

Learning from Levinas: The Provocation of Sharon Todd

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Sharon Todd's thought-provoking essay gives sensitive and careful attention to a thinker whose significance for education is very much still to be realized. In what follows I want to explore the provocations of her essay — the vision of education and of the teacher-student relationship she calls us toward — and also, exploiting the double genitive in my title, to provoke her in a number of ways: by pointing to some potential misunderstandings that she will probably want to resist, and by stretching Levinas in ways that she may well not countenance.

Todd's concise account of Levinas's conception of the ethical seems to me exemplary in its lightness of touch, demonstrating possibilities of communication that are indicative of her larger purpose. It is a call to a quality of communication in the teacher-student relationship that is very much her concern. Such a relationship is poles apart from that of the teacher as technologist, efficient deliverer of the curriculum. And the language is remote from the kinds of rhetoric that can take over more enlightened conceptions of education, including education that seeks to do justice to others. The "fine risk" of communication requires attending to the Other as "infinitely unknowable." It is "the self's susceptibility to the Other, not knowledge about the Other, to which education must address itself." This is required if violence to the Other is to be avoided. This is not only a precondition of social justice; it is at the heart of education itself.

A first problem concerns what Todd calls the educational question *par excellence*: this is not what education ought to teach in relation to this or that principle, but what makes education itself a *condition* of ethical practice. It is clear that Levinas wants to place ethics before ontology and the epistemic. But what kind of condition is implied here? Surely, for Levinas, education cannot be a precondition of the ethical, yet this is the way that Todd's formulation might be construed.

A second problem relates to the closeness of her language to ideas that are at odds with Levinas. Thus, while she rightly emphasizes that alterity, rather than subjectivity, is the condition that makes intersubjectivity possible, her words in a later paragraph might be taken to endorse a kind of subjectivism: the Other's fantasies, creativity, emotions "remain hers and hers alone;" an individual "makes cultural meaning for herself." This is something she would surely resist. Part of the problem is the proximity of familiar rhetorical forms. Her sustained talk of the (capitalized) Other will no doubt be seen by some as rhetoric; certainly it can be confused with more casual talk of alterity.

Todd tells her students that to teach well one must teach *in ignorance*. The partial knowledge that one acquires about others can never provide any entry into ethics. When I think I know the Other, I shroud the Other in my own totality. But Todd's ignorance is different from Socrates': it is not a matter of needing more information or a richer cognitive perspective; it is not anything cognitive at all. The

absolute “unknowability” of the Other is different from knowledge and ignorance altogether.

Todd’s analysis comes around to a concern with the centrality of the relation between people — strictly, between teacher and learner. And it does seem then that Levinas does not help very much with such questions as what to teach, or even what education might be for. For Levinas the Other is understood in human terms, excluding the relation both to nonhuman living things, sentient or otherwise, and to nonliving things. Education, it is obvious, normally involves the interaction of teachers and learners in relation to some content, a triadic relation. On this view Levinas’s thought may be significant for the interpersonal relationship, not for the relation to content. I want to draw attention to a potential problem with this interpretation and to suggest a way beyond.

The problem is that emphasis on the quality of the teacher’s interactions with her students may sound like a call for better interpersonal or communication skills. These might be thought to require the development of fairly self-conscious and carefully calculated behaviors. This would be a grotesque distortion of what Todd has in mind. But it is a real possibility of distortion because of the background instrumentalism against which teachers lead their professional lives. When Todd writes, “A shift to recognizing the quality of relations focuses on to what degree the relations we *actually* engage in (rather than identifying what type we *should* engage in) enhance or compromise the persons involved,” I am left thinking that something important is being said but unclear about how much this implies in practice. Is this not what decent people do anyway? Levinas might be happy to acknowledge this. But this mutes the significance of the work for education.

Todd’s alternative title, “Learning from Levinas,” however, may license us to explore something of where learning goes when it takes off *from* or moves *from* Levinas, where it does not stop with Levinas but is still very much in the draft of his thought. I want to try to stretch Levinas by drawing out some themes in the later Heidegger, a philosopher in relation to whom Levinas is both near and very far.

Heidegger moves away from the direct focus on Being itself in favor of various formulations: the fourfold of earth, sky, gods, and mortals; the worlding of the world; the thinging of the thing. Heidegger’s conception of Being, from *Being and Time* onwards, is sometimes read in a way that aligns it with pragmatism. We encounter things — the ready-to-hand — in the manner of equipment; they are used in the light of purposes we are moving toward (realizable ends); this context of use gives them their meaning. But a reading of this through the lens of the later work enables us to see Heidegger as moving towards a conception of Being that is very different — a conception, I am inclined to say, that is more religious, though without the cosmological baggage that this might be taken otherwise to imply. The being of the thing is understood as in some sense spectral. In this it is close to the idea of the given and the gift, perhaps also to the “gift of ethicity.” Heidegger’s piety towards Being is at the heart of Levinas’s reaction against him: it is Levinas’s conviction that the focus on the ontological stands in the way of ethics — distorts ethics and subjugates it, and ultimately brings horrors in its train. But Heidegger’s reticence

about the *naming* of Being in the later work and the reverential relation to things suggests possibilities of understanding that escape the metaphysics of presence.

Levinas's Other, conversely, is not divorced from books, traditions, things in the world. Nor are things neutral objects encountered by subjectivities that subsequently confer value on them: they always come to be for us within ways of understanding that are already human. Such understanding *lets the world be*. And the suggestion of the subjunctive mood disrupts the predominance of the indicative in our theoretical grasp of these things. Whereas for Heidegger there is a mutual appropriation of man and world, Levinassian responsibility would deepen this relation in an irrevocable asymmetry.

There are thinkers such as Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch for whom a kind of reverential attention to things is very important in education. Whether what is studied is a geometrical proof, a work of art, an event in history, or a chemical compound, the learner is confronted with something that goes beyond her acquisitive grasp. It is too much to say that education must always be like this, but teaching and learning can be so designed as to keep open possibilities of this kind. Such experience requires the development of habits of attention with a sense of the intractability of the thing, sometimes of its mystery. In short it requires a kind of receptiveness.

Whether or not Levinas can be stretched in this way, there are implications here for what should be done in education. These are not, to be sure, of a kind that could be operationalized in a tidy recipe, but they should change what is taught and learned in schools in practical ways. Aims such as rational autonomy or self-esteem would come to seem compromised with egocentricity. Against an excessive emphasis on propositional knowledge and skills there would be a new recognition of the value of knowledge by acquaintance, perhaps including knowing by heart. Transparency and ease of use in curriculum materials would give way to more writerly, sometimes classic texts. I am suggesting that there might be a continuity of a kind between the receptiveness that such an education would promote and the responsibility to the Other that is at the heart of ethics. These are gestures, beyond those that Todd wishes to make, toward the practicalities that such an ethics might imply.