

Looking the other in the eye:

The metaphysics of presence and the ideal of openness in education

Introduction

In November 2008 Dutch newspapers reported that Dutch Minister of Education Ronald Plasterk had decided to ban *burqas* and *niqabs* in institutions of higher education (they were already banned in elementary and secondary schools, both inside the classroom and on school grounds).¹ The newspaper *Trouw* reported that, initially, the Minister had been reluctant to extend the ban to higher education institutions as, he argued, these are attended by adults who choose to pursue higher education, not by children who have no choice but to attend school. However, several Members of Parliament argued that the ban should be in effect at all levels of education. The Minister relented and announced he would prepare legislation to extend the ban on face-covering garments to higher education.

I wrote the Minister a letter arguing that this decision was inconsistent with the Minister's stated commitment to the emancipation of women. I explained that the Minister's decision not to allow women wearing *burqas* or *niqabs* in higher education prevented the women involved from demonstrating that their intellectual capacities are not diminished by a *burqua* or *niqab*. In addition, I argued that his decision prevented these women from participating in academic debates about gender equality, the place of religion in public space and many other topics relevant to their lives. I received a letter back from the Ministry telling me that the decision was based on the value of open communication in

¹ The *burqa* is a full-length garment, worn mostly in Afghanistan, that covers all of the body, head, and face, with netting at the level of the eyes. ...The *niqab* covers the face from just below the eyes and may be worn with a *khimar*—a scarf covering the head, neck, and shoulders—and a *jilbab*—a full-length coat or dress that leaves the head and hands exposed ([author], 2008, p. 27).

education, which requires the ability to see each other's non-verbal, and especially facial, expressions.

In this paper I will analyze not the Minister's final decision or its legal consequences. Rather, I will analyze the arguments provided by Members of Parliament who encouraged the Minister to extend the ban to higher education, as well as the arguments provided in the letter I received from the Ministry in response to my letter. These arguments show how the metaphysics of presence, which has been critiqued over the past four decades, still forcefully undergirds Dutch education policy.

The discourse of openness

It was a discussion of the Parliamentary Committee on Education, Culture and Science on November 26, 2008 that led the Dutch Minister of Education to extend the ban on face-covering clothing to higher education. During this discussion, several Members of Parliament emphasised education's reliance on "open communication" and the importance of the visibility of the face in such communication. Three excerpts from the transcript provided on the website of the Ministry of Finance (and translated by the author of this article) illustrate this.

I begin by offering compliments to the Minister who wants to prohibit face-covering clothing in all forms of education, except higher education. The latter is precisely the issue for today. As far as the Liberal Party is concerned, we should also do this in higher education. The great thing is that where the Minister argues why it is necessary in other forms of education, he also provides the perfect arguments for why this should be the case in higher education. A small selection from that list of arguments: face-covering clothing is irreconcilable with the requirement of good communication in the educational learning process. An educational learning process occurs in all forms of education, including higher education. The Minister indicates that it is important to see how a student feels; that matters in higher education, too. The students may be adults but one will still want to know how they respond to certain matters. The Minister indicates that it is important to be able to recognise facial expressions of teachers and

students, in order to optimise the communication and didactic process. He also indicates that prohibiting face-covering clothing in an educational institution is linked directly to the conditions of a pedagogical climate that fosters good education. I think: the same goes for higher education. (Halbe Zijlstra, MP for the Liberal Party)

We support the Cabinet's intention to prohibit face-covering clothing in [elementary and secondary]² education. Open communication must be warranted in an educational environment. One has to be able to look each other in the eye, several colleagues have said this already, there must be a safe learning environment in which one has to know whom one is dealing with. ... The Minister makes an exception for higher education. We ask: why? ... Let us give one signal to all parts of the education system, because the arguments that hold in the other parts of the education system also hold in higher education. (Margot Kraneveldt-van der Veen, MP for the Labour Party)

The Socialist Party supports the proposal to prohibit face-covering clothing in [elementary and secondary] education. ... First because of the importance of communication at school, second because the *burqua* or *niqab* are, in our view, extraordinarily misogynist. ... Initially Cabinet, according to the letter of February 8, 2008, wanted a ban across education. But the Minister now limits this to a ban in elementary and secondary education. Higher education is excepted because it deals with adults who are not subject to compulsory education. That is a flawed argument

² The particularity of the Dutch education system complicates translation here. The MP referred to "basisonderwijs, het voortgezet en middelbaar beroepsonderwijs." Simplifying somewhat, Dutch secondary education includes a four-year pre-trade stream (typically age 12-16), a five-year pre-professional stream (12-17), and a six-year pre-academic stream (12-18). Because education is compulsory until age 18, students who complete the four- or five-year stream either go on to complete the five- or six-year stream, or go on to "MBO," community colleges which offer programs including agriculture, trades, retail, hospitality, and aesthetics. The originally announced ban was related to the *age* of compulsory education and included elementary, secondary and community college education. Since most community college students in North America attend such colleges from age 18 I left out "community colleges" from the translation.

when held up against the Minister's other arguments. In higher education communication is important, too, and safety plays a role. It is simply unworkable to produce good work in a group project, let alone in an oral exam, wearing a *niqab*.
(Jasper van Dijk, MP for the Socialist Party)

The statements that face-covering clothing is “irreconcilable with the requirement of good communication” in education, and that “one has to be able to look each other in the eye” clearly demonstrate the emphasis on face-to-face communication, including speech, eye contact and other facial expressions. The letter I received from the Ministry in response to mine underscored this. But before I quote from that letter let me—in the interest of “open communication,” perhaps—quote extensively from my own letter to the Minister of Education (December 4, 2008):

Recently you announced that *burqas* and *niqabs* will be prohibited at polytechnics and universities. This accommodates the anxiety of several Members of Parliament about the islamisation of Dutch society. At the same time, however, you gloss over some important principles of higher education, such as the idea that scientific advancement benefits from a diversity of views, and the idea that higher education ought to be open to all those who wish to participate in it and are capable of doing so.

On the morning of the announcement of your decision about *burqas* and *niqabs* in higher education I passed a woman wearing a *niqab* on the campus of the University of [withheld for anonymity]. It is self-evident to me that she is welcome in higher education. I imagine it is not news to this woman herself that her religious beliefs do not affect her academic talent, but her presence sends a clear message to colleagues and/or fellow students who may have assumed that a *burqa* or *niqab* could not possibly conceal much intellectual capacity.

In the “Strategic Policy Agenda for Higher Education, Research and Science” your Ministry writes, “Our complex society needs people who can handle this complexity” (p. 1). However, by excluding women who wear a *burqa* or *niqab* from universities and polytechnics, you artificially reduce this social complexity and provide students with fewer opportunities to learn to handle these complex differences.

Your Ministry posits in the “Strategic Policy Agenda” that education and science are important not only for the knowledge economy but also for “determining factors for quality of life” such as “insight into one’s own identity” and “social relations” (p. 1). Since wearing a *burqa* or *niqab* is an inextricable part of questions about Muslim identity and social relations in the Netherlands and, more broadly, Europe, the prohibition on *burqas* and *niqabs* is difficult to defend on this point, also.

Moreover, the decision no longer to allow *burqas* and *niqabs* in higher education is in tension with your own portfolio on the emancipation of women. The emancipation of women who wear *burqas* and *niqabs* is not supported if they are excluded from higher education. This not only prevents these women from demonstrating that their intellectual capacities are not diminished by the *burqa* or *niqab*, but also excludes them from academic debates about the equality between men and women, the difference between Christianity and Islam, the place of religion in public space, and many other topics that are addressed both in higher education classrooms and academic research projects.

In reply to this letter, a civil servant at the Ministry sent me an email on January 14th, 2009, excerpts of which I have translated below:

You indicate that wearing a burqa or niqab in education is quite customary in [withheld for anonymity]. You do not understand the Minister of Education’s (Mr. Plasterk’s) policy with regard to this subject.

The Dutch government is very reluctant in limiting its citizens’ religious freedoms. There will, however, be a prohibition in all schools (including universities and polytechnics) on *face-covering* clothing (which includes other types of clothing that can cover the face).

The measure is not based on a fear of islamisation of Dutch society. The Minister of Education (and many others) believe that non-verbal expression and articulation are important components of education. If the face cannot be seen, communication is hindered. Open communication must be mutual. If the face and facial expression are not visible, this is impossible. The prohibition will apply also to parents, staff and those

making deliveries at schools. In addition to schools all national civil servants are already prohibited from wearing face-covering clothing. The Minister of Public Health will investigate whether there should be a prohibition in health care. The customs, culture and insights about this are, therefore, different from those in [withheld for anonymity].

The Ministry's email removes any doubt with regard to the value placed on the presence of the face in educational communication, including the mouth of the speaker, the ear of the listener, and the eyes and other expressive parts of the face of both. The Ministry connects the visibility of the face to the concept of education itself by arguing that education requires open communication, that open communication is impossible if the face and facial expression are not visible, and that, therefore, obscuring the face and facial expression is irreconcilable with the idea of education itself. More simply put, the assumption is that if the teacher is face-to-face with the student, can see the face of the student and look the student in the eye, the teacher cannot only hear what the student says but also see how the student feels about what she says. Does she look nervous, shy, excited or indifferent about what she says? And more importantly perhaps: is she telling the truth? For it is assumed that students are less likely to tell a lie or withhold the truth while looking someone straight in the eye. Looking down or away are taken as signs that the student wishes to hide something that might be revealed if she continued to look the teacher in the eye. I will address these assumptions philosophically, through an investigation of the concepts of presence, communication and education, but will first provide some cultural context for the views I have cited.

The Dutch context

Just as the French policy in 2004 to prohibit “signs or dress that obviously manifest religious belonging” in French public schools must be understood within the particular context of France's colonial past in North Africa, the Dutch prohibition of “face-covering clothing” in higher education and the justifications given for it must be understood within the Dutch cultural context. The latter has traditionally emphasised transparency in the

sense of free, honest, and open communication. Ian Buruma (2006), in his analysis of the national and international context of the 2004 murder of Theo van Gogh, comments on the Dutch emphasis on open and transparent communication and the condemnation of communication that is perceived to be less than fully frank and open as “hypocritical” and “dishonest”:

The insistence on total frankness, the idea that tact is a form of hypocrisy, and that everything, no matter how sensitive, should be stated openly, with no holds barred, the elevation of bluntness to a kind of moral ideal; this willful lack of delicacy is a common trait in Dutch behavior. Perhaps its roots are in Protestant pietism, a reaction to what was seen as glib Catholic hypocrisy. Private confession had to become public. Discretion was a sign of holding back the truth, of dishonesty. (p. 94)

American sociologist Hernán Vera (1989) made a study of the Dutch habit of never closing the front room curtains and found that the Dutch send contradictory messages about the value of openness and transparency. On one hand, the idea has persisted that the front room curtains should be open, even at night and in winter, and that, when the curtains of the front window are drawn, something must be going on that the inhabitants wish to hide. (Some of the people Vera spoke with attributed this habit to an old Calvinist decree that people were “to leave their windows open so their private lives could be inspected by church elders and the community at large” (p. 220).) On the other hand, Vera also found that the social expectation that one’s indoor home life is visible is coupled with a strong denial of the desire to know what is going on in someone else’s home. Writes Vera,

My questions on peeking into homes elicited sharp and hostile responses as often as they elicited stories and norms. “Here we greatly respect each other’s privacy,” “what people do in their homes is their business, I don’t care,” “foreigners might look in, I don’t,” were some of these responses. (p. 223)

It turns out that “respecting each other’s privacy” does not mean that one does not look into each other’s front rooms, but that one does so discreetly and denies having seen

anything. This dissimulated surveillance is practiced both by those looking out and those looking in. “The visual exchange through the window takes the form of a communication game, whose rules require that no one admit it is taking place: Look but don’t look, even though the open window is a blatant invitation to exchange information” (p. 223). People appear to abide by the unwritten rule, “If you promise to show everything, I promise not to look.”

I describe these cultural habits to underscore that in Dutch society one casts suspicion upon oneself if one is perceived to be hiding something. This is the case not only with living room curtains but also with “face-covering clothing” [*gezichtsbedekkende kleding*]. The connection between window covering and face covering is not arbitrary. The English expression “the eyes are the window to the soul” and the French “*les yeux sont le miroir de l’âme*” (the eyes are the mirror of the soul) are derived from the Latin expressions “*vultus est index animi*” (the face is the index of the soul) and “*oculus animi index*” (the eye is the index of the soul). The Roman orator Cicero is quoted as having said: “*ut imago est animi vultus, sic indices oculi*” (the face is a picture of the mind as the eyes are its interpreter). These expressions all indicate that the face is considered representative of what the soul is truly like. The face and the eyes function as interface between the inner (private) and the outer (public) world; from the face and the eyes the truth of the inner world can be “read.” Hiding the face or the eyes from view is thus seen to be an attempt to hide this inner world from public scrutiny. This is considered inappropriate by cultures in which it is socially expected that the inner world is shared publicly. By contrast, cultures in which it is socially expected that the inner world is *not* shared publicly, such as Arabo-Islamic cultures, may mandate rather than prohibit hiding the face or eyes from view.

In Arabo-Islamic cultures there is a similar parallel between the treatment of the window and the treatment of the face. Fadwa El Guindi discusses the *mashrabiyya*, the lattice woodwork screen or window as is common in urban Arabic architecture, for example in Syria. She describes how the *mashrabiyya* allows women to scrutinise male suitors who come the house, without being seen themselves:

Mashrabiyya embodies the essence of traditional notions of Arab privacy—who has the “right to see whom,” who has the “right not to be seen by whom,” and “who chooses not to

see whom.” ... In many ways, veiling resembles a *mashrabiyya*; but whereas *mashrabiyya* is stationary, veiling is mobile, carrying women’s privacy to public spaces. (El Guindi, 1999, pp. 94-95)

The Dutch government’s emphasis on the need to show the face in educational communication is based on a particular cultural emphasis on openness, and on the association of concealment not with privacy or modesty but rather with dishonesty. This policy lacks critical self-awareness in the way it rests on a metaphysics of presence. I will now turn my attention to a critique of this metaphysics, using the work of Jacques Derrida.

The metaphysics of presence

It is fairly uncontroversial to value honesty over dishonesty and sincerity over hypocrisy but what is at stake in the Dutch political debate about face-covering clothing is less whether communication *is* honest and sincere, in the sense that it represents the true thoughts, feelings or intentions of the speaker, than whether it is *perceived to be* honest and sincere. In Dutch culture, students are encouraged to “speak out” because it is assumed that when they speak, they “speak their mind,” that is to say, what they say represents what they think. It is better, then, to speak than to remain silent, since silence conceals and keeps private thoughts and opinions that should be made public. However, the Dutch demand for “openness” fails to recognise what “openness” disguises. Neither direct, plain, or blunt speech, nor the act of speaking itself guarantee open and unhindered communication; ironically, they may disguise better what is left out and not said than in a culture where the verbal or gestural “I would rather not share this with you” is accepted or even expected.

It seems to me that the demand for self-revealing speech and facial expression can be better understood through the lens of Jacques Derrida’s critique of the “metaphysics of presence.” The “metaphysics of presence” is a term Derrida gave to a set of fundamental ontological assumptions on which Western philosophy rests. He discusses and critiques these assumptions throughout his work but especially in *Of Grammatology* and *Limited Inc.* “Presence” in the “metaphysics of presence” refers to the belief that being, meaning, truth—all the concepts with which Western philosophy has concerned itself—can be

traced to a stable origin: something that *is*. The metaphysics of presence manifests itself very clearly in the belief, stated and demonstrated throughout Western philosophy, that the spoken word is truer or more authentic than the written word, because it is closer to the alleged source of being:

The voice is *heard* (understood) ... closest to the self as the absolute effacement of the signifier: pure auto-affection ... which does not borrow from outside of itself, in the world or in “reality,” any accessory signifier, any substance of expression foreign to its own spontaneity. (Derrida, 1967/1998, p. 20)

Speaking is the most original and self-present form of communication, according to the metaphysics of presence, because the voice is closest to the mind itself and its message is not put at a distance from the mind by graphemes (written signifiers) or other media. Facial expressions, by this logic, would be an even more authentic expression of the self’s spontaneity as they rely not even on phonemes (spoken signifiers), only on the skin and muscle of the physical face—and what could be closer to the soul?

Gert Biesta (2009) confirms that “the privileging of voice as the medium of meaning and the consequent dismissal of writing as derivative and inessential” is “one of the most pervasive ways in which the metaphysics of presence has been present in Western philosophy” (p. 22). In addition to the voice not requiring an “accessory signifier,” as we have seen above, Biesta points out that the use of the voice presupposes that speaker and listener share a time and place:

The priority of spoken language over written or silent language stems from the fact that when words are spoken the speaker and listener are supposed to be simultaneously present to one another. Writing, on the other hand, is considered to be subversive in so far as it creates a spatial and temporal distance between the author and its audience. (p. 22)

Derrida elaborates this point in “Signature Event Context” (1972/1988) and “Limited Inc a b c” (1977/1988) in which he argues that absence is not a distinctive characteristic of

writing. Speech is characterised by the possibility of absence just as writing is, not only because both in speech and in writing the referent can be absent but also because the conscious intention of speaker and writer are never fully present. The Unconscious will always leave a gap between what motivated the speaker or writer to say or write what s/he did, and the intentions of which this speaker or writer is conscious. Derrida concludes that absence structurally marks both speech and writing.

The Dutch parliamentary discussion about the banning of face-covering clothing affirms several beliefs of presence. The first is that students are aware of what they know and feel and that they express these thoughts and feelings in verbal and body language. The second is that a teacher can read these languages and know what is going on in the minds of their students. These are not new ideas, nor are they uniquely Dutch; John Dewey wrote in 1938, for example, that a good educator, “ must ... have that sympathetic understanding of individuals as individuals which gives him an idea of what is actually going on in the minds of those who are learning” (p. 39). Remarkably, however, these ideas have persisted: “It is as if the Cartesian ego had never been challenged: as if our highest image of humankind were still individuals transparent to themselves.... (Smith, 2006, p. 24).

Derrida’s critique of the metaphysics of presence shows that these ideas are flawed: we are not fully self-aware, nor do we have full control over what we reveal to others. We remain fundamentally unknowable both to ourselves and to others, and the idea of transparency and unhindered communication is as fictitious as it is treasured. As Richard Smith (2006) proposes, we ought to recognise that “we are indeed obscure to ourselves and will continue to be so. We shall never wholly understand the meaning of our desires” (p. 32).

Physical and metaphorical eyes

The *burqa*, which is rarely seen outside of Afghanistan, includes a mesh over the eye area, which makes the eyes more difficult but not impossible to see. The face veil or *niqab* is less uncommon in the West and covers the face below the eyes with an opaque cloth, while leaving the eyes fully exposed. The fact that the need to “look each other in the eye” is perceived to be hindered even by women wearing a *niqab* shows that “looking each other

in the eye” is only in part meant literally here; there is the more general idea of needing to come “face to face” as a condition of being able to “see eye to eye.”

Yet this metaphorical use is never far from its physicality as phenomenological ideas about the role of visual contact in relationship persist. Political scientist Stephen Chilton, for example, acknowledges the metaphorical use of the eye when he writes:

In ordinary language, “looking the other in the eye” means to have an honest relationship with the other, at least honest on one’s own part: to have good intentions, to act in a way one believes is fair, to act in a way one reasonably believes the other agrees with or at least can agree with after suitable explanation and thought. Conversely, “being unable to look someone in the eye” is a standard figure of speech representing guilt or shame—an inability either to defend what one has done or to be proud of who one is. The image even extends to one’s own internal authenticity when we speak of “being able to look at oneself in the mirror,” the image in the glass representing all the other voices whose agreement one has failed to obtain. (p. 6)

However, Chilton immediately indicates that this is not the kind of metaphor that is far removed from its sensory origin but rather one that is recognisably rooted in physical experience:

The act of looking someone in the eye is more than a figure of speech. It is a real, physical manifestation of a reliable (or at least significant) moral guide. ... Certainly I can testify to the reality of these things. When dealing with someone wrongly, at least in my own assessment, I cannot comfortably meet his or her eyes. If I do, I find myself defocusing—either literally defocusing my eyes or else defocusing my attention, putting up a mental barrier of anger, or anxiety, or racing thoughts, and so on—in short, closing myself off from any true connection with the other. (p. 6)

Not surprisingly, given Derrida’s sustained critique of phenomenological ideas of the possibility of authentic self-presence and unmediated experience, Derrida is more interested in the irreducible metaphoricity of language. Rather than tracing a metaphor to

its sensory origin and considering the truth of this origin, he argues that if the metaphor is a trace, at the origin of the metaphor lies another trace—which is thus not an origin. In the case of the metaphoric use of “looking the other in the eye,” also, the sensory origin is non-original, always deferred because of its cultural inscriptions, such as the idea of the idea as *eidos* or image. When Chilton expresses the commonly held idea that defocusing or turning away one’s eyes is a physical representation of shielding one’s consciousness from the other, he assumes that one’s consciousness is a self-presence, that can be made present to the other if one looks the other in the eye. Chilton’s ideas of honesty, of internal authenticity and of true connection—all of which are echoed loudly in the arguments presented by the Dutch Members of Parliament—speak to a conception “of a presence to itself of the subject before speech or signs, a presence to itself of the subject in a silent and intuitive consciousness” (Derrida, 1972/1982, p. 16). This conception of a self-present consciousness is a manifestation of the metaphysics of presence which does not hold up against deconstructive scrutiny.

Derrida’s critique of the metaphysics of presence highlights that the structure of the metaphysics of presence is one of exclusion. Following Saussurian linguistics, Derrida points out that we come to understand what something is by distinguishing it from what it is not: “There is no presence before and outside semiological difference” (Derrida, 1972/1982, p. 12). However, rather than taking this binary of what is and what is not, what presents itself and what does not present itself, as a given, Derrida argues that the emphasis on presence disguises that presence *relies* on absence: not only does the binary between absence and presence not hold, but absence is what makes presence possible; it is its constitutive outside. “The movement of signification is possible only if each so-called ‘present’ element, each element appearing on the scene of presence, is related to something other than itself” (p. 13). The desire for presence ignores the fact that presence is not possible without absence, and that absence is always-already there, as the shadow side of presence. The demand that students make themselves present to their teacher and their fellow students ignores the fact that absence cannot be banished from the classroom or from any other scene of presence. Teachers cannot know what goes on in a student’s mind, regardless of whether that student reveals her face or not.

The deconstruction³ of the metaphysics of presence matters politically because it marks the end of the metaphysical grounds on which such exclusions have been justified. The Dutch government presents the transparency of speech and facial expressions, and the co-presence of student and teacher as self-evidently preferable to what is assumed to be excluded by these models, namely opacity and absence, and they use the self-evident preferability of this model of communication to exclude those who clearly manifest opacity and absence. However, following Derrida's analysis, opacity is also part of supposedly transparent speech and facial expressions, and absence is also part of the co-presence of student and teacher. The exclusion of those who wear the opacity and absence of communication on their sleeve can, therefore, not be justified by the undesirability of these qualities, since these are "always already" part of the very model that the Dutch government promotes.

To those who, at this point in my argument, wish to point out Derrida's indebtedness to the work of Emmanuel Levinas, and Levinas's insistence on the face as manifestation of the call of the other, let me respond that Levinas uses the term "face" metaphorically. Chloé Taylor (2006) provides extensive textual evidence for the view that Levinas, rather than insisting that the physical face must be seen, actually insists that the other engages us through her discourse and silence and that "the face of which he is writing is not the physiognomic or visually encountered face" (par. 6). As Taylor puts it succinctly, "the face of ethics is not the face whose form we take in with our eyes" as "taking in" the face of the other would violate the other's alterity (par. 2). To demand, then, in the name of responsive pedagogical communication, that the other reveal her face, that she offer up her face to one's view, is to inflict ethical violence. Although Taylor also provides examples of Levinas's (1989) discussion of the ethical significance of seeing—as in seeing "an arm or a hand by Rodin" or "the napes of the necks of those people who wait in line at the entrance gate of the Lubyanka prison in Moscow" (p. 38, as cited in Taylor, par. 10)—seeing the physical

³ Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to address this in depth, I should point out that the deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence is an *auto-deconstruction*: deconstruction is not an operation done to the metaphysics of presence but rather, the metaphysics of presence deconstructs itself.

face or eyes is clearly *not* a requirement for an ethical encounter of and response to the other, and may well make an ethical response more difficult.

The presence of girls and women who physically do not offer up their full face to the vision of the teacher does not jeopardize the possibility of responsible or educative schooling. Rather—and ironically—their less-than-full presence makes visible the necessarily-less-than-full presence of all others in the classroom. From the perspective of Levinasian and Derridean ethics, the encounter with an other who does not reveal her thoughts and feelings, an other who is wholly other, that is, *every* other, poses an ethical challenge and, more specifically, a challenge of *hospitality*. Derrida’s “ethic of hospitality” (e.g., 1997/2001, p. 83) is a demanding but, in my view, very appropriate ethical framework for education. As I have argued elsewhere, “education ... ought to be concerned with giving place to students, with receiving children and adults who arrive, and who are, in spite of the best attempts at preparation by teachers and administrators, unpredictable and wholly other” [author, in press]. Making education conditional upon the student’s self-revelation, an impossible condition in any event, does not, as the Dutch parliamentarians suggest, make education safer or more responsive; it does make it less hospitable. Students who wear *niqabs* or *burqas* confront their fellow students and teachers with the need to subject the declared educational necessity of seeing the student’s face and eyes to critical scrutiny. This challenge should be welcomed in higher education, not excluded from it.

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