

## Pedagogical Responsibility and the Third: Levinasian Considerations for Social Justice Pedagogies

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The third party is other than the neighbor but also another neighbor, and also a neighbor of the other, and not simply their fellow. What am I to do? What have they already done to one another? Who passes before the other in my responsibility? What are the other and the third party with respect to one another?<sup>1</sup>

### THE QUESTION OF THE THIRD

When moving with Levinas's ethical philosophy from the realm of the abstract to that of the political, one of the questions that is given life is that of justice; for him, "The first question in the interhuman is the question of justice."<sup>2</sup> And yet, Levinas's philosophy is not known for its treatment of justice — it has been tagged rightfully as "ethics as first philosophy." And perhaps there is reason to doubt that his seemingly unrealistic ethical philosophy has anything to offer the concrete political concerns of progressive pedagogies striving for social justice. In fact, while the strengths and limitations of Levinas's radical transfiguring of ethics have been explored extensively in the general philosophical literature, discussions of Levinas in the education literature are fairly scarce;<sup>3</sup> and it focuses primarily on the ethical relation of Self and the Other, and largely ignores the notion of the Third. Consequently, the political potential of Levinas's philosophy is left behind, as it is the notion of the Third that is the crucial element for Levinas where social justice is concerned.

I will argue that when an exploration of Levinas's philosophy is limited to a discussion of the Self and the Other, his philosophy does lack political viability; however, when the notion of the Third is taken into consideration, there are significant political implications for progressive pedagogies — specifically for whiteness pedagogies, where, as it happens all too often, whites talk about whiteness with other whites, and relegate themselves to the tidy racial intimacy of the known and the same. Levinas offers social justice pedagogies a way to disrupt the dyadic intimacy of whiteness with the presence of the Third; this disruption provides some political footing from which to make ethical headway in working toward social justice in education.

The idea of implementing an infinite responsibility for the Other before me *should* be overwhelming. In terms of everyday pedagogical situations, enacting a Levinasian ethics seems impossible. Consequently, much of Levinas's writings get dismissed as being theoretically rich, but politically unworkable. While the bulk of Levinas's thought is concerned with the intimate relationship of the Self with the Other, he is careful to argue that his philosophy is based on and directed toward concrete lived experience.<sup>4</sup> In fact, Levinas criticizes Martin Buber's famous work, *I and Thou*, as being apolitical for leaving the Self and the Other in an ideal and abstract realm; the I and Thou relationship is unmitigated by concrete demands for justice.<sup>5</sup>

While Levinas places the Self and the Other first and foremost in his work, Levinasian scholars agree that his philosophy of ethics is never complete without mention of the Third. I would argue that it is the question of the third party that gives Levinas's philosophy political teeth — that makes it viable for everyday life. My argument hinges on the assumption that the third party is always already present in the ethical considerations of the Self and the Other: in the face of the other. And it is the question of the Third that brings justice and judgment to the fore and interrupts the dyadic intimacy of the Self and Other.<sup>6</sup> I will treat the notion of the Third momentarily, but first there is value in looking at how education scholars have considered the Self and Other of Levinas's ethical philosophy, but have ignored the notion of the Third, which results in their leaving the ethical to be worked out in the apolitical intimacy of the dyad.

#### DYADIC INTIMACY

In the literature on Levinas and education, the Other is often posited as a generic alterity; the “other” is often read as “student.” However, these students-as-others are not always posited as being beyond our comprehension; they are not “unique enigmas,” as Levinas would want it. The student-Other seems to be quite knowable, comprehensible to the teacher taking the role of the pedagogical Self. One danger of this kind of conceptualization is the inclination to reduce the Other to the same, to transmute alterity back into the known of the comprehending ego. This is the ontologically violent leveling of being that reduces difference to recognition — a hallmark of western philosophy. Levinas refers to this kind of thinking as the ontological “melting pot” of philosophy.<sup>7</sup> (This phrasing is provocative in light of the resurgence of colorblind multiculturalism promulgated in schools and society today.)

For example, in his article, “Pedagogy of the Other: A Levinasian Approach to the Student-Teacher Relationship,” Clarence Joldersma limns out a working model of the Self and the Other for pedagogy.<sup>8</sup> He focuses on Levinas's first-person discourse of spatiality, positing the Self as the “near pole” and the Other as the “far pole” of a pedagogical relationship. Joldersma argues that the teacher and the student are each other's Other. That is, I will be infinitely responsible for you and you will be infinitely responsible for me. (This way, everything works out evenly.) Perhaps Joldersma does this in order to avoid exploitation of the Self by the Other (as is certainly plausible in pedagogical contexts). Concerns about having no control over our responsibility might be part of our problem in understanding the extreme notion of *passivity* in Levinas's work. Nonetheless, as a remedy I cannot impose my sense of obligation onto the Other. As Levinas puts it, “To say that the other has to sacrifice himself to others is to preach human sacrifice!” (*OTB*, 126).

The “remedy” Levinas proffers to guard against possible exploitation in the intimacy of the Self-Other dyad is the notion of the Third. This notion is, however, absent from Joldersma's discussion. As a result, there is no apparent recourse to anyone other than him-Self in making pedagogical judgments. This becomes a problem when, as Joldersma suggests, the teaching-Self takes on the task of breaking the student-Other's totality. This presumes a sense of willful imposition on the part

of the teaching Self who must grasp and control the student's being; to teach is to break (however responsibly) the student's totality in a way that is not harmonious with Levinas's philosophy in terms of the passivity of the Self. In Joldersma's discussion, responsibility for the other seems to rely primarily on the reasoning of the Self. The teaching-Self as the comprehending ego decides what is socially just in terms of a willful and intentional responsibility for the student-Other.

Pedagogies that rely on the primacy of being and reason, even in a Levinasian framework, run up against the limitations of teaching and learning in the realm of the known and the same of dyadic intimacy.<sup>9</sup> The problem with an application of Levinas's radical ethics that does not consider the third party is that it restricts the ethical to the intimacy of the Self and the Other in a way that precludes the possibility of justice in pedagogy. When pedagogy is reduced to an abstraction of "just the two of us," then there is no need for *social* justice. In the intimacy of the dyad I am too often inclined (and this seems endemic in our pedagogies) to the enticements of figuring ethics against the unchecked goodness of my own thinking.

As mentioned, there is a sense of justice for Levinas in the intimacy of the dyad. That is, the Self and the Other, were they to remain in a "vacuum of being" could work out justice between them. I, being asymmetrically responsible for the Other, could receive exculpatory pardon from the Other (*EN*, 19). But for Levinas this is not *social* justice. Social justice for Levinas means justice in concrete everyday terms. That is, social justice is the way that I respond, in political and material ways, in relation with the Other *and* the Third, in search of a trace of the ethical.

For Levinas, responsibility is the "only response" I can give in the face of the Other. The only way there can be any *justice* in my response — that I can have responsibility in my ability to respond — is by way of the Third. I cannot start to think about ethical responsibility toward social justice without always already including the third party. "All love — unless it becomes judgment and justice — is the love of the couple. The couple is the closed society" (*EN*, 21). For Levinas, social reality entails the existence of the third party who, listening to the amorous dialogue of the closed society of the couple, is wounded; with regard to the third, the closed society of the couple is unjust.

I think we, as progressive pedagogues, are often guilty of this "wounding of the third party" when we talk about race and racism — especially when whites do whiteness theory and pedagogy with other whites. We seem to be satisfied with knowing how antiracism *should* work and we seem to prefer to leave our thinking and workings unsullied by the presence of the Third. Likewise, theorizing social justice pedagogy only in terms of the Self and the Other leaves our thinking in the abstract and relegates our political work to the realm of the romantic. As there are always more than two people in the world, Levinas sees *social* justice as "the way in which I respond to the fact that I am not alone in the world with the other."<sup>10</sup>

#### ETHICS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE EDUCATION

On this point, Sharon Todd asserts in her book, *Learning From the Other: Levinas, Psychoanalysis, and Ethical Possibilities in Education*, that any philosophical

investigation into the ethical possibilities of education must consider the exigencies of current social injustices as central to its conceptualizations. One of her opening statements reads, “Ethics, insofar as it potentially offers us a discourse for rethinking our relations to other people, is central to any education that takes seriously issues of social justice.”<sup>11</sup> Indeed, for Levinas, all questions, including those of social justice and education are subsequent to ethics as first philosophy.

Todd addresses two questions regarding social justice education. The first question concerns whether we enact violence on the Other as teachers and is easily answerable in Levinasian terms: “yes.” We do so in terms of the ontological violence of our thematizations that reduce the alterity of the Other to the same and the known of the comprehending being. The second question is “How might we attend to the Other and preserve alterity as a nonviolent alternative while working toward the aim of social justice?” (*LFO*, 3) This is a good question, but one that I don’t think Todd can adequately answer in Levinasian terms without including his notion of the third party, which is absent from the discussion in her book.

By focusing her discussions of Levinas on the Self and the Other, she is left to “attending” to only one Other at a time, which requires that justice be worked out in the intimacy of the dyad. That said, Todd recognizes that each student, in their alterity, must be approached as an unknowable enigma; she argues that “responsibility is not a singular position, behavior, skill or attitude” but is rather an uncertain and risky approach to the alterity of the Other” (*LFO*, 141). I agree, but the question remains concerning the Third party and justice: What do I do when I am faced (and I always am) with many others? How do I respond to them justly? In Levinasian terms, I can never respond to the Other before me as if we were the only two to be taken into consideration — this would be an un-just response. Part of what makes responsibility “risky” are the questions of justice and judgment brought by the Third.

Todd quotes Levinas in stating that justice must always be “held in check by the initial interpersonal relation” (*LFO*, 144). This refers to ways that ethics and justice serve as “checks” for each other. In other words, I check my judgments about political action with the ethics of my intersubjective relationship with the Other. This is an aspect of the perpetual “an-archic” tension in Levinas’s philosophy between ethics and politics: politics is always ruptured by an asymmetrical ethical responsibility to the Other and ethics is always ruptured by the demand for justice. The crucial part of this configuration for Levinas is that the demand for justice can only come because of the Third; the check of justice is not to be left to the Self. To reiterate the point, when the anarchic tension between ethics and justice is left to the Self and the Other, their relationship is un-real — an apolitical and socially unjust relationship of dyadic intimacy.

Social justice for Levinas would mean asking the questions, to which of these unique others do I attend first and what is the cost to the third. Todd argues that it is only by “anchoring ethics and education to the tangibility of people’s lives” that we might fruitfully explore ethics in social justice education (*LFO*, 1). And yet, without a discussion of the Third, there is no way to get at the politically fruitful part of Levinas’s ethics.

## THE PROBLEM OF BEING-FOR-ITSELF

Part of my point here is to show how our tendencies are toward ourselves as comprehending beings; our pedagogical thinking and working inclines toward and tends to demonstrate our self-interestedness, our being-for-ourselves, even when in the service of others. Levinas refers to this in terms of the law of being — the *conatus essendi* — that is primarily concerned with its own existence.<sup>12</sup> For example, while Todd is genuinely concerned with the welfare of students-as-Others, her sense of responsibility seems to be informed by an underlying concern for the teaching-Self. What seems to be at stake is “the development of the capacity for the continual renewal of the self in relation to another who signifies” (*LFO*, 146). Likewise, Todd discusses our need as educators to address the “complex layers of affect that inform our responses to the Other.” While these needs are important, they seem to maintain a prior concern with the Self. For Levinas, there is no consciousness without the Other — and I am obligated, “Without asking myself: what then is this to me?” (*OTB*, 87).

For Levinas this need to know and understand the Self, to coincide with and be contemporaneous with one’s self, is one of the limitations of Western philosophy (and, I would argue, with our pedagogies). Moreover, the dis-interestedness and extreme passivity — the forgetting of one’s self — of Levinas’s ethics is part of what makes it so radical — so un-*reason*-able. There is space, however, in Levinas’s thinking for the care of the self. He says, “The ego can, in the name of this unlimited responsibility, be called upon to concern itself with itself.” That said, he quickly follows up with the statement that, “The fact that the other, my neighbor, is also a third party with respect to another, who is also a neighbor, is the birth of thought, consciousness, justice, and philosophy” (*OTB*, 128). The key to the Self in Levinasian terms is reference to the infinite obligation of the Self-for-the-Other *in relation to the third*.

## WHENCE JUSTICE?

One of the Levinasian questions that Todd asks is, “Can we think about ethics through education rather than education through ethics?” (*LFO*, 29) The foil for this question is that conventional thinking about ethics works from a position of applying the *known* of ethics (as a priori and universal) to social problems such as education. According to Levinas, social justice education would be about the education of ethics, where ethics is something not-yet comprehended, but to be sought after relationally. While Todd touches on this idea she never says more specifically how the relationship between ethics and social justice works with the Self, the Other, and the Third. There is a seeming disjuncture between her very moving account of Levinasian responsibility of the Self for the Other and her apparent dismissal of that same responsibility as the impetus for “larger” social justice. She states,

It’s not that responsibility...is or ought to be the sole work of social justice education. Indeed, the interpersonal conditions of responsibility cannot serve as a replacement for the larger concerns of justice; responsibility...does not replace the important struggle for a more inclusive curriculum, nor does it act as a panacea to the ills of social inequity and violence. (*OTB*, 146)

I would contend that, for Levinas, the same asymmetrical and infinite responsibility that works to establish justice on the level of dyadic intimacy also works for larger groups, communities, and nations. As Levinas puts it, the responsibility to the Other with reference to proximity is in no way “a repudiation of politics” (*EN*, 166–167).

#### JUDGMENT AND THE COMPARISON OF INCOMPARABLES

Without a discussion of the Third, our pedagogical “checks and balances” with ethics and justice seem relegated to the intersubjective processes of the Self and the Other (more particularly the teaching-Self when considering the asymmetry of power in pedagogy). The Self, in attending to the Other, can mete out justice according to her understanding — being checked by her infinite responsibility to the Other. However, if this “process” goes unchecked by the Third, then judgments about justice, however empathetically informed, are likely limited in this sense to an intimate economy of the known and the same. For Levinas, we speak of social justice because we live “in a world of citizens and not only in the order of the Face to Face” (*EN*, 105).

It is, however, in the face of the Other that I am also exposed to the Third and “It is consequently necessary to weigh, to think, to judge, in comparing the incomparable.”<sup>13</sup> The question of comparison is brought by the Third as an “incessant correction” that breaks up the ethical intimacy of the Self-Other dyad and demands justice (*OTB*, 158). As Levinas puts it,

Here, beginning with this third person, is the proximity of a human plurality. Who, in this plurality comes first? This is the time and place of the birth of the question: of a demand for justice! This is the obligation to compare unique and incomparable others; this is the moment of knowledge...this is the moment of consciousness and intentionality. (*EN*, 166–167)

This call for consciousness in comparing incomparables — even with the presence of the third — is problematic for Levinas. Granted, Levinas’s project is not about spelling out for us the rules of making just judgments in comparing Others. Without details from Levinas, it seems that pedagogical judgment relies on one’s knowledge and consciousness — the very things that are inextricably connected to his critique of being. And while it seems that this brings us right back to an ethics of ontology and the primacy of reason, I think the difference, subtle as it may be, between conventional ethics in social justice pedagogies and what a Levinasian pedagogy might look like, is in *how* judgments in pedagogical responsibility are made. In many social justice pedagogies, and even in applications of Levinas for education discussed here, judgment seems at worst to be determined by the reasoning of the comprehending being and at best to be determined in the intimacy of the closed society of Self and Other. For example, in white-on-white pedagogies, this tidy intimacy might sound something like, “Follow these twelve steps to feel good about achieving an antiracist consciousness.”

What I am suggesting is that Levinasian pedagogical judgment is not a judgment left to its own designs, nor to the dyadic intimacy of the interpersonal relations of the known and the same — Levinasian pedagogical judgment includes the Other *and* the Third. And though it is not fully clear to me what informs judgment in Levinas’s philosophy, I would like to think that Levinasian judgment, the ethical

comparing of incomparables, would require rigorous study and pondering. For instance, a learning of what has been “said” in racial discourse so that it might be “unsaid” with the Other and the Third, in a “saying” that is less violent and more ethical.

I also think a Levinasian sense of pedagogical ethics in the name of social justice is not just about how I attend to a student as Other, but about how my attending to one student comes at a cost to another. That is, my responsibility must be limited by justice. What, then, are the implications of my responsibility to the others that I teach in relation to the third, particularly in terms of whiteness pedagogy. At what cost is my responsibility fulfilled? And, perhaps more importantly, how have I used knowledge in dividing my responsibility between the Other and the Third? For example, what assumptions inform my antiracist pedagogical interventions with white students?

In the moment of justice, in the comparing of incomparables, the teaching-Self must make use of knowledge, the love of wisdom, and the “wisdom of love” in making pedagogical judgments (*OTB*, 104). For Levinas, this must be done in institutions wherein the anarchic tension of ethics and justice is sensed so strongly. In education, teachers are in a unique position as judges, albeit with limited power, to make judgments about justice that, even as they are made, are unjust and must be checked by the ethics of an infinite and asymmetrical responsibility (*OTB*, 195–196).

#### PROXIMITY AND PEDAGOGICAL RESPONSIBILITY

Our position in relation to those about whom we make judgments in responsibility is not one removed to a place of comprehending objectivity. For Levinas, “Justice is impossible without the one that renders it finding himself in proximity. His function is not limited to the ‘function of judgment’ the subsuming of particular cases under a general rule. The judge is not outside the conflict but the law is in the midst of proximity” (*OTB*, 159). Herein, Levinas suggests that we have “ceased to be surprised by all that is involved in proximity and approach” in our relationships with the Other and the Third; we need to be reawakened to the complexity of judgment in proximity (*OTB*, 5).

The difficulty of judgment in proximity is not clarified by Levinas who states, “Justice remains justice only, in a society where there is no distinction between those close and those far off, but in which there remains the impossibility of passing by the closest” (*OTB*, 159). And yet, paradoxically, “the other and the third party, my neighbors, contemporaries with one another, put distance between me and the other and the third party” (*OTB*, 157).

While Levinas is not about to give any certain answers to questions about who ought to be the closest neighbor or who should receive priority in proximity, I think there are some ways we can approach this dilemma fruitfully. One way to begin is to release our comprehension of the notion of proximity; proximity in Levinas’s thought is neither spatial nor geometric with regard to others but rather “its absolute and proper meaning presupposes ‘humanity’” (*OTB*, 81–83). Proximity is my a priori responsibility for the neighbor, particularly the neighbor who suffers.

Judgment in proximity is rightly complicated because “the relationship between the neighbor and the third party cannot be indifferent to me when I approach. There must be justice among the incomparable ones.” Proximity is troubled when the third party enters; this is “the limit of responsibility and the birth of the question: What do I have to do with justice?” (*OTB*, 157). For Levinas, “it would be to fail in my first personal-responsibility... were I to ignore the wrongs of the one toward the other because of this responsibility, prior to all judgment, of proximity” (*EN*, 195). In other words, I cannot let my infinite responsibility to the Other — in proximity — keep me from taking informed political action for justice, demanded by the Third. “If proximity ordered me to the other alone,” Levinas suggests, “there would not have been any problem” (*OTB*, 157). But there are problems; for example, in how whiteness theorists justify the politics of our pedagogies — what we do pedagogically when we have historical racial knowledge about what these “incomparable others” have already done to each other.

The question, “Who is responsible?” is unforgettably posed at the end of *Night and Fog*, the 1959 documentary about the Holocaust. Levinas’s response to such a question is, “I am, I, more than all others.” The question we struggle with as teachers should not be “For whom and for what am I responsible?” We are responsible for all. The questions that vex us are: To whom do we attend first and at what cost?

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1. Emmanuel Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 168.

2. *Ibid.*

3. See Sharon Todd, ed., special issue on Levinas and education, *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 22, no. 1 (2003).

4. See Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 74; and Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous: Thinking of the Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 63. These works will be cited in the text as *OTB* and *EN*, respectively, for all subsequent references.

5. See Emmanuel Levinas, “Utopia and Socialism” in *Alerity and Transcendence*, trans. Michael B. Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

6. See Robert Bernasconi, “The Third Party: Levinas on the Intersection of the Ethical and the Political,” *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 30, no. 1 (1999): 76–87.

7. See Emmanuel Levinas, “Transcendence and Height,” in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Peperzak, Critchley, and Bernasconi.

8. Clarence Joldersma, “Pedagogy of the Other: A Levinasian Approach to the Student-Teacher Relationship,” in *Philosophy of Education 2001*, ed. Suzanne Rice (Urbana Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2002), 181–188.

9. Pedagogies that do include the Third but still rely on the primacy of being and reason operate in what might be viewed as a “tyranny of the triad” where the teacher comprehends and controls the political and ethical for the Other and the Third.

10. Emmanuel Levinas, “The Paradox of Morality,” in *The Provocation of Levinas*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (New York: Routledge, 1988), 174.

11. Sharon Todd, *Learning From the Other* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003), 1. This text will be cited as *LFO* in the text for all subsequent references.
12. Levinas, "The Paradox of Morality," 172.
13. Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001), 90.