

Asymmetry and the Pedagogical I-Thou

Ann Chinnery

Simon Fraser University

Translating Levinas's ethics into classroom practice is no easy task, and yet in making a case for pedagogy of the other, Clarence Joldersma has drawn on several of the more subtle and contested aspects of Levinasian thought. By way of extending the conversation, I will take up three of those points here: asymmetry and subjectivity, the face, and reciprocity.

Levinas's insistence on the fundamental asymmetry of ethical relationship is indeed a hallmark of his thought, but one might also argue that there is nothing inherently new or radical in a claim to asymmetry as such. In fact, since the prevailing conception of ethics is founded on the modernist notion of subjectivity as sovereign rational autonomy, it has been characterized as a self-other asymmetry all along. The scandal of Levinas's ethics, however, is that he inverts the prevailing model and insists on the ethical priority or superiority of the Other. Asymmetry for Levinas marks the "fundamental" or "essential" difference in which the I is already subject *to* the Other: "The Other reveals to me that the 'essence' of the self is to be a subject in the accusative: not *I think, I see, I will, I want, I can*, but *me voici (see me here)*."¹ For Levinas, the "I which says I" is a subject position already deposed of its kingdom of identity and substance, already in debt to and for the other.² It is an inversion of the traditional "no other-than-self without a self" to "no self without another who summons it to responsibility."³

This shift — the switch from subjectivity as an "I" to a "me" — is, on Joldersma's account, central to both learning and to a pedagogy of the other. It is the exercise of having one's freedom called into question and of welcoming the new, the stranger, the genuinely other. But, again, one might ask, what is so radical here? Has not learning always required (most certainly from students, but also, to a certain extent, from teachers) a departure from the familiar? Of course, the divergence from traditional models is more obvious in the discussion of student-as-other wherein the teacher is the "accused:" as Joldersma says, "[W]hat keeps teaching from being a form of domination — domestication — is the otherness of the student as other." But since pedagogical models grounded in an ethics of care, for example, also resist domination and domestication, I have a sense that Levinas has something more radical in mind.

In reading Levinas, we must remain ever vigilant of the tendency to slide back into traditional ways of thinking. For instance, Joldersma's claim, "That student, whose face I see, is irreplaceably calling me to respond," is entirely compatible with a Murdochian emphasis on perception and attentiveness, or with an ethic of care, both of which leave the conception of substantial subjectivity untouched. Levinas's use of ordinary words in extraordinary ways is one of the reasons his work is so difficult to comprehend. And while his use of "the face" is perhaps the most enigmatic example, "responsibility" poses similar challenges. Levinas divests these

words of their common meaning and we are left with “the tension between what we think we understand and the repeated insistence that we have still not yet got the point.”⁴

To take up the example cited above, Levinas resists the reduction of the face to that which can be perceived. This is well illustrated in Philippe Nemo’s interviews with Levinas for Radio France-Culture in 1981 (later published as *Ethics and Infinity*, 1985).⁵ Nemo asks Levinas about the phenomenology of the face — about what happens when I look at the Other face to face. Levinas immediately resists the call to a phenomenological analysis, pointing out that phenomenology’s concern (which is to describe what appears) inevitably renders the Other an object, the object of perception. He is concerned instead with revealing the essentially ethical nature of the face and of our relation to the Other, and he invokes the notion of “the face” by way of calling us to ethical relationship with the Other, to a relationship that does not succumb to the temptation to reduce the Other into what can be known. For Levinas, the face is not so much a mode of appearing as it is the appeal and contestation of the Other.

The radical promise of a pedagogy of the other is thus, on my view, not so much in the shift from nominative to accusative but in the perhaps more subtle shift from *me voici* to subjectivity as responsibility accepted. Levinas expresses this by way of Moses’ response to the appeal of the absolute Other: “God called to him out of the bush, ‘Moses, Moses!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’”⁶ This construal of subjectivity as the response “Here I am” locates subjectivity at the site of response, and marks the “I” as nothing other than responsibility to and for the Other. To use Martin Buber’s terms, the “I” comes into being only in saying “Thou,” only in suspending adherence to the site of subjectivity. And it is in this moment that the crucial pedagogical questions emerge. What, for example, does pedagogy look like when subjectivity is construed as a position of existential and ethical debt to the other?

For Joldersma,

The ethical conditions for successful pedagogy require that it consist of two asymmetric relationships, each of which has “the other” at the far pole. Pedagogy occurs in the context of a double relationship between teacher and student....This doubling is not merely an optional extra. It is central to pedagogy as pedagogy.

He also points out earlier that this double asymmetry is not a kind of leveling reciprocity, for “[t]hat would make the two, together, a symmetry, a Buber-like I-Thou.” However, I am not so sure that Buber’s conception of reciprocity is in fact about symmetry. Now, Levinas certainly interpreted it that way: he saw Buber’s insistence on reciprocity, reversibility, and mutuality as a sharp contrast to his own emphasis on the “original ethical inequality of a responsibility in which the first person appears not in the nominative but in the accusative.”⁷ But when Levinas asked Buber whether the reciprocity of the I-Thou did not compromise the otherness, or the distance of the Thou, Buber replied that Levinas had misunderstood him.⁸ Buber does in fact emphasize the otherness of the Other, but most interpretations of his work render his conception of reciprocity one of symmetry. In an afterword to the second edition of *I and Thou*, he sought to clarify the distinction by stressing the

close association between the relation to God and the relation to the human Other.⁹ While claiming the latter as his primary concern, it is their coexistence, he says, which constitutes the I-Thou as a relation of both reciprocity and asymmetry.

For Buber, the I-Thou is not a matter of equality between subjects. The I-Thou never reduces to I and Thou, and, more importantly, the emphasis is not on the subjects at all; it is on the relation. It was this pivotal recognition, enabled by Gabriel Marcel's commentary on Buber, which finally laid to rest for Levinas the crucial question of asymmetry.¹⁰ And it is in recognition of the primacy of the between, I suggest, that we can truly begin to conceptualize a pedagogy of the other. The double asymmetry of the pedagogical I-Thou opens into a "space" where both "teacher" and "student" are realized in exposure and vulnerability to the other. The pedagogical moment is a moment of both profound responsibility and incredible lightness. It requires a suspension of Being — of the *conatus essendi* (being's perseverance in its own being) — in order that the other might flourish. A pedagogy of the other is a pedagogy of responsibility that, like great improvisational jazz, demands a response that cannot be prepared beforehand but which can only be spoken with one's whole being. It demands, in Buber's words, "nothing of what is past. It demands presence, responsibility; it demands you."¹¹

1. Adriaan Peperzak, *Beyond: The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 199.

2. Emmanuel Levinas, "God and Philosophy," in *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 144.

3. Paul Ricoeur, cited in Peter Kemp, "Ricoeur between Heidegger and Levinas: Original Affirmation between Ontological Contestation and Ethical Injunction," in *Paul Ricoeur: The Hermeneutics of Action*, ed. Richard Kearney (London: Sage, 1996), 46.

4. Colin Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), 132.

5. Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. R. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985).

6. Exodus 3:4.

7. Robert Bernasconi, "'Failure of Communication' as a Surplus: Dialogue and Lack of Dialogue between Buber and Levinas," in *The Provocation of Levinas*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (London: Routledge, 1988), 122.

8. *Ibid.*, 120-21.

9. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970).

10. Bernasconi, "Failure of Communication," 115.

11. Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, trans. R.G. Smith (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 114.

I AM GRATEFUL TO Claudia Ruitenberg for comments and conversations central to the preparation of this response.