*Political Education and the Pandemic*

Online seminar, Friday, November 6, 2020

Funded by JSPS Promotion of Joint International Research (Fostering Joint International Research (B))

“Political education for living with the other: a Japanese initiative in international  
dialogue on American practical philosophy”

Opening

8:00 UK, 9:00 France, 10:00 Finland, 17:00 Japan

**Sari Kivistö & Sami Pihlström** (40 minutes) (University of Helsinki and Tampare University)

Critical Distance: Thinking about the Abstract Other

*Chair:* Naoko Saito (Kyoto University)

**Naoko Saito and Tomohiro Akiyama** (40 minutes) (Kyoto University)

Distance Education and the Pursuit of the Common at the Time of COVID-19: Ontology of Separation

*Chair*: Paul Standish (UCL Institute of Education)

**Paul Standish** (40 minutes) (UCL Institute of Education)

A Refraction of Education

*Chair*: Adrien Skilbeck (UCL Institute of Education)

Break . . . 10:00 UK, 11:00 France, 12:00-13:00 Finland, 19:00-20:00 Japan

11:00 UK, 12:00 France, 13:00 Finland, 20:00 Japan

**Daniele Lorenzini** (40 minutes) (University of Warwick)

Biopolitics, Democracy and Education

*Chair*: Sandra Laugier (Paris 1st University)

**Adrien Skilbec** (University of Warwick)**, Emma Williams** (University of Warwick)**, Jeremy Rappleye** (Kyoto University) and **Sandra Laugier** (Paris 1st University)

Comments (10 minutes each)

\*\*\*

General Discussion (40 minutes)

\*\*\*

End

13:00 UK, 14:00 France, 15:00 Finland, 22:00 Japan

Abstracts

CRITICAL DISTANCE

Thinking about the Abstract Other

Sari Kivistö & Sami Pihlström

During the global covid-19 crisis, one of the most important lessons we have learned is the need to keep a safe distance to other human beings in order to avoid spreading the potentially deadly virus. This “critical distance” can be seen as an analogy to more general issues concerning our ethical and political relations to others that will remain permanently relevant after the pandemic, too (and have, of course, never been irrelevant).

We will illustrate our main point – that is, that we need to (learn to) maintain an appropriate distance to others, especially to others’ suffering – by discussing two main issues that we take to be central to political education. First, we will critically examine the excessive reliance on humanly natural emotions such as empathyandsympathy in ethical relations; ethics cannot be grounded in such emotions but presupposes, primarily, the normative context of duty. Secondly, we will criticize the analogous idea of immersion into others’ experiences in humanistic research as well as in reading literature: the claim to be able to, e.g., re-enact historical actors’ ideas and actions (as a method of understanding them) is vulnerable to the same kind of critique as the claim to be able to empathetically share the other’s suffering. Both lose the vitally important idea of keeping a critical distance that respects the other person as genuinely other.

While one of our background ideas is Emmanuel Levinas’s conception of the other concretized in the face of the other, we will, in contrast to excessive concreteness, introduce the concept of an “abstract other”, characterized in terms of examples drawn from the pandemic, in order to emphasize what we mean by critical distance in its ethical dimensions. Finally, while arguing for a certain kind of *detachment* from others (as contrasted with immersion and immersive emotions such as empathy), we do recognize that there is both good and bad detachment: continuing the line of argument from our joint book, *Kantian Antitheodicy: Philosophical and Literary Varieties* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), we suggest that we should not seek to view others’ experiences, especially their sufferings, from a standpoint that lies too far away, nor from an imagined (empathetic, immersive) point of view that aims at being too close, but should constantly seek an ethically appropriate – viz., critical – distance. The educational relevance of this idea should be obvious.

Distance Education and the Pursuit of the Common at the Time of COVID-19: Ontology of Separation

Naoko Saito and Tomohiro Akiyama

In the radical changes in social systems and people’s ways of living that have arisen with the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), the difficulties and critical situations people confront make them realize that the private question, “What does it mean to live a happy life?” is simultaneously part of the public agenda. The crisis in hospitals, the bankrupt businesses, the enforced reconstruction of educational systems and methods – all encourage a shift of thinking over the division of the private and the public in democracy, making us realize that individuals in their various domestic things are involved in the creation of public knowledge and that they are already in a shared space. The line between the private and the public is blurred and the very meaning of “the public” should be reconsidered, as should “the private.” The crisis itself impels us towards a holistic view of human being, and this orients us towards a renewed way of creating the common.

Against this background, this paper focuses on the digital commons, which we believe is a potentially fruitful concept for reconsidering the idea of the common at the time of COVID-19. It is a publicity of shared space, resources and knowledge, enabled by border-crossing digital space and time. The term “digital commons” has come into use in such empirical areas as sustainability studies, computer technology, and economics, and it has emerged also in library practice.[[1]](#endnote-1) The combination of the digital and the commons has created new possibilities as well as challenges in our times. As the digitalization of university education indicates, shared digital space, resources and knowledge are expected to have the potential to enable a pooling of knowledge beyond differences in position in which new possibilities of the public are realized. At the same time, as some of the criticism of online teaching demonstrates, the digital commons can have negative effects. With this background in mind, we would like to raise three philosophical-practical tasks involving the digital commons for democracy and education. First, at times when discrimination and prejudice have been manifested, how can we cultivate, in virtual reality, imagination and aesthetic sensitivity to the other? Second, how far can the divisions in and possibilities of recovering society’s bonds be reconsidered through forms of withdrawal? Third, what kind of an alternative form of open-mindedness be cultivated at a time of closure and barriers? These are overarching questions that we shall pursue in this paper.

To this end, this paper is engaged in philosophical investigations into the ways that people can attain the common, beginning with distance and separation as experienced in digital space. Specifically, we would like to draw attention to the American transcendentalism of Emerson and Thoreau because their thought is full of suggestions that can help to elaborate the idea of the common to be pursued in digital space. Their radical transcendentalist commitment to our ordinary lives can be appreciated anew today, enabling a way of thinking about distance that exceeds any facile binary distinctions and crosses borders.

This paper is organized as follows: Section II, “Distance in the Internet and online education,” reviews articles by Andrew Feenberg and Paul Standish as they have special bearing on the idea of distance in distance education and identify some challenges in the creation of the digital commons as evidenced in COVID-19. Section III, “An ontology of separation: Some possibilities of American transcendentalism,” discusses the ontology of separation drawn from Emerson and Thoreau because this unparalleled perspective can be developed as a promising, alternative philosophy for our pandemic times. Section IV, “The teaching of distance in distance education,” discusses some educational implications for creating the common as the teaching of distance. In Section V, some concluding remarks are made.

**A Refraction of Education**

*Paul Standish (UCL Institute of Education)*

My discussion draws on the different senses of “refraction” to explore ways in which these have a bearing on education at the time of the pandemic. In particular, I consider the context that has become familiar this year to those in university education – teaching and learning online. While such online experience is generally taken as an impoverishment of the normal conditions of classroom teaching (and I do not exactly wish to deny this), there are ways in which the experience can draw attention to aspects of education that are easily overlooked. These can be thought of as forms of indirectness. My approach is, loosely speaking, phenomenological, but in the process I refer also to the work of TS Eliot.

**Biopolitics, Democracy and Education**

Daniele Lorenzini

What challenges do democracies face in a time of pandemic? Is striving to protect the biological security of the population compatible with the full exercise of democratic rights and participation? By building on Michel Foucault's work on biopolitics and its contemporary re-appropriations by authors such as Giorgio Agamben, Roberto Esposito, Achille Mbembe, or Toni Negri, my aim in this talk is to explore and problematise the challenges we face today in terms of the clash between biosecurity imperatives and the protection of democratic rights. I will also raise the question whether it is possible to develop *democratic* biopolitical policies (which protect both people's life and their democratic rights) and how this might transform the work of educators, especially those engaged in higher education.

Cf. <https://critinq.wordpress.com/2020/04/02/biopolitics-in-the-time-of-coronavirus/>

1. See, for example:

   [https://whatis.techtarget.com/definition/digital-commons](about:blank)

   [https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2012/05/the-tragedy-of-the-internet-commons/257290/](about:blank) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)