

On Not Knowing the Other, or Learning *from* Levinas

Sharon Todd
York University

What has recently been coined the ethical turn in philosophy — and there is certainly evidence of this turn in educational theory as well — has been noticeably inflected by an emerging interest in the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas,¹ who is described by one literary critic as “offering the gift of ethicity.”² This gift is marked by Levinas’s attention to the category of the Other as a necessary condition for ethical interaction and his insistence upon an ego-less and non-conscious passivity in relation to being responsible for that Other. Ethics, in his view, is rendered less in terms of consciousness and agency, which are the usual hallmarks of moral theory and education, and more on a “pre-originary” susceptibility and openness to Otherness.

It is precisely for these reasons that educational theorists have either turned to Levinas in order to reconsider notions of responsibility as a relation across difference, or have been skeptical about how his work can address difference in education at all. While I place myself firmly in the former camp, I wish to begin this essay by exploring what some of the worries and concerns are with respect to Levinas’s view of the Other and his insistence on susceptibility as a condition for responsibility. I then want to consider how learning from and not merely about Levinas might help us to work through those worries and to read education differently.

EDUCATION, ETHICS AND THE VIOLENCE OF KNOWING

For those who are skeptical, it appears that Levinas’s privileging of the Other serves to reify the very otherness that has been at the heart of hideous inequity and social violence. Moreover, emphasizing non-conscious openness seems to leave education with little to do, for how can it address itself to a non-knowledge that cannot be taught? How can an ethical theory that relies so heavily on the category of Other be at all helpful? To put the question rather crassly, what can we do with Levinas?

One could argue that such questions emanate from a misreading of Levinas, that his view of the Other is of a different order than the one more commonly espoused — namely that Otherness results from unjust social practices. More judiciously, one could also argue that such questions reveal a concern for practicality in the face of continuing injustice and violence: that is, how would Levinas’s ethical metaphysics help us change the conditions under which the concrete Other suffers? However, I believe that such queries also reflect a much larger philosophical assumption pertaining to the relation between ethics and knowledge. Philosophy’s commitment to viewing ethics as a question of knowledge might be summed up as “what do we need to know in order to live well together?” This commitment informs much of our educational attention to difference. Alternatively, Levinas’s work asks us to consider knowledge as an ethical question: “what relation to the Other is necessary in order for knowledge to be possible?” In so doing, his work centers ethics at the heart

of epistemic concerns and, moreover, it speaks a different language of Otherness, one that is absolute rather than socially defined.

In looking at the problem more closely, educational attempts to work across differences often gain their ethical strength from deconstructing centre and margin; inclusion and exclusion; self and other. Anti-racist projects, for example, seek to make transparent the discourses that marginalise people through the ways they position certain racial and ethnic groups as Other. Curricular and pedagogical initiatives frequently focus on learning about those who have been Othered — their untold histories, their narratives of self-identification; and their demands for recognition — in order to disassemble the structures of power that distort, if not outright destroy, certain individuals and their communities. Framing our ethical attention to difference as a question of knowledge implies that Otherness is a position wrought by oppressive or at least exclusionary social circumstances, and is, therefore, undesirable. The explicit hope is that the more we know about Others, the better we are able to understand how to respond to them, and how to be more responsible.

Yet, when we think of our ethical attention to difference as a question of knowledge, teaching often falls into a form of rhetoric, an influential device for getting students to learn about how people came to be designated as Other and what needs to be done in order to change this. And it is this rhetorical dimension of education that calls into question the ethical benefits in learning *about* Others; for if educators seek to persuade, convert, or cajole students into adopting certain attitudes, no matter how desirable those attitudes may be, then is education performing the very violence it is seeking to remedy? That is, to follow both Levinas and Derrida, is it committing a violence by not engaging students as distinct subjects of difference? Levinas comments, “to renounce the... pedagogy rhetoric involves is to face the Other, in a veritable conversation.”³

To return to the question that I posed earlier in relation to Levinas’s work, “what relation to the Other is necessary in order for knowledge to be possible?” cannot therefore be answered from our usual educational frames of reference, particularly as these frames of reference assume that ethical issues can be answered by way of knowledge, by way of knowing more or better. Even if learning about the Other were desirable, there is something more at stake in that learning. Levinas proposes that in order to acquire any knowledge there is already in place an *orientation* to receive and work with a new idea or theory or experience. Knowledge requires in the first instance an openness to something new, something foreign, something totally other beyond the self. The *approach* to knowledge implies first and foremost an ethical relation to difference; that is, what we learn is conditioned upon an initial susceptibility to what is outside of and exterior to us.⁴ In this sense, it is the self’s susceptibility to the Other, not knowledge about the Other, to which education must address itself if it is not to inflict violence. Yet, we can see here that Levinas’s Other is not the socially constructed Other that pedagogies of social justice take for granted. Instead, Levinas is gesturing toward a different conception of the Other: to engage in a veritable conversation with the Other means to engage and treat as Other

each person with whom we come into contact, not only those who have been labelled as Other through oppressive discursive structures. Moreover, for Levinas, knowledge of the Other — that is, learning *about* the Other — is not the aim in any ethical relation; “veritable conversation” or the “fine risk” of communication⁵ precisely requires attending to the Other as “infinitely unknowable.” To put it bluntly, this Levinasian shift from ethics as knowledge to knowledge as ethics, raises an entirely new frame of reference for working across difference. It compels us to reconsider, on the one hand, our taken-for-granted definitions about the Other and, on the other, to review the significance of susceptibility in learning.

REVISITING THE OTHER

The Other, for Levinas, is a concrete manifestation of absolute difference; that is, the Other is an individual person who partakes in one of two existences. Levinas explains that there are two ways in which difference structures being: on the one hand, there is a monadic or synchronic view which assumes that each individual is the same within a totality and that difference is what distinguishes us, one from the other; on the other hand, there is his own diachronic view that sees difference as splitting being itself into two: into an I and an Other that are irreducible, who may share space and who may communicate with one another, but only across their irreducibility, not because they are the same.⁶ He writes, “The absolutely other is the Other. He [sic] and I do not form a number. The collectivity in which I say ‘you’ or ‘we’ is not a plural of the ‘I.’ I, you — these are not individuals of a common concept.”⁷

His insistence on difference as absolute, and on the irreducible quality of the two beings known as I and Other has the power to disturb and provoke. His Other is not socially constructed, not defined by discursive power, but is an unassimilable and unknowable alterity. As such the I and Other lie in a relation of non-reciprocity, where they come together only ever as strangers to each other.⁸ Levinas writes: “in the very heart of the relationship with the other that characterizes our social life, alterity appears as a nonreciprocal relationship... The Other as Other is not only an alter ego: the Other is what I myself am not. The Other is this, not because of the Other’s character, or physiognomy, or psychology, but because of the Other’s very alterity.”⁹

This view of how we relate across difference disrupts any comfort we may have in the hope that our knowledge *about* Others will point the way to ethical action. Instead, Levinas moves away from pinning our hopes on a conscious subject, on an agent of knowledge, by placing alterity, rather than subjectivity, as the condition for ethics. Indeed, in focussing on difference as the *sine qua non* of being, Levinas declares that it is this which makes intersubjectivity possible. Without difference, subjectivity is itself unthinkable. Thus, the ethical relation is not so much a type of relation between two subjects, such as we find in notions of the carer and the cared-for, the teacher and the student, but a quality of relationality, whereby susceptibility to absolute difference defines how we relate to each other.

SUSCEPTIBILITY TO ALTERITY

Levinas proffers that it is susceptibility, rather than knowledge, which is key to ethical interaction and he identifies that susceptibility as “pre-original” (*OTB*,

122). Susceptibility does not originate in some empirical past, but *alludes* or *gestures* to a past that is wholly unrepresentable, and “immemorial” (OTB, 78). His project is concerned, therefore, with the *traces* of susceptibility which are to be found in the qualities of relationships we have to other people and in our capacity for response to them. Levinas pushes our thinking on susceptibility a step further when he claims that it is a “passivity prior to all receptivity, it is transcendent” (OTB, 122). This statement may seem to confuse the issue of susceptibility more than it explains; yet I believe it is this transcendent passivity that gets at the crux of the educational problem of what to do with Levinas.

The idea of transcendence signifies a specifically transcendent relation to the concrete Other. Located in the immediacy of the relation between Self and Other, transcendence is about being fully open to the other in a way that one’s ego (one’s conscious ego) is not at stake in the relation. Moreover, it is in the ambiguity of communication that one is open to the uncertainty of the relation itself: “Communication is an adventure of a subjectivity, different from that which is dominated by the concern to recover itself... it will involve uncertainty” (OTB, 120). Passivity, then, insofar as Levinas identifies its transcendental quality, is that mode through which the self approaches the other beyond essences, and is that irrevocably naked position the self occupies in the face of the other. As a radical openness that is not seeking to “understand” or “know” the other, passivity is “the way opposed to the imperialism of consciousness open upon the world” (OTB, 92). It is not that passivity is merely in-active in its non-consciousness, but it indicates instead an “exposure” to the other that lies prior to consciousness. In this sense, passivity is a kind of radical susceptibility. The subject’s passivity does not mean that one ought not to act, or that one’s actions in the world are unimportant; rather it means that even to consider action one is already presupposing a profound exposure to the world. And it is this very presupposition, this necessary condition of exposure (and exposedness), that constitutes subjectivity — and responsibility. Levinas writes, in his characteristic lyricism, “responsibility for the other... is a passivity more passive than all passivity, an exposure to the other without this exposure being assumed, an exposure without holding back, exposure of exposedness, expression, saying” (OTB, 15).

It is the self’s susceptibility to the Other that makes the self *solely* responsible: “The knot of subjectivity consists in going to the other without concerning oneself with his movement toward me” (OTB, 84). How the Other is for the self does not play a factor in the self’s responsibility for her. This is the case because responsibility is not located *within* a subject. Instead, involved in the initial susceptibility I have *to the other*, responsibility *comes from the other* and so is located in the human relation — a relation, as we have seen, that does not presuppose that self and other are fundamentally the same.

Yet, to return to our worry about what to do with Levinas, we can see here that passivity poses peculiar problems for education since, if education seeks to teach something about how to relate ethically across difference and about how to encourage responsibility, it presumes that knowledge can lead to ethical action. As Doris Sommer puts the problem: “To follow Levinas, willfully *taking* the turn

[toward ethics], locating oneself as the subject of activity, vitiates any claim to ethical conduct. Ethics means demoting the self to serve the Other, to be the hostage object of the Other subject. It means facing up to the Other's demands."¹¹ So the problem becomes how can education participate in passivity? Can we educate for susceptibility? Is responsibility something that can be taught?

Instead of once again insisting that education needs to answer these questions by proposing new knowledges to teach or new curricula to develop, I am proposing a slightly different tack. I think we need first to ask ourselves not what we have learned *about* Levinas's ethical philosophy in order to come up with educational answers, but what have we learned *from* it. Clearly, the ideas discussed here cannot lead to an easy translation into classroom life; we cannot simply apply Levinas's thought to our educational encounters. Like the Other herself, Levinas's philosophy refuses to be assimilated as something that can be known in order to be applied, as something that can be operationalised or instrumentalised. Rather, Levinas's philosophy is an invitation to think alongside it in open communication, as it were. It invites us to read differently, through our differences, and in this sense there is a methodological stake in his ethics. The "gift of ethicity" that Levinas presents to us is an opportunity to approach education differently by attending to what transpires in its name. There are three approaches I would like to offer as possibilities for attending to this task.

EDUCATION AS AN IMPLIED ETHICS

Generally speaking, as ethical theories come into contact with education they are often transformed into an applied morality, or at least become programmatic, finding their way into policies, syllabi, and curriculum documents. When ethics is routed along an epistemological path, our philosophical task is to identify the "right" kind of knowledge, the "right" principles. Education is then seen to be a field of "application," often in the service of instrumentalising concepts that come to education from the outside.

If we begin, however, from the Levinasian position that openness to the Other is required for knowledge to be at all possible, then education becomes implicated in the ethical relation that is the condition for knowledge. In these terms, we can no longer simply think *about* education in relation to ethics; rather we need to think ethics *through* education. The educational question *par excellence* is not what education ought to teach in relation to this or that principle, but what makes education itself a condition of ethical practice? What makes ethics possible in education? Rather than assuming that education can teach ethics, what I am advocating here is an understanding of education as a condition of ethics itself, education as a site of *implied* ethics.

An implied ethics means that educational practices, technologies, discourses, and relationships always already participate in a field of ethicality, that is to say, a domain or realm in which non-violent relations to the Other are possible. As a site of implication rather than application, working across difference becomes less about learning about Others, and more about attending to the specificity of relationships in our classrooms. An implied ethics requires paying close attention to what we do

when we engage in practices of teaching and learning and means exploring the ways in which our engagements across difference promote conditions for non-violent relations. If responsibility is inescapable because of the “impossibility of indifference to the Other” then our interactions with one another profoundly matter to our understanding of ethics.¹² How a teacher handles, for instance, a student’s response to traumatic literature carries ethical significance. What dynamics are at stake in the teacher’s response to the student? In the student’s response to the literature? What, essentially, is the quality of relationality across difference? This brings me to my second approach.

QUALITY OF RELATIONALITY

The work of educational institutions is often to insist that its members behave according to the types of relations they have. For example, in the moral panic over touch in schools, what we are witnessing is an overly exercised attention to what teachers, seemingly by virtue of their institutional roles and positions, should and should not do. What has evaporated is any concern for touch as a basic form of communication that is not necessarily afflicted with moral decay or sexual degeneracy. The focus on types of *relations* suggests that institutions are concerned with defining certain types of *communication*, rather than with the *quality* of the communication. Touch, like any kind of communication which is ambiguous, could also be transcendent, to use Levinas’s phrasing, since it may reflect the very quality of passivity and openness to the Other that provides for the ethical relation. However, regulations are not instituted in ways that acknowledge communicative ambiguity, nor the transcendent quality of communicative openness. Instead, institutions are concerned solely with the content of what persons say and do, not with the quality of relationship these utterances and deeds help create and sustain.

A shift to recognizing the quality of relations focuses on to what degree the relations we *actually* engage in (rather than identifying what type we *should* engage in) enhance or compromise the persons involved. Returning to Levinas’s conception of the Other, what is at stake is whether the Otherness of the Other is supported within these relations. In exploring the quality of relationality, we might ask ourselves: What traces of susceptibility do we find in our relations to each other? Am I responsive to the Other in such a way so as to maintain alterity as a distinctive mark of relationality?

TEACHING WITH IGNORANCE, OR LEARNING FROM THE OTHER

The final, but perhaps the most important approach I am outlining here, considers the place of ignorance in teaching. When I tell my undergraduate students that to teach in a “culturally polyvalent” society such as Toronto one must do so in ignorance, their faces become contorted with perplexity.¹³ Because they are learning to teach the idea hits them doubly hard: do not they need to learn about the cultural backgrounds of their students in order to teach well? And on another level, what can they be learning about teaching from a teacher who insists on her own ignorance? You can see the problem.

I suggest in a Levinasian vein, that the only ethical response to the roughly one-hundred self-identified communities in our city is to fully appreciate the infinite

unknowability of the Other — her fantasies, desires, life problems, creativity, passions, emotions remain hers and hers alone, and how an individual makes cultural meaning for herself is always an indeterminate process of translation. Thus, not only is what we know never enough, but how could this partial knowledge provide any sort of entry point into ethical relationality? Knowledge, as we have seen, is not ethically significant on its own, but rather what precedes it is. To follow Levinas, it is our openness to the Other, our susceptibility to the Other's stories, our capacity to enter into a "veritable conversation" that places us on ethical ground. When I think I know, when I think I understand the Other, I am exercising my knowledge over the Other, shrouding the Other in my own totality. The Other becomes an object of *my* comprehension, *my* world, *my* narrative, reducing the Other to me. What is at stake is my ego. But if I am exposed to the Other, I can listen, attend, and be surprised; the Other can affect me, she "brings me more than I contain."¹⁴ And insofar as I can be receptive and susceptible I can learn *from* the Other as one who is absolutely different from myself.

It is this learning from, which emerges when we let go of our need to know, that offers, in my view the best hope for working across our differences. Obviously I realize that when we learn *from* we do learn *something*, and we do not always approach the Other from an ego-less passivity. Yet, the specifically *ethical* possibility of education, this possibility for non-violent relation to the Other, can only ever emerge when knowledge is not our aim. Instead, learning *from* as opposed to *about* allows us an engagement with difference across space and time, it focuses on the here and now of communication while gesturing toward the future, it allows for attentiveness to singularity and specificity within the plurality that is our social life. It is only when we learn *from* the stories that Others have to tell that we can respond with humility and assume responsibility. When we teach with ignorance, we create a path toward an ethical horizon of possibility rather than a fixed destination. And it is Levinas's work that has taught me to live and teach in the impossible space between what is now and what is not-yet.

1. See, for example, Claudia Eppert, "Relearning Questions: Responding to the Ethical Address of Past and Present Others" and Roger I. Simon, "The Paradoxical Practices of *Zakhor*: Memories of "What Has Never Been My Fault or My Deed" in *Between Hope and Despair: Pedagogy and the Remembrance of Historical Trauma*, ed. Roger I. Simon, Sharon Rosenberg and Claudia Eppert, 213-30; 9-26 (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000); Julian Edgoose, "An Ethics of Hesitant Learning: The Caring Justice of Levinas and Derrida," *Philosophy of Education 1997* (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1998), 266-74; Gert Biesta, "Where Are You? Where Am I? Education, Identity, and the Question of Location," in *A Report on Identity*, ed. Carl Anders Säfström (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 1999); and Ann Chinnery, "Levinas and Ethical Agency: Toward a Reconsideration of Moral Education," *Philosophy of Education 2000* (Urbana, Ill: Philosophy of Education Society, 2001), 67-74.

2. Lawrence Buell, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Ethics," in *The Turn to Ethics*, ed. Beatrice Hanssen, Marjorie Garber, and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (New York: Routledge, 2000), 9.

3. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingus (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 70.

4. Sharon Todd, "'Bringing More than I Contain': Ethics, Curriculum, and the Pedagogical Demand for Altered Egos," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* no. 4 (2001).

5. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (1974; reprint, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 120. This text will be cited as *OTB* for all subsequent references.

6. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 59.

7. *Ibid.*, 39.

8. This comes out of an interview with François Poirié. See Poirié, "Entretiens," in *Emmanuel Levinas, Qui-êtes vous?* (Lyon: La Manufacture, 1987), 94.

9. Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other and Additional Essays*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 83.

10. In many places in *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas contrasts both sensibility and susceptibility with knowledge.

11. Doris Sommer, "Attitude, Its Rhetoric," in *The Turn to Ethics*, ed. Beatrice Hanssen, Marjorie Garber, Rebecca L. Walkowitz (New York: Routledge, 2000), 207.

12. Thomas Carl Wall, *Radical Passivity: Levinas, Blanchot and Agamben* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), 32.

13. Zygmunt Bauman suggests that this term or polyculturalism should replace multiculturalism, since the latter insists on "culture" as being well-defined and contained. *In Search of Politics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 197-201.

14. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 51.