

Theodore Sizer's Horace, Levinas, and Pedagogy for Social Justice

Kevin Gary
Loyola University

In light of Matt Jackson's call to remember the Third in Emmanuel Levinas's thought I turn to Theodore Sizer's *Horace's Compromise* — a compelling sketch of the life of a secondary school teacher.¹ As Jackson states, he is concerned with the “concrete political implications” of Levinas's thought for social justice pedagogies. I would like to explore further Jackson's concrete directives in light of Horace's situation. What does Jackson's call to remember the Third mean for Horace? How would Third considerations challenge Horace to re-envision to whom, how, and what he teaches?

Horace is Sizer's fictional, though truthful, portrait of a twenty-eight year veteran English teacher at suburban Franklin High School. He loves to teach; for eight years he was the department chair, but gave up the position because it took time away from his teaching. In a profession that is beleaguered with burnout, continually changing expectations, poor compensation, and constant criticism from every quarter, Horace has survived. He has not become jaded, enjoys what he does, and cares about his students and their learning. However, to endure he has had to make compromises. The vexing questions that Jackson concludes with — “to whom do we attend first and at what cost?” — Horace must wrestle with and answer every day.

Horace teaches five classes with approximately 20 to 25 students in each class, totaling 120. Though, as an English teacher, he values the importance of writing, he can only assign one short writing assignment per week (1 to 2 paragraphs) so as to be able spend at least five minutes a week on each student's writing, lest his workweek surpass sixty hours. Horace feels guilty about this compromise, but there are just so many hours in the day. Also, as a dedicated teacher, he feels he should spend at least half an hour preparing for each class. Realistically though he can only spend ten minutes — another compromise he is uncomfortable with, but forced to make. Moreover, during his classes Horace finds that he “can never pursue any one student's errors to completion without losing all the others.”² This, combined with the limited feedback on writing, especially frustrates Horace for he knows that the heart of good teaching consists of coaching students one on one, something he can provide in only a limited way.

Such is Horace's predicament — his day is a series of compromises that he regrets having to make. Always, he experiences an unbridgeable chasm between what he would like or ought to do and what he can do. He sometimes wonders how his counterparts in the inner city manage, typically carrying class loads of 175 students, with “a far greater percentage of demoralized students.”³

Imagine now that Matt Jackson is invited, as a consultant, to speak at Franklin High about the viability of Levinas's thought for social justice pedagogies. Perhaps this exercise is unfair, for Jackson's paper may not be intended for an audience of high school teachers, let alone a mandatory assembly of teachers. Nevertheless,

Jackson is there, and he is the keynote speaker for an assembly that meets after an early school dismissal on a Thursday at 1 p.m. Horace enters the auditorium ten minutes early so as to secure a seat near the back of the auditorium — a safe distance from the speaker and administrators so that he can inconspicuously grade a stack of papers if Jackson's talk is not engaging. From the start, though, Horace is captivated by Jackson's lecture. As a teacher at a predominately white, suburban school, Horace has struggled firsthand with the challenge of facilitating a meaningful discussion about whiteness. Jackson's talk of the dyadic intimacy that can characterize discussions wherein "whites talk about whiteness with other whites and we relegate ourselves to the tidy racial intimacy of the known and the same" resonates with Horace. "How can I," Horace asks, "disrupt this dyadic insularity?" However, Jackson's answer to this question may overwhelm him.

Horace hears that he is not only infinitely responsible for the Faces that immediately beckon him (his 120 students), but is also infinitely responsible for the Third, others near and far. He learns that the focus of his struggle on equitably attending to 120 students has been narrowly construed. He needs to broaden his vision and, with the wisdom of love, consider incomparable and countless others. In so doing, it would seem he has to compromise even more.

In considering Horace's dilemma, I am reminded of Maxine Greene's question at the beginning of *Releasing the Imagination*. She asks "whether it is better to see the world small or to see it big."⁴ To see the world small is to take a detached perspective, to see people from a distance. This vision favors a systems approach that notes trends and tendencies of human behavior. It is the view taken by great leaders because otherwise, Greene says, "they would never be able to deal as they do with the lives and deaths of so many living beings."⁵ When applied to schools this way of seeing favors statistics and quantitative measures.

By contrast, to see the world big is to attend to concrete details — it is to receive, in Levinas's words, the "alterity" and "uniqueness" of particular human beings, avoiding generalizations that do violence to the incomparable uniqueness of each person. This vision offers what Clifford Geertz describes as a "thick description" of reality that gets beneath the surface. It hesitates before categorizing, favoring a qualitative versus a quantitative approach.

Levinasian pedagogical judgments, it would seem, involve a delicate balance of these two visions. It is in the face-to-face encounter, the letting the Other be the Other, that one sees the world big. And it is in qualifying one's commitment to the particular, immediate Other in light of the Third or countless Others, wherein one sees the world small. The extremes of both views are problematic. Jackson is principally concerned with the problems of an exclusively big vision. This vision, Jackson explains, risks isolating "the ethical to the intimacy of the Self and the Other, [thus precluding] the possibility of justice" as consideration for Others beyond the immediate Other whose face beckons me.

And yet the small view, consideration of the Third, is not without risks. In trying to comprehend one's responsibility to the countless others that constitute the Third,

there is the danger of forgetting the incomparable uniqueness of each person, of overlooking the demanding responsibility to the Face in front of me, thus doing violence wherein ethics is reduced to politics. Consider Dostoevsky's story of a doctor who finds that the more he loves humankind in general the less he loves people in particular. "In dreams," the doctor elaborates, he passionately thinks of "serving humankind," would even go "to the cross for people if it were somehow suddenly necessary, and yet" he finds himself "incapable of living in the same room with anyone even for two days... In twenty-four hours [he begins] to hate even the best of people: one because she takes too long eating her dinner, another because he has a cold and keeps blowing his nose."⁶ Third considerations risk this fantastical kind of love.

How does Horace strike the right balance between attending to the Other and the Third? When is the Third present in a classroom, when is it absent? Can it ever be present in Horace's school that is predominately white? Given the inequities among schools, communities, and nations, when can Horace, an English teacher at Franklin High, feel some measure of confidence that he has in word and deed adequately attended the Other *and* the Third? These questions, important and necessary as they are, risk overwhelming Horace. Comparing incomparables and measuring the tasks required of infinite responsibility for everyone is dizzying. I appreciate Jackson's cautioning us against dyadic self-absorption, but wonder how much Third thinking Horace can handle or should be asked to handle.

For a way out of this conundrum, I return to the thought of Martin Buber. Jackson mentions Levinas's critique of Buber's apoliticism, wherein the I and the Thou remain in an abstract world — the intimate dyad as Jackson describes it — "unmitigated by concrete demands for justice." Yet is not Buber's explication of the I-Thou relationship a political indictment (perhaps implicitly) insofar as it offers a critical lens through which to view political, economic, and social institutions? Buber provides us with a foundational perspective, whereby we can appraise institutions, schools, classrooms, considering to what extent they enable or hinder meaningful I-Thou encounters. From this qualitative perspective, we can see which compromises Horace should never be asked to make. Of course, Horace must consider multiple Thous; Third considerations are indispensable, but if he is bombarded with so many Thous, can he ever hope to say Thou and mean it?

1. Theodore R. Sizer, *Horace's Compromise* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1992). For the sake of this discussion I have added some details to Sizer's portrait of Horace. They are, however, in spirit with Sizer's sketch.

2. *Ibid.*, 13.

3. *Ibid.*, 17.

4. Maxine Greene, *Reclaiming the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995), 9–10.

5. *Ibid.*, 10.

6. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (New York: Everyman's Library, 1992), 57–58.