

Levinas and Moral Education

Gert J.J. Biesta
University of Exeter

Education as it is with us today is, as Robin Usher and Richard Edwards have argued, the “dutiful child” of the Enlightenment. It is “the vehicle by which the Enlightenment ideals of critical reason, humanistic individual freedom, and benevolent progress are substantiated and realised.” Further, the rationale of the educational process “is founded on the humanist idea of a certain kind of subject who has the inherent potential to become selfmotivated and selfdirecting, a rational subject capable of exercising individual agency.” The task of education has therefore been understood as one of “bringing out” this potential, “so that subjects become fully autonomous and capable of exercising their individual and intentional agency.”¹

If there is one philosopher who has almost single-handedly demolished the conception of subjectivity that lies at the root of the modern project of “enlightenment-through-education,” it is, as Ann Chinnery makes so eloquently clear in her essay, Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas has challenged the “wisdom of the Western tradition” in which it is assumed that human individuals “are human through consciousness.”² He has challenged the idea of the subject as a substantial center of meaning, a *cogito* that is first of all concerned with itself and only then, perhaps, if it decides to do so, with the other. He has argued, instead, that the subject is engaged in a relationship — or, is constituted by a relationship — that is “older than the ego, prior to principles.”³ This relationship is neither a knowledge relationship nor an act. It is a relationship of infinite responsibility for the other, which, for that reason, can be called an *ethical* relationship.

Although it is not too difficult to identify the general inversion that is articulated in Levinas’s work — for example with the phrase of “ethics as first philosophy” — it is far more difficult to delineate what is *precisely* at stake in this fascinating corpus of writing. Yet it is only on the basis of an answer to this question that we can begin to think about implications of Levinas’s work for (moral) education.

The issue that I want to raise concerns the relationship between ethics and subjectivity. It might appear that Levinas is offering us a new ethics based upon a new conception of subjectivity. While there may be some truth in such a reading, I want to argue that Levinas is not so much offering us a new ethics but first of all a new “conception” of subjectivity.

This conception is not only new in that it tells us something different about human subjectivity. It is most of all new because it is not a conception in the usual sense of the word, that is, not an attempt to bring the phenomenon of subjectivity under a concept. It is not an attempt to outline the nature of human subjectivity but rather an attempt to express that the subject has no nature.⁴ Or, to be more precise, an attempt to express that the *uniqueness* or *singularity* of the subject cannot be conceived in ontological terms.

The problem with ontology is that it can only think of the individual “within the formal framework of his belonging to a genus.”⁵ It can only think of the individual as a particular instance of something more general. In doing so the subject’s uniqueness is obliterated. If, therefore, we want to safeguard this uniqueness we must do what is literally inconceivable, which is going “beyond essence” to a “mode” that is “otherwise than being.”

Going beyond essence brings us to a place where the first and final question is *not* that of the *being* of the subject but of “my *right* to be.”⁶ Levinas argues that it is only in “the very crisis of the being of a being,”⁷ in the *interruption* of its being, that the uniqueness of the subject “first acquires a meaning.”⁸ This interruption constitutes the relationship of responsibility, which is a “responsibility of being-in-question.”⁹ And it is this being-in-question “which assigns the self to be a self” and constitutes me as this unique individual.¹⁰

Rather, therefore, than offering a new conception of subjectivity, Levinas attempts to account for the awakening of the *singularity* of the subject. This awakening is approached in terms that can easily be recognized as ethical. But Levinas does not offer us a new ethics. He does not command us to take up the responsibility for the other. Nor does he try to convince us that it would be reasonable to do so. In a sense his “message” for ethics is only negative in that it suggests that any ethics which tries to found itself in the nature of human subjectivity impedes the possibility of goodness coming into the world.

Although my remarks about the relationship between ethics and subjectivity tell a slightly different story from Chinnery’s, I believe that this is more a difference of emphasis than of principle. But this difference does suggest a rather different approach to the question of implications for moral education.

If I see it correctly, Chinnery, in thinking about implications for education, relies upon a model of education where moral action stems from or is motivated by an understanding of the situation in which we find ourselves. Her approach seems to play on the assumption that Levinas has shown us that the other is “ethical prior to us,” that the other is “the very bedrock of selfhood,” that altruism is “an unremarkable aspect of one’s prior condition of responsibility,” and so on and so forth, and that it is for these reasons that we should act in a responsible manner — or that this is at least the lesson that moral education should teach us.

Now it cannot be denied that Levinas has said all this. But is this also what his writings are saying to us? The predicament here is that although Levinas wants to speak about what is “otherwise than being” — the subject, the ethical, responsibility — he can only do so in the language of being, in the language of ontology. Levinas articulates this predicament with the help of the distinction between the saying and the said. Although the saying always precedes the said, it can only be thematized, can only be conveyed before us in “language qua said,” which means that it can only be expressed “at the price of a betrayal.”¹¹ This means that we cannot simply approach Levinas’s writings on the level of the said, that we cannot simply approach it as a new theory, a new conception or a new truth about human subjectivity and its

ethical condition. At the very least we also need to respond to a saying that is beyond what is said in Levinas's writings.

On one level we can therefore conclude that we should not read Levinas's writings as simply a description of human subjectivity and its ethical condition, because he challenges the very idea that this condition can be described in positive terms, that is, in the language of being. But the fact that we cannot straightforwardly "use" Levinas's writings in this way, is not only a deficit of the "kind" of "information" he is offering us. He primarily questions the idea that it is on the basis of *knowledge* of our situation that we can come to see *that* we are responsible. The point of what he is saying is precisely that "there is no pre-ethical subject" (Chinnery) that can know about its condition and that can thereupon choose to act responsibly or otherwise. At this point, then, it becomes clear that Levinas's writings put into question the very assumptions on which the modern model of "enlightenment-through-education" is erected. Thinking about the implications for education of Levinas's writing goes, therefore, much further than simply putting his ideas "at work" in the model of education with which we are most familiar.

Where, then, does this leave us? And where does it leave moral education? In a most interesting way, so it seems, the writings of Levinas bring us to a point where our most basic certainties are put into question. The writings thus put us in a position where it is up to us to respond, where *we* must take responsibility. Could this, perhaps, be a metaphor for moral education "after" Levinas?

1. Robin Usher and Richard Edwards, *Postmodernism and Education* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 24-25.

2. Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre-nous: On Thinking of the Other* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 190.

3. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), 117.

4. See also Gert Biesta, "Radical Intersubjectivity: Reflections on the 'Different' Foundation of Education," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 18, no. 4 (1999): 203-20.

5. Levinas, *Entre-nous*, 189.

6. Emmanuel Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy," in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Seán Hand (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 86 (emphasis added).

7. *Ibid.*, 85

8. Levinas, *Otherwise*, 13.

9. *Ibid.*, 111.

10. *Ibid.*, 106.

11. *Ibid.*, 6.