese thought further distablizes the boundaries of self-alterity, self-world to open up capacious movements and potentialities in human relations and experiences.

As much as the Chinese embrace blandness—a quality neither partial nor artificial—as a virtue in generating genuine, holistic social relations, Levinas meditates upon vulnerability as undeniable responsibility for the crisis and suffering of the other, as a fundamental virtue that dons human encounters a sacred aura. On this common ground of the bland and the vulnerable, one encounters the paradox: that to praise the bland and the vulnerable runs against one's most spontaneous judgment. The English incarnation of blandness and vulnerability is unmistakably repellent, indicating that something is missing and the lack thus renders the person/thing weak and fragile.

In the last section of this article, I will explore what can be learned through a positive reading and appraisal of the motif of vulnerability and blandness to enrich our curriculum practices. It is impossible to "translate" or "apply" Levinas or classical Chinese thought to a curricular agenda, as both have questioned the very foundation of our current framework of education, and turned away from the predetermined guidelines and mandates that order the contour of school reforms. The bland and the vulnerable evoke the existential/aesthetic dimension of our curriculum because the vulnerable and bland is always there within us, and binds us to the intimate togetherness with the world and the others in a subtle manner. The bland and the vulnerable does not try to paint the world through signs, but give reign to the signs' intensity, sensitivity, and perpetual (dif)fusion. In them, we find a theoretical rigor that is as efficient as it is subtle, and that lends much food for thoughts to current curriculum reforms in the U.S. and worldwide.

Vulnerability as Subjectivity

The notion of vulnerability is alarmingly salient in our time when racial slurs, ethnic violence, religious conflicts, homophobia, and labor exploitation crowd the news headlines, indicating that our disconnection from each other (and from ourselves) has reached tragic proportions. Even in schools, children often report being unfairly judged, misunderstood, and rank-tracked, and not infrequently, suffer from bullying and gunfire. Meanwhile, self-centered individualism seems to be an epidemic that prevents the young from connecting to each other in meaningful ways. The question to ask is what educational responses would be appropriate in our time. In the market spirit of competition, it is commonsense to advocate for a curriculum oriented towards the cultivation of strength, power, and advantage, all antonyms to vulnerability. After all, who would desire their own selves and nations to be vulnerable?

The vulnerability at issue here, however, is a misnomer, having little in common with the conventional definition as susceptibility to harms and attacks. It is a radical pedagogy that vows to hold open a space that might otherwise to be stifled with racial,

cultural, national, gendered, and able-ist norms. To endeavor for a curriculum of vulnerability is a daunting task that carries political risks given the racial-ethnic-religious-ideological impasse we daily encounter in the global order. To teach vulnerability inescapably buttheads with nationalistic sentiments basing the strength of the nation on conquest and victory, in a world dominated by paranoia of the others through discourses of security, immigration, and terrorism, and in a globalizing market that upholds competitiveness and survival of the fittest. It is the Other, the sine qua non of difference and aberration, that we have been conditioned to fear.

Indeed, a curriculum of vulnerability is unthinkable within the ontological structure of western historiography. To teach vulnerability is going against the grain, thinking with the unthinkable, and venturing into realm unexpected in curriculum studies canon. Yet the concept of vulnerability allows us to speak differently about education, as it invites the teacher and the student to tap all circuits of intuitive/imaginative faculties, to hear what is muffled, to notice what is obscured, to overcome the inability to see others in the world of appearance ("faces"). A curriculum of vulnerability is mindful of the collective history of victimization, oppression, and marginalization, yet does not let the weight of the past foreclose the possibilities of the future. Such a curriculum of vulnerability is complex, not to say aporetic, that encourages us to keep alive a sense of awe, so as to nurture a plurality of our common world without being lured into the comfort of essence and identity politics.

Yet to teach vulnerability provides little comfort to the teacher, for it opens up a space of suspended authority and certainty. The fleeting fear of exposing to and not knowing in the face of others may trigger loss, disorientation, and melancholia, yet the difficulties take us to the heart of the pedagogies of difference. Indeed, to many, the classroom is a quintessential public space where one "appears" before one's fellows and comes to terms with others whose backgrounds bring different possibilities of existence. These might be uncomfortable engagements, yet they are educative in an important way, as they constitute a relational and ethical moment of pedagogies, and renew the condition for being-with each other more justly and coming into being as moral subjects (Säfström, 2003).

It is not to romanticize vulnerability, which is likely deemed as an irrational threat to a hyper-nationalistic, individualistic, and competitive sentiment so pervasive in our time. Learning to inhabit the loss, expiating for the other, and being its willing hostage echoes a bare life that requires one to forgo a language of thinking, to be answerable for the other, to dwell in kinships—what Wittgenstein calls "family resemblance" (1968, p. 32)—which makes possible the true wonder of enigmatic humanity. The politics of vulnerability is a bold gesture of nonviolent movement toward the other that reorients ontology. As Levinas puts, "It is then not without importance to know if the egalitarian and just State in which man if fulfilled… proceeds from a war of all against all, or from the irreducible responsibility of the one for all, and if it can do without friendships and faces" (1998b, p. 160). To teach a curriculum of vulnerability is to be answerable to the students and to participate in a time of risk and give up the safe position as guarantor of knowledge.

Blandness as Nonaction

The ideal of rational, autonomous subject seeking self-realization and progress has long infused curricular assumptions and pedagogical practices. Teaching is conceived as a means through which to impart knowledge, and knowledge a foundation upon which subjects obtain rationality and enter into ethical relationship with one another. Ironically,

with such an enduring framework, especially the outcome-based curriculum, the educational system has increasingly become not part of the solution but part of the problem. Consider the current school reform in the U.S. that seizes the techniques of accountability, standardization, and evaluation as the solution for "failing" schools. The outcome of preparing the 21st-century learner, worker, and citizen in the global competition dictates a strikingly similar laundry-list of reform measures circulating in educational systems around the world: high-stake testing, merit-pay teacher competency evaluation, school choice, child-centered pedagogy, evidence-based research, to name a few. These monolithic, top-down strategies often produce tensions, controversies, and new forms of inequality and exclusion (Noddings 2007; Taubman 2009; Watkins 2012).

We live in an age of standardization and differentiation, where competence, ability, aptitude are measured over and again in school tests and evaluations. Standardization is made possible by classifications and differentiations that unrelentingly define pupils in comparison with, and in hierarchical order of, each other. Whether it is grade, score, race, ethnicity, or gender, students are sequestered in their exclusive individuality and can hardly be anything more than this compartmentalized and insuperable particularity. How can our curriculum and pedagogy allow for an infusion of meanings, rather than close off meanings, and embark on a perpetually renewed journey of possibilities? Rather than being fastened to a model of banking (Freire 2006), how can the bank of the curriculum be overflown with its own contingency so that schooling becomes all the more flavorful for un-naming any particular category and flavor?

Perhaps we can glimpse from the wisdom of the Chinese sage who, counter-intuitively, savors the bland and engages in "nonaction" (*wuwei*无为). Nonaction, as the virtue of blandness, is by no means the forfeiture of actions *tout court*. It is a non-teleological way of conceptualizing action, as the openness of actions through which potentialities are fully present and outcomes are mutually engendering, rather than predetermined. Blandness as nonaction preserves immanence, spontaneousness, and detachment in human relations. As the famous opening statement of *Tao Te Ching* goes, "The Tao that can be said/known is not the invariable Tao; the name that can be named is not the invariable name" (Lao Tzu, 2002). The cosmic image of Tao calls for the active forgetfulness of concepts, of names, of dualism, and urges unlearning or undoing knowledge, for knowledge, just like presence, is always already split, multiplied, incapable of appearing to itself except in its own disappearance. Such a space keeps open to the inevitable fluctuating and frees itself from the ends-focused approach that frames problems and solutions as oppositional.

The intense appeal to reforms and actions in our current educational sphere, contrary to the motif of Tao, attempts to achieve drastic and far-reaching results, yet often exhausts the potential, and neglects the mundane propensity of becoming. In the reform paranoia, the vibrancy and inconsistency that moves through the everyday classroom lives is increasingly lost as well as the picture of the whole. For instance, I have argued that the lofty sounding goal of child-centered pedagogy does not always bring about empowerment, but acts like a forked tongue that speaks different languages in front-stage and back-stage practices. Based on ethnographic research in ethnic minority villages in Southwest China, the study illustrates that this cookie-cutter model of "best practice" and "quality education" obscures other potentials of learning and other understandings of "the educated person," and drives village teachers and students into disenchantment and maneuvers (see Wu 2012). While taking child-centeredness as the deliverable "universal good," the formulaic

reform guidelines leave us with nothing to anticipate or imagine, and erase other possibilities and educative dimensions.

Once a stylized package of action is produced, it presents only a partial, particular *externalization* and loses sight of the complicated whole. What "ends" is oftentimes amplified tensions and divisions, and diminishing insights. To disrupt an overdetermined world and to speak/act in the immanent space requires a difficult undertaking so as to begin, over and again, in the middle of things. Suspending the quick, concrete measures of success by test scores puts the teacher in a vulnerable position of undecidability. Yet it is a necessary uncertainty of entering into and engaging with a pedagogical relationship that does not reduce plenitude to abstract sameness.

Instead of pushing the circumstances to a singular direction, as seen in the market-dictated accountability movement in the U.S. schools and elsewhere, the lesson of the bland and the virtue of the Great Mean opens up an alternative curriculum space. In this space, it is understood that situations can never be fully manifested or eternalized, but exist in a motif of "lingering" that evokes the inexhaustible potential, the presence of absence, the generative multiplicity. In this space, no stance is overdeveloped, for as soon as we are predisposed to a particular solution, we limit its own field of action to produce fixations and divisions, ossify our subjectivity, and block the energy of other eventualities. The curriculum space of blandness brings us back to the sentiment of Tao where meanings are not presented definitively but appear only to be withdrawn, where we rid ourselves of the differentiating nature of curriculum and are invited to a "beyond"—a beyond only accessible by an inward journey towards the profundity of signs and their own relinquishing.

The virtue of blandness as nonaction is succinctly articulated by Jullien not as an indicator of deficiency, but as a path to unimpeded growth:

> [O]ne must not seek flavor in flavor itself, since it is, in its very essence, relative, ceasing to be detectable as soon as it is identified. One must allow oneself to be brought to true flavor from that phase which is its opposite: blandness. Blandness, as it evolves, tends naturally toward flavor, which, in turn, far from remaining in barren isolation, opens itself to its own superseding, revealing itself as an infinite progression (2008: 43).

In a similar vein, nonaction, far from remaining in barren non-doing and abandonment, tends naturally towards actions, which, freed from ensnarement in fixations and overdetermined goals, opens up to potentialities and initiatives. Nonaction is non-differentiation and the base from which all originates and to which all returns. The *wuwei* of blandness ensures the polyvalence of paths and trajectories and prevents any particular aspect of a situation to affirm itself to the detriment of other potentialities.

Blandness and nonaction is certainly not the only pedagogy to approach the curriculum of vulnerability. Other models, most noteworthy the autobiographical approach, also provide powerful alternatives to the dominant curriculum studies canon committed to quantification, generalization, prediction, and typology. The efforts to understand curriculum as autobiographical and biographical texts, initiated by pioneers such as William Pinar and Madeleine Grumet in the 1970s and later elaborated by curriculum scholars such as Janet Miller, F. Michael Connelly and D. Jean Clandinin, William Schubert and William Ayers, have become a major contemporary curriculum discourse (see Pinar et al 2008). The (auto)biographical approach explores the existential dimensions of teaching and learning through creating a space for life histories, memories, imaginations.

Similar to a curriculum of blandness and nonaction, the narrative, reflexive, and interpretive characters of (auto)biography allows for playful rendition of curriculum as an open field of discovery and recovery, consciousness and unconsciousness, fluxes and potentials.

Now the question is that how can curriculum express itself in concrete terms by way of signs while maintaining the momentum of nonaction? In this contradiction, it is not to obtain a state of complete detachment and indifference in our pedagogy, but to live the very contradiction of signs that are at once signifying and deconstructing, accumulating and declining, emerging and fading. Blandness and vulnerability, prompting one to perpetual discovery, is a rich and meditative pedagogical mode. Just as the bland sound does not strike the ear directly, but suffuses the air with fugitive traces en route back to the undifferentiated, the curriculum will never be a complete or complete-able project. Such is the impossibility of education (Biesta, 1998, p. 503-505) whose indeterminacy and contingency demands us to live with aporia when facing the complicated ethical issues/tensions that arise within the parameters of the classroom life.

Notes

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[2] Butler uses the notion of abjection to describe bodies that fail to qualify as subjects, and how they nonetheless provide a necessary outside for normalizing the bodies which matter. Normative regime that sets the boundary of which body is natural and intelligible and which is not is sustained over time by repetition and reiteration of norms. Reiteration solidifies the system of norms and conventions, yet at the same time is subjective to resignification through the subject's performative acts. That is to say, rather than assuming a stable subjectivity prior to its acts, Butler argues that it is the very act of performing gender and various gendered roles that constitutes who we are. And such repeated performances of presumed roles contest, reshape, and reconfigure the norms that govern the society.

[3] For Derrida (1978), the metaphysical traces Levinas tries to do away with are still the founding base where his arguments and writing rest, as writing ethics nonviolently is an impossible oxymoron (117). The impossibility marks the limits that inhere in language, through suspending, effacing, and obliterating what cannot be brought into intelligibility in thought. Derrida undertakes the "hesitant" writing of ethics in which ethics is a double movement that has to work half way in and half way out of the being-shaping, communicative-linguistic structure, yet at the same time negotiate and deconstruct the violent tendencies of the structuring *logos*. The responsibility of deconstruction lies in the questioning of the very ground of which our ethico-just decisions are conditioned with an appeal to language, and re-reading how the Other is made in the texts of metaphysics.

[4] The metaphysics of presence depends on the grammatical structure of language to function, founded on the concepts of being as presence and nonbeing as absence—with the former representing the superior essence, and the latter the inferior non-entity.

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