

“The Tears That a Civil Servant Cannot See” —  
Rethinking Civic Virtue in Democratic Education:  
A Levinasian Perspective

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The relationship between democratic life and the type of education that can best support it has been a steady topic of discussion amongst educators. According to a review article in the ERIC Digest, for example, the 1990s in particular witnessed a marked increase in the global circulation of information about the role of educational theory and practice for democracy.<sup>1</sup> From nine of the most important “Global Trends” in “Civic Education for Democracy” that the article describes, the first and most influential involves the bringing together of the three components of civic “knowledge,” “skills,” and “virtues.” The commonly held assumption at work here is that it is necessary to provide students not only with basic information about how governments and societies function, but also opportunities to practice behaviors like independent thinking and dialogue, while encouraging what the review calls “traits of character,” such as civility and self-discipline. Illustrations of this approach are easy to find in diverse education literatures devoted to democracy and citizenship education.

For instance, in the foreword to *Preparing for Citizenship: Teaching Youth to Live Democratically* by Ralph Mosher, Robert Kenny, and Andrew Garrod, Thomas Lickona argues that certain experiences can help students understand and value democracy and develop political skills, aid cognitive, moral, and social development, and improve the culture of the school.<sup>2</sup> Starting from this point the authors themselves ask, “Can the techniques of democracy be taught?” and proceed to share the structural changes and challenges that four schools underwent to make their classrooms more democratic. Their conclusion is that education for democracy requires direct experience with specific processes and values so that students can learn to work and live together in democratic societies. In *Education and the Culture of Democracy: Early Childhood Practice*, a text explicitly directed toward educators living in Central and Eastern Europe, Kirsten Hansen, Roxanne Kaufmann, and Steffen Saifer claim to offer “the tools of attitude, behavior, and instructional strategy,” to prepare young people for democratic life.<sup>3</sup> Based on the child-centered classroom, these tools include providing opportunities for student self-initiative and self-efficacy, active play where children are given a variety of resources to help them build community in the classroom, and forging strong links with families and the wider community. The authors contend that their recommended practices help students to better understand both themselves and others and become life-long learners and stewards of a hopefully more compassionate world. Finally, for Patrice Meyer-Bisch in her comparative UNESCO study, the three most important “dynamics” of democracy are human rights, organized dialogue, and the respect for creativity.<sup>4</sup> Schools committed to this view of democracy, she continues, ought to

teach general ideas, prepare students for interdisciplinarity, and draw attention to the gap between the ideal and the real.

The strategy that all of these authors pursue may best be described as articulating just the right balance between civic knowledge, skills, and virtues. While there may be disagreement about what specific items in each category are most relevant in today's world, the overall approach in terms of dividing civic education into equal and reciprocating parts is commonly regarded as fundamentally sound, and even necessary, to prepare students for democratic life.

My goal in this essay is to examine the third component in this framework, virtue, from a Levinasian point of view. The initial motivation for this came partly from the ERIC article itself, which lists "respect for the worth and dignity of each person, civility, integrity, self-discipline, tolerance, compassion, and patriotism," as democratic virtues that continue to play a prominent role in curricula.<sup>5</sup> I was struck by how different these "traits of character" are, and genuinely surprised to find tolerance and particularly patriotism listed, notions that I consider problematic at best.

Emmanuel Levinas's view of the relationship between societal peace and the ethical demands of responsibility challenges this popular understanding of the role of virtue in democratic education. Specifically, through my reading of Levinas, I will demonstrate that rather than a third component which sits equally alongside of knowledge and skills, virtue has moral priority and should be understood not as "traits of character" but as denoting the foundational role of ethical subjectivity in the peaceful state. In support of this interpretation, in the second section I will address what Levinas himself regarded as the most common and serious objection to his ethical philosophy, that it cannot adequately address so-called "real-life" ethical and political problems. My argument there is that while it may indeed be accurately described as utopian, it is not only none the worse for that, but it is this very quality that can help educators cultivate a democratic pathos that can enhance our everyday reflections and decisions as responsible teachers and human beings.

#### THE INDISPENSABILITY OF SUBJECTIVITY TO CIVIC LIFE

As a point of departure, consider the following interview excerpt, worth quoting at length. In reply to a question about the tensions involved in criticizing the necessary state, Levinas describes the role of an ethics of subjectivity this way:

For me, the negative element, the element of violence in the State, in the hierarchy, appears even when the hierarchy functions perfectly, when everyone submits to universal ideas. There are cruelties which are terrible because they proceed from the necessity of the reasonable Order. There are, if you like, the tears that a civil servant cannot see: the tears of the Other. In order for things to work and in order for things to develop an equilibrium, it is absolutely necessary to affirm the infinite responsibility of each, for each, before each....it is necessary to defend subjectivity....subjective protest is not received favorably on the pretext that its egoism is sacred but because the I alone can perceive the "secret tears" of the Other, which are caused by the functioning — albeit reasonable — of the hierarchy. Consequently, subjectivity is indispensable for assuring this very nonviolence that the State searches for in equal measure....I am *for* the I, as existence in the first person, to the extent that its ego-ity signifies an infinite responsibility for an Other. Which amounts to saying that

it is as if substance of the I is made of saintliness. It is perhaps in this sense that Montesquieu rested democracy upon virtue.<sup>6</sup>

This rich and compact answer deserves a slow and deliberate analysis, especially since Levinas's ethics is not a virtue ethics in the conventional sense of being derived from the philosophy of Aristotle. My strategy in this section is therefore to utilize this quote to sketch a fuller understanding of democratic virtue from a distinctly Levinasian stance.

I want to start with Levinas's claim in the quote that there are "tears which a civil servant cannot see." In *Totality and Infinity* he describes Western civilization as "hypocritical" since it is "attached both to the True and the Good, henceforth antagonistic."<sup>7</sup> The history of this hypocrisy in Western societies, a history marked by imperialism and violence on an unthinkable scale, reveals for Levinas the dominance of the "True" as a totalizing thought, one "which moves in a being without human traces," where "the unknown immediately becomes familiar," and "everything is absorbed, sunk, buried in sameness."<sup>8</sup> This capacity of thought to aggressively thematize and thereby smother otherness has been a constant theme in Levinas's writings. Hence the functional "universal ideas" of the state blind the metaphorical civil servant to the "tears," or suffering, of particular others. On Levinas's reading this is not exceptional. As he makes clear, these cruelties often occur even when the state functions properly, and has sadly resulted in "a long indifference to the sorrows of an entire world."<sup>9</sup>

Of course for Levinas the otherness of the Other, as that which cannot be thematized by being reduced to a concept or a scheme, takes on vital significance here. Since "infinity or the transcendent does not let itself be assembled,"<sup>10</sup> then "the epiphany of the human face"<sup>11</sup> defies all attempts to name and control it. More than this, it acts as "a penetration of the crust,"<sup>12</sup> an opening or fissure, "as if the other person were sought — or approached — in an otherness where no administration could ever reach."<sup>13</sup> The failure of the organs of the state, rather than being purely negative, shifts the burden of what it means to ethically approach the Other to the quality of response that each singular person can provide: "The presence of persons who, for once, do not fade away into words, get lost in technical questions, freeze up into institutions or structures."<sup>14</sup>

If the logic of the state as totalizing thought is blind to the particular suffering of others, and the face of the Other is that which opens up the very possibility of ethics, how shall we understand what this entails? "I speak of responsibility as the essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity," claims Levinas, and he has described this in different yet complementary ways.<sup>15</sup> For instance, he writes, "If we call a situation where my freedom is called in question conscience, association or the welcoming of the Other is conscience."<sup>16</sup> It is clear that a personal relationship is at stake here, in that to associate with or welcome another person requires a level of direct contact.

In the quoted excerpt, however, Levinas also speaks about an "equilibrium" between the functioning of the state and this responsibility. It is therefore important to stress that although the state has the potential to be cruel, even when it is working

properly, and that individual responsibility for the Other is required, the state is still necessary and that it is from within a condition of harmony or balance that the peaceful state emerges. Can we make greater sense of this relationship between the necessarily thematizing operations of the state and the role of responsibility?

When Levinas writes that “the face to face remains an ultimate situation,”<sup>17</sup> he is not only referring to the primacy of ethics but also to the foundation of most everything else. For instance, Levinas asks, “Should not the fraternity that is in the motto of the republic be discerned in the prior non-indifference of one for the other?”<sup>18</sup> This rhetorical question gives non-indifference priority, and Levinas gives us a concrete example of how this works: “My freedom and my rights, before manifesting themselves in my opposition to the freedom and rights of the other person, will manifest themselves precisely in the form of responsibility, in human fraternity.”<sup>19</sup> Rather than conflict with the rights of the other person as a starting point for society, our rights make demands on us before this in fraternity. “Morality accomplishes human society. Can we ever gauge its miracle?”<sup>20</sup> asks Levinas, “responding ‘here I am’ (*me voici*) to the demand that summons me. This is, without doubt, the secret of sociality.”<sup>21</sup>

Thus the offices of the state, such as courts and other institutions, derive their authority from our responsibility for the Other, from the “depths of that initial charity.” Thus judgment and comparison are necessary for society to function, but the key for Levinas is that they exist because of the “initial charity,” or responsibility for the other. He even goes so far as to insist that “it is in terms of the relation to the Face or of me before the other that we can speak of the legitimacy or illegitimacy of the state,” defining a totalitarian state as one “in which the interpersonal relation is impossible, in which it is directed in advance.”<sup>22</sup>

I hope it is clearer now what Levinas means when he claims that “peace is a concept that goes beyond purely political thinking,”<sup>23</sup> in being “the problem of the humanity within us,”<sup>24</sup> the thrust of his analysis on peace being, he claims in another context, “to insist on the irreplaceable function of the I in a world of peace.”<sup>25</sup> Levinas thus derives the burden of working for a world of peace from our responsibility for the Other. For him such a “good” peace, as opposed to a “bad” one that originates in a Hobbesian “war of all against all” that finds its only limit in power, starts from our irreducible responsibility for the Other, from a charity, a welcoming, that entails debate and dialogue, institutions and courts, to promote and maintain nonviolent relationships in the state.

The key point that I want to highlight in this section is the vital role of subjectivity in this peaceful state. For it is in the context of our singular responsibility for the Other, which calls our freedom into question, that each of us is asked to notice the specific pain or “tears” of particular others, a pain that societal institutions, by their very demand for generalizing norms and regulations, cannot notice. This is the basis of what Levinas, in the quoted excerpt, refers to as a “subjective protest” for the Other, a personal involvement against injustice that maintains a balance between the ordered functions of the state and its cruelties.

## ON UTOPIAN THINKING AND THE DEMANDS OF DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION

To afford subjectivity such a robust role in civic education for democracy inevitably leads to the “so what” question and a request for an articulation of some definite implications. In other words, a thoughtful person might now ask “why exactly should we see virtue and its role in democratic education in this Levinasian way?” The problem of trying to be clear about the difference his philosophy would make in specific circumstances was one that Levinas himself struggled to address.

In an interview with Richard Kearney, for example, in response to the claim that “your analysis of God as an impossibility of being or being-present would seem to suggest that the ethical relation is entirely utopian and unrealistic,” Levinas says:

This is the great objection to my thought. “Where did you ever see the ethical relation practiced?” people say to me. I reply that its being utopian does not prevent it from investing our everyday actions of generosity or goodwill towards the other: even the smallest and most commonplace gestures, such as saying “after you” as we sit at the dinner table or walk through a door, bears witness to the ethical. This concern for the other remains utopian in the sense that it is always “out of place” (*u-topos*) in this world, always other than the “ways of the world”; but there are examples of it in the world. I remember meeting once with a group of Latin American students, well versed in the terminology of Marxist liberation and terribly concerned by the suffering and unhappiness of their people in Argentina. They asked me rather impatiently if I had ever actually witnessed the utopian rapport with the other that my ethical philosophy speaks of. I replied, “Yes, indeed — here in this room.”<sup>26</sup>

Rather than offer a counter to the charge that his ideas are “utopian and unrealistic,” Levinas interestingly accepts this criticism, even recognizing it as both legitimate and serious. He nonetheless defends his utopian or “out of place” idea that we are responsible for the Other, on the grounds that it can still inform the day-to-day moments of our lives, and that, rare though it may be, it can exist in our everyday actions in the world. Levinas is probably correct that the expressed frustration on the part of these students is the result of the distance they perceive between their concrete political and social commitments and this utopian quality of his philosophy. I can even imagine some of them rolling their eyes at the claim that saying “after you” at dinner and “mere” dialogue are examples of the ethical relation of being-for that Levinas has so often described. And yet I can also appreciate how such small acts and the possibility of constructive dialogue should not be taken for granted and that too often in the world there seems to be so little “bearing witness to the ethical.”

What makes Levinas’s defense of utopian thinking here even more remarkable is that he was able to maintain it even though he had no real optimism that it was achievable in any final sense. In response, for instance, to a question about the disparity between his views on ethics and the extraordinary violence and hatred in the world, Levinas says “I am not at all certain that the ‘otherwise than being’ is guaranteed to triumph,” and, he continues, “I have no illusions; most of the time, things happen that way and it will probably recur... I have no illusions about it and I have no optimistic philosophy for the end of history.”<sup>27</sup> A reader might not be blamed for being surprised and perhaps even disappointed by such a response, which they may regard as a harsh qualification from a thinker so deeply committed to the idea of responsibility for the Other.

And yet Levinas's insistence that his philosophy can "invest" even the smallest moments of our lives with ethical significance continues to linger. In another interview situation, for example, he tries to make clearer what his overall work has been about when he says:

Is my discourse deficient in concern with concrete reality? Does all this metaphysics of mine have the ability to solve actual ethical problems?...it is not my purpose to moralize or to improve the conduct of our generation ....I have been speaking about that which stands behind practical morality.<sup>28</sup>

To see Levinas's notion of responsibility in this way is not to regard it as a description of how the world actually is, measured against the criterion of accuracy, but as a clarion call to what is present, albeit too often deeply buried and obscured. Behind our day-to-day actions lies a call to be responsible for the Other, a summons that founds objectivity and justice, that entails courts and institutions, and that balances the inevitable weighing and comparing that is part of the day-to-day working of society to hopefully engender a society of nonviolence, a place where we can live together in peace. We can agree with Levinas when he says that "I don't say that all is for the best, and the idea of progress doesn't seem to me very reliable,"<sup>29</sup> and yet still struggle for a better world *for the Other*.

So while Levinas's thought may not have the sort of reach and programmatic quality that a Marxist theory of liberation provides, and although it is vulnerable, as he admits, to the charge of being utopian, it does not follow that his thinking is too far removed from the depressingly common brutality of everyday life throughout the world. For example, in *Altared Ground: Levinas, Violence, and History*, Brian Schroeder announces that the aim of his work is nothing less than "to suggest a notion of subjectivity that is not grounded in violence," and he concludes with the assertion that "The task ahead for thinking, for action, is the *embodiment* of the saying in the said, of the continual production of divinity. There is no absolute assurance; but there is also no final limit on the horizon of possibility."<sup>30</sup> On this view the ethical meaning of subjectivity, according to Schroeder, is to think and act so that being-for is embodied as a continual possibility in everyday life.

But we may still remain unconvinced, and wonder again how we might best live toward this "horizon of possibility." In one of his later essays, "Beyond Dialogue," Levinas gestures beyond what he had so often said about the meaning of ethics, suggesting that what is needed is:

a new attitude, a paradigm of the one that seems to me to be missing in the perfect deductions of the sublime doctrinaires of progress: the search for a proximity beyond the ideas exchanged, a proximity that lasts even after dialogue has become impossible. Beyond dialogue, a new maturity and earnestness, a new gravity and a new patience, and, if I may express it so, *maturity and patience for insoluble problems*.<sup>31</sup>

Seen this way, to criticize Levinas's thinking as utopian and unrealistic would be to maintain the misleading and even dangerous assumption that ethical problems can be finally resolved and that any philosophy that fails to deliver at every turn is somehow inadequate and to be found wanting. In the context of civic education for democracy, the framework that divides it into three reciprocating parts would be

thereby vulnerable to the counter charge of complacency. This criticism would especially gain in momentum if this approach to civic education over-confidently assumed that by such an approach students would be completely prepared to meet the ethical demands of democratic life.

I would like to close by suggesting that perhaps the most important thing we can learn here from Levinas is that all we can hope for in terms of civic education is to humbly cultivate a democratic pathos, where with a tinge of melancholy we accept that to live and teach ethically, which means to do so responsibly, is to be for the Other beyond the bounds of good intentions and reciprocity, while we hold to the utopian conviction that despite the violence of the world an ethical metaphysics can still invest our actions for the better. If Levinas is right that humanity is the “*Being that weeps*,”<sup>32</sup> then civic virtue in education for democracy should be based on an ethics of subjectivity conceptualized as an infinite responsibility that “bears witness” to the “weeping” of others. There are no guarantees, but civic virtue conceived in this Levinasian way will remain the highest and best thing about being a human being in the fragile political world we share.

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1. John J. Patrick, *Global Trends in Civic Education for Democracy: ERIC Digest* (Bloomington, Ind.: ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, 1997), <http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/detail?accno=ED410176>.

2. Ralph Mosher, Robert A. Kenny, Jr., and Andrew Garrod, *Preparing for Citizenship: Teaching Youth to Live Democratically* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1994), 1.

3. Kirsten A. Hansen, Roxanne K. Kaufmann, and Steffen Saifer, *Education and the Culture of Democracy: Early Childhood Practice* (Washington, D.C.: Children’s Resources International, 1997), 1.

4. Patrice Meyer-Bisch, ed., *Culture of Democracy: A Challenge for Schools* (Paris: UNESCO, 1995).

5. Patrick, “Global Trends in Civic Education for Democracy,” 1.

6. Emmanuel Levinas, “Transcendence and Height,” in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, eds. Adrian T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 23.

7. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 24.

8. Emmanuel Levinas, “Ideology and Idealism,” in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Seán Hand (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 240 and 245.

9. Emmanuel Levinas, “Peace and Proximity,” in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, eds. Peperzak, Critchley, and Bernasconi, 163.

10. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1981), 161.

11. Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, trans. Michael B. Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 171.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Levinas, “Ideology and Idealism,” 242-3.

14. Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, 87.

15. Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Phillippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 95.

16. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 100.

17. *Ibid.*, 81.

18. Emmanuel Levinas, *Outside the Subject*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1994), 125.
19. *Ibid.*
20. Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 9.
21. Emmanuel Levinas, "Bad Conscience and the Inexorable," in *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard A. Cohen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 39.
22. Emmanuel Levinas, *On Thinking-of-the-Other: Entre Nous*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 104 and 105.
23. Emmanuel Levinas, "Politics After!" in *Levinas Reader*, ed. Hand, 283.
24. Levinas, "Peace and Proximity," 162.
25. Levinas, "Transcendence and Height," 24.
26. Emmanuel Levinas and Richard Kearney, "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas," in *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Cohen, 32–3.
27. *Ibid.*, 114.
28. Levinas, "Ideology and Idealism," 247.
29. Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, 171.
30. Brian Schroeder, *Altered Ground: Levinas, History, and Violence* (New York: RoutledgePraeger, 1996), 1 and 147 (emphasis in original).
31. Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, 87 (emphasis in original).
32. Asbjorn Aarnes, "End or Fulfilment of Phenomenology? On the Philosophy of Levinas," in *Closeness: An Ethics*, eds. Harald Jodalen and Arne Johan Vetlesen (Oslo, Norway: Scandinavian University Press, 1997), 68 (emphasis in original).

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