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INTRODUCTION:
LEVINAS AND EDUCATION: THE QUESTION OF IMPLICATION*

Reading the texts of Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995) often means entering a strange and lyrical world, a world rife with poetic invocation and profound sensitivity to the suffering of humanity, a world where the philosophical cardinal points of ethics and ontology are repositioned in laying out the terms of responsible subjectivity. Such a world, in its poignant lyricism and philosophical reorientation, has brought us a language of ethics that is deeply resonant with the experience of human relationality. Proximity, openness, passivity, response, vulnerability, glory, the face, and alterity are only some of the terms which supplant the good, virtue, rationality, agency and moral reasoning as conditions of the ethical. Levinas's world profiles the inter-personal communicative relation that makes ethical relationality possible, resisting the appeal to a grand system that delineates principles of right and good. As Levinas remarks, "my task does not consist in constructing ethics; I only try to find its meaning. In fact I do not believe that all philosophy should be programmatic" (Levinas, 1985, p. 90). Coming into this unprogrammatically world is ultimately disturbing not least because familiar bearings are hard to find and the elusiveness of Levinas's writing does not always provide the expected philosophical ground on which we may plant our feet firmly. Reading his words, approaching his texts, requires some suspension of our attachments to trusty principles if we are to make sense of the world he is proposing, not so that we might be 'converted', but so that we might attend fully to his provocative questioning of the ego as the locus of responsibility.

As one of the most influential French thinkers of the latter half of the twentieth century, Levinas writes across and through the traditions of phenomenology, existentialism, and Judaic thought, and at the same time poses a formidable challenge to his teachers, Husserl and Heidegger. Not a

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quest for experiential and ontological certainty, his philosophical project is a form of engagement with the limits of intentionality and indeed with the limits of thought and being themselves. Writing his major philosophical contributions as well as his religious commentary in the shadow of the Holocaust and grave personal loss, Levinas's work also bears a distinctive weight, indeed a heaviness, with respect to posing the non-determinate conditions of responsibility that stretch beyond Husserlian intentionality and Heideggerian being. There is present in his work an exigency to attend to suffering, injustice, and violence, and his account of the ethical becomes a labour born not only of philosophical interest, but human necessity. Trying to find the "meaning" of ethics, as he claims, becomes an inversion of the problem of ethics as seen from the vantage of the philosophical tradition. Levinas revokes the claims (transcendental and otherwise) that ethics is subsequent and therefore subordinate to a thorough understanding of the nature of existence (i.e., if we can know who we are we will then know how to be responsible). Instead, existence is understood for Levinas as itself an ethical problem since it ultimately lies in relation to a non-totalizing alterity that is simply neither phenomenon nor representation. This alterity is neither the existential 'nothingness' of death, nor the psychoanalytic unconscious, but rather the absolutely irreducible otherness that always lies in an exterior relation to being; an otherwise than being. That is, in exploring the meaning of ethics, or what Derrida has called "the ethics of ethics" (1978, p. 111), Levinas's concern is to explore relationality as an event that can neither be subsumed into a totalizing function of being, nor, therefore, into a totalizing discourse, including that of philosophy. For Levinas, the relation between persons is not about two people who share the same being, or the same time of being, but who in their relationality are expressions of radically different existences: "... the interpersonal relationship ... is not a matter of thinking the ego and the other together, but to be facing. The true union or true togetherness is not a togetherness of synthesis, but a togetherness of face to face" (Levinas, 1985, p. 77).

Depicting a relation to alterity as an ethical structure of being that is pre-originary, or older than being itself, means of course to be caught within language's own limits. If the emergence of responsibility grows not out of a rational exercise of being, or out of understanding that the other is like me, but out of a relation to an alterity that is not recuperable through language, then how might we think about ethical exigency in relation to actual persons? To put it another way, the real problem or challenge is how to think about the non-representable conditions of ethical subjectivity in ways that might inform our practical orientation to the world. Where does a meaning of ethics, as opposed to an ethics, leave us if we wish to attend

to the ethical aspects of education, for example, given that education is ostensibly very much about language and intentionality?

I think part of the answer, and one that is taken up in each of the present essays, lies in attempting to think alongside Levinas, to think with his inversion of being as an ethical question. To think with is not to be uncritical or adulatory, but to be faithful to the modality of questioning which guides Levinas's work, that is to seek out conditions of ethical response in everyday forms of human relationality. This kind of thinking demands nothing less than a reconsideration of what philosophy has to offer education more generally. Levinas's non-systemic approach to ethics refuses a traditional application model; in seeking the meaning of ethical relationality, his work offers, rather, an orientation, an approach, a mode of engagement that opens up the potential to 'read' actually existing relations in terms of their engenderment of the ethical. In other words, approaching education from a Levinasian perspective becomes a question of implication: how do subjectivity, responsibility, and communication perform in the processes of teaching and learning? What are the constitutive features of pedagogical life that give rise to ethical relationality?

Such questions do not merely supply a framework for interpretation, rather, they help us think differently about the ethical significance of education itself. Neither seen as a tool or instrument for carrying out pre-ordained principles, nor as an applied field which must bear the weight of ethical injunctions, education instead becomes a site for ethical inquiry and investigation. Levinas's work invites us to seek out the meaning of the ethical structure of education. That is, as an approach to education, his work lends itself to a reconfiguration of the terms through which education is often understood. In grappling with what is of ethical significance in education and with how educational practices are implicated in ethical response, what emerges is a different conception of the practices that constitute the work of education. Redefinitions of learning, teaching, response, and communication are now posed as conditions of ethical possibility and not merely as the vehicles through which a certain ethics gets carried out.¹ As the papers here collectively suggest, what is at stake in bringing Levinas to bear on education is a questioning of the ethical content of education itself.

¹ See my discussion of these issues (Todd, forthcoming).

REFERENCES

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