

Levinas and Ethical Agency: Toward a Reconsideration of Moral Education

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INTRODUCTION

In an attempt to address the apparent paucity of empathy and the so-called “moral decay” in the United States and Canada (evidenced in part by increasing incidents of violence among children) recent efforts in moral education have focused on mapping and cultivating the capacity for empathy and the other-regarding emotions in children.¹ This approach to moral education is also consistent with attempts in psychology, sociology, and philosophy to understand moral motivation by way of studying the heroic altruism of modern day saints and heroes, most notably the rescuers of Jews during the Nazi Holocaust.² Curricular initiatives in this regard have ranged from the values clarification programs of the 1970s and 80s (based on theories of psycho-social development) to the recent resurgence of an Aristotelian-based character education, similar to programs last popular in North America in the 1920s. However, these approaches have met with only limited success. The apparent moral relativism of values clarification was a significant factor in its demise; and studies of youngsters who perform morally desirable behaviors while in the presence of authorities, but not in their absence, lend support to critics who charge that the behavioral focus of character education does not necessarily reflect a shift in moral motivation.³ Thus, I propose that in order for moral education to effect the deeper kind of transformation it seeks, attention ought to be shifted away from an emphasis on decision-making and moral behavior toward a reconceptualization of moral agency itself — that is, to a critique of the foundational assumptions regarding subjectivity that underpin even apparently diverse curricula.

In a similar vein, Arne Vetlesen and others have argued that it is specifically the prevailing modernist conception of subjectivity, with its attendant prioritization and privileging of the autonomous subject, that poses one of the most serious obstacles to empathic agency.⁴ While most research on the lives and actions of the rescuers of Jews points to a commitment to essential sameness and the notion of a common humanity as the determining motivational factor in heroic altruism, I contend that the rescuers’ moral consciousness reflects instead a more radical departure from the traditional understandings of moral agency itself.⁵ Emmanuel Levinas’s ethics, which is based on an inversion of modernist subjectivity, seems to me particularly promising in terms of attempting to reconceptualize moral agency outside the prevailing model and is thus also, I suggest, a promising framework for reconsidering moral education.

LEVINAS ON SUBJECTIVITY

After working for more than 20 years on Husserlian and Heideggerian phenomenology, a critical turn in Levinas’s own thought came in 1951 with the publication of his essay, “Is Ontology Fundamental?” in which he critiques Heidegger and ultimately rejects the traditional Western appeal to ontology as first philosophy.⁶

Levinas's argument rests primarily on the charge that Western ontology in general, and Heidegger's ontology in particular, is ultimately and inescapably egoistic in its conception of the subject as a being whose main concern is its own being. Levinas counters with an argument for ethics as first philosophy and with a concomitant reconceptualization of subjectivity as "pre-ontological" intersubjectivity — a position that grounds all of his later work.⁷

In order to get a sense here of Levinas's radical and controversial position regarding subjectivity, set out first in *Totality and Infinity* and developed more fully in *Otherwise than Being*, I shall frame my discussion around part of a dialogue he had with Richard Kearney in 1986.⁸ In that conversation, Kearney asks whether Levinas's ethical thought is an attempt to preserve some form of subjectivity in light of the recent structuralist and poststructuralist debates in Continental thought concerning the "disappearance" or "demise" of the subject.⁹

In response, Levinas rejects "the idea of a subject who would be a substantial or mastering center of meaning, an idealist, self-sufficient *cogito*"; and, in contrast to the Western emphasis on presence and sovereign autonomy, he offers a conception of subjectivity wherein agency is seen as a radical kind of passivity.¹⁰ For him, one is "subject to" the other in an ethical relationship that precedes the ontological constitution of subjectivity in its more familiar sense.¹¹ However, from the standpoint of traditional metaphysics, such a position cannot hold, for it posits subjectivity as an apparently negative "construct" — that is, as a break with or deliverance from Being itself.¹² In essence, then, Levinas inverts the traditional "no other-than-self without a self" for a claim to "no self without another who summons it to responsibility."¹³

Admittedly scandalous by traditional standards, this inversion of subjectivity parallels Jacques Derrida's project of deconstructing the metaphysics of presence by calling attention to the absences and gaps — to what philosophy has historically concealed, forbidden, or repressed in order to remain a philosophy of presence.¹⁴ For, just as deconstruction reveals every totality (thing, concept) to be founded on that which it excludes, so too, for Levinas, the other (or what would be considered "excess" by reductive standards) is a precondition for subjectivity, and not derivative of it: the other is the very bedrock of selfhood.¹⁵

ON SIMILARITY, DIFFERENCE, AND THE SPHERE OF MORAL OBLIGATION

Connected to this emphasis on the other, Levinas's ethical subjectivity "dispenses with the idealizing subjectivity of ontology, which reduces everything to itself."¹⁶ Instead of the colonizing desire for homogeneity, Levinas claims that the ethical is characterized by an event of nonsubsumptive relation with the other.¹⁷ The salient point here is that Levinas's ethics resists any appeal to sameness, even in its thinnest (hence most inclusive) sense, such as the notion of a common humanity cited in several prominent studies of altruistic motivation.¹⁸

Regarding altruism, the work of Kristen Monroe et al. bears special mention here in terms of its problematic relation to Levinas's position.¹⁹ In an attempt to understand moral motivation, Monroe undertook extensive studies of Gentiles who rescued Jews during the Nazi Holocaust. The "extreme" altruism exhibited by the

rescuers has been deemed saintly or heroic (if not super-human) by traditional Western moral standards, because of the extent to which the agent's own needs and rights, even to existence, were suspended in the interest of another.²⁰ Monroe's research reveals only one common motivational characteristic among the rescuers: a recognition of the essential sameness of all human beings (regardless of familial, political, religious, or national ties), and a self-perception as part of a common humanity.²¹ Consequently, Monroe suggests, the rescuers' moral identity, as human beings in relation with all other human beings, both limited their perceived options and demanded of them an altruistic response when confronted with the suffering of another.²²

Prevailing models of morality typically base moral rights and duties on some form of proximity — that is, on an identifiable sphere of moral obligation determined by one's relationship to the other.²³ And, despite an apparent departure from such models, I contend that Monroe's findings ultimately uphold this condition, albeit in a significantly extended sense. By appealing to the notion of a common humanity and a concomitant self-perception, Monroe still characterizes the rescuers' sense of ethical responsibility as delineated by a circle of proximal relation — in their case, the shared condition of being human.

On this ground I find her analysis insufficient and potentially morally limiting, for the notion of a common humanity already rests on a (historically and culturally constituted) conception of what it is to be human.²⁴ The danger, on my view, is that the very condition of perceiving the other as a human being like oneself, which Monroe cites as the key determining factor in the rescuers' moral motivation, could also arguably be cited as a motivational factor in Hitler's genocidal project itself. In other words, while it was on the basis of perceived similarity between the rescuers and the Jews that the rescuers recognized their obligation to respond in an altruistic manner, it could also be claimed that it was a parallel *lack* of perceived similarity that permitted the Nazi perpetrators and sympathizers to justify the atrocities of that regime. For, on the basis of perceived similarity, moral obligation is only necessarily extended to those persons and to situations into which one is able imaginatively to project oneself; and one need only to deny the other possession of the requisite set of "human" qualities in order to reasonably deny his or her status as a human being worthy of moral concern. My point here is that a conception of ethics and moral obligation that appeals primarily to a notion of perceived similarity — no matter how expansive — can have both morally laudable and contemptible results, and is thus finally inadequate.

In contrast to Monroe's position, Levinas rejects the appeal to sameness and, to repeat, the "idealizing subjectivity of ontology, which reduces everything to itself," declaring instead that the other cannot be known by the usual categories of perception.²⁵ Rather, he says, we have to find "another kinship" — one that will enable us to conceive of the difference between oneself and the other in a way which preserves the other's alterity and resists oppression and subsumption of any kind.²⁶

Now, whether a fully fleshed out ethics based on the notion of a common humanity would finally (that is, in practice) be incompatible with a Levinas's

approach is an inquiry that warrants study beyond the scope of this essay. However, on one point, at least, there seems to be agreement: both Monroe's ethical identity construct theory and Levinas's conception of ethical subjectivity resist a conception of other-regarding moral conduct as the result of free-will or volition.²⁷ For Monroe, ethical action flows naturally from one's sense of self in relation to others. She writes, "the prime force behind ethical acts is not conscious choice but rather deep-seated intuitions, predispositions, and habitual patterns of behavior related to [one's] central identity."²⁸ And, on Levinas's view, one is responsible for the other without having taken on that responsibility — as she puts it, "whether accepted or refused, whether knowing or not knowing how to assume it, whether able or unable to do something concrete for the Other."²⁹

Yet, despite their shared rejection of altruism as the result of free choice, the incommensurable difference between the two approaches, as I understand them, appears at a more fundamental level. Monroe sees the perception of responsibility for the other as an aspect of the agent's ethical identity, an attribute (perhaps a "natural" predisposition to benevolence) of the already-constituted subject. But, for Levinas, responsibility for the other is the very nature of subjectivity itself. One is responsible for the other because one's existence as an individuated subject derives from one's "pre-ontological" responsibility for the other; and subjectivity — as the ethical relation of one-for-the-other — thus already signifies "total altruism."³⁰ We thus get a glimpse of the scandalous nature of Levinas's claim that there is no pre-ethical subject; it is only by suspending adherence to ontological priority itself that his conception of subjectivity can begin to make sense at all.

ETHICAL AGENCY AND HETERONYM

In terms of subjectivity being bound inescapably to the ethical priority of the other, Levinas states,

The ethical 'I' is subjectivity precisely insofar as it kneels before the other, sacrificing its own liberty to the more primordial call of the other. For me, the freedom of the subject is not the highest or primary value. The heteronomy of our response to the human other, or to God as the absolutely other, precedes the autonomy of our subjective freedom.³¹

It might seem here that Levinas is not really talking about subjectivity at all, but that he is actually suggesting a forfeiture of subjectivity and agency. Earlier in his conversation with Kearney, he rejected the sovereignty of self over other, and he now rejects autonomy in favor of heteronomy.³² On this view, one is defined as a subject — a singular person, an 'I' — precisely because one is exposed to the other and abdicates one's position of centrality in favor of the other.³³ However, I contend that a rejection of the traditional emphasis on individual freedom and autonomy marks neither a forfeiture of subjectivity nor an appeal to slave morality. On the contrary, Levinas's argument for "heteronomous freedom" points to the metaphysical violence and unjustness of an ethics that maintains the priority of self over other and insists on subsuming the other into the same. When subjectivity is viewed as heteronomous responsibility, one becomes an ethical 'I' — a responsible agent — only to the extent to which one agrees to depose or dethrone oneself in favor of the other.³⁴ That is, in a telling statement from Levinas, "I am I in the sole measure that I am responsible."³⁵

Levinas's conception of subjectivity thus holds profound implications for conceptions of moral agency. However, even his more sympathetic reviewers and interlocutors typically point to his insistence on unconditional responsibility for the other as naive and utopian.³⁶ Obviously, the possibility always remains of responding to the appeal of the other by way of violence and hatred, and human lives are filled with moral agonies and ethically intractable situations. Yet, having lost most of his family members in the Holocaust, Levinas is in no way naive as to the potential for human violence and destruction; rather, that experience only strengthened his commitment to the urgent need for a reconceptualization of ethics and subjectivity. And, interestingly, he does not reject the charge of his ethics as utopian. Instead, he says,

[I]ts 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, bear 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 many examples of it in the world.³⁷

In other words, while Levinas's ethics is indeed utopian, and in this sense unrealistic, the impossibility of its full realization does not negate its importance in everyday conduct. As subjects continually constituted by exposure to the other, it is precisely our everyday acts that bear witness to the tension of attempting to live responsively and responsibly between the realities of historical violence and ethical idealism.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION

Given the diversity of North American classrooms today (in terms of race, religion, culture, class, sexuality, language, ability, and so on), Levinas's reconceptualization of subjectivity and ethical agency seems to me particularly promising as a foundation for moral education. Due to constraints of space, I will focus here on just two relevant points from the preceding discussion: his rejection of the tendency within Western thought to reduce all difference to the same, and his insistence on the ethical priority of the other.³⁸

Let us first return briefly to Monroe's research on the rescuers, and her suggestion that their heroic altruism was made possible primarily by their recognition of the essential sameness of all human beings. On this account, moral education would emphasize basic human similarity across differences, and would seek to cultivate empathic perception as the primary precondition for moral judgment. In other words, students would come to see that "I am responsible for the other because he or she is a human being, *like me*." As indicated above, though, a serious limitation of this approach is that ethical responsibility is only necessarily extended to those persons and situations into which one can imaginatively project oneself.

In contrast to Monroe's emphasis on perceived similarity, Levinas insists on respecting and preserving the otherness of the other, and he characterizes the impulse to reduce difference to the same as a kind of metaphysical violence. Thus, moral education on his account would take a very different slant, something like this: "I am responsible for the other *not* because he or she is a human being like me, but because of our original ethical relationship, which situates responsibility outside any kinship or commonality of kind."³⁹

To repeat, recall that Levinas also insists on the ethical priority of the other as a defining characteristic of subjectivity itself — “I am I in the sole measure that I am responsible.”⁴⁰ In traditional models of moral education on the other hand (such as character education), even altruism is tainted with a subtle egoism because the focus is ultimately on the cultivation of the student’s own virtue.⁴¹ However, Levinas’s insistence on the ethical priority of the other precludes such a focus and thus enables a more robust conception of ethical agency than is possible on a traditional, modernist account. This distinction can perhaps best be illustrated by way of an example.

Consider, then, a fairly standard classroom scenario where one of the higher achieving students, Pat, regularly uses spare time during class, at lunch, and sometimes even after school, to help classmates who are struggling to understand the new mathematics curriculum.⁴² Since altruism is one of the virtues most highly regarded by teachers and administrators alike, it is likely that Pat will be rewarded for these acts of apparent personal sacrifice on behalf of others. From a Levinasian standpoint, however, Pat’s suspension of self-interest in order that another student might have the chance to flourish holds no exceptional moral value, and thus merits no particular individual acclaim.

To understand the discrepancy between these two readings, we need first to unpack their respective conceptions of subjectivity, to which, I contend, the moral status of any action refers. To see Pat’s actions as morally laudable (as on the first reading) presumes a conception of subjectivity wherein (like the prevailing modernist view) the self has priority; for, on that account, all actions that are deemed altruistic are *ipso facto* supererogatory. On the other hand, within a conception wherein subjectivity is derivative of an existentially prior intersubjectivity, moral agency is already marked by an inescapable ethical debt to the other, and thus altruism is emptied of its exemplary or virtuous status. Significantly, this latter (Levinassian) conception does not deny that Pat ought to offer such assistance (given, that is, that it is welcomed in the first place); rather, it simply sees it as an unremarkable aspect of one’s prior condition of responsibility to and for the other.

In closing then, I suggest that the challenge to modernist subjectivity which is so much a part of current educational debates, and which perhaps finds its most radical articulation in Levinas’s ethics, ought not to be seen as a threat to responsible morality — much less as a slide to moral relativism — but rather as a call to reconsider moral consciousness, moral agency, and the attendant implications for education.

1. See, for example, Nancy Eisenberg and Janet Strayer, eds., *Empathy and its Development* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982); Carol Gilligan and Grant Wiggins, “The Origins of Morality in Early Childhood Relationships,” in *The Emergence of Morality in Young Children*, ed. Jerome Kagan and Sharon Lamb (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 277-305; and various pieces by Martin Hoffman.

2. See, for example, Lawrence Blum, *Moral Perception and Particularity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Eva Fogelman, *Conscience and Courage: Rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust* (New York: Doubleday, 1994); Kristen R. Monroe, "John Donne's People: Explaining the Differences between Rational Actors and Altruists through Cognitive Frameworks," *Journal of Politics* 53, no. 2 (1991): 394-433; Kristen R. Monroe, *The Heart of Altruism: Perceptions of a Common Humanity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Kristen R. Monroe, Michael C. Barton, and Ute Klingemann, "Altruism and the Theory of Rational Action: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe," *Ethics* 101, no. 1 (1990): 103-22; Samuel P. Oliner and Pearl M. Oliner, *The Altruistic Personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe* (New York: Free Press, 1988); and Arne Vetlesen, *Perception, Empathy, and Judgment: An Enquiry into the Preconditions of Moral Performance* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania University Press, 1994).
3. See, for example, Cornel Hamm's rejection of values clarification in *Philosophical Issues in Education: An Introduction* (New York: Falmer, 1989), chap. 9; and Hugh Hartshorne and Mark May's critique of character education in *Studies in the Nature of Character: Studies in Deceit* (New York: Macmillan, 1928); and *Studies in the Nature of Character: Studies in Self-control* (New York: Macmillan, 1929).
4. Vetlesen, *Perception, Empathy, and Judgment*, 7-10.
5. See especially Monroe et al., "Altruism and the Theory of Rational Action."
6. Emmanuel Levinas, "Is Ontology Fundamental?" in *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 1-10.
7. Adriaan T. Peperzak, ed., *Ethics as First Philosophy: The Significance of Emmanuel Levinas for Philosophy, Literature, and Religion* (New York: Routledge, 1995), xi.
8. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. A. Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969); and *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. A. Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981). Also, Emmanuel Levinas and Richard Kearney, "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas," in *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard A. Cohen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 13-33.
9. Levinas and Kearney, "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas," 27.
10. Ibid.
11. Fabio Ciaramelli, "Levinas's Ethical Discourse Between Individuation and Universality," in *Re-reading Levinas*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 83-105.
12. Ibid.
13. 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.
14. Alan Bass, "Translator's Introduction," in Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), x.
15. Ibid., xvi; Colin Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), 80.
16. Levinas and Kearney, "Dialogue," 27; Davis, *Levinas*.
17. Simon Critchley, "Introduction to 'Is Ontology Fundamental?'" in Peperzak et al., *Emmanuel Levinas*, 1-2; Adriaan Peperzak, *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1993).
18. See footnote 2, above, for some of the better-known studies on the rescuers. While written from a range of disciplinary perspectives, all seek to understand the moral motivation of those who would sacrifice their own well-being — and frequently that of their families — for the well-being of a stranger.
19. Monroe, "John Donne's People," and *The Heart of Altruism*; Monroe et al., "Altruism and the Theory of Rational Action."
20. Blum, *Moral Perception and Particularity*.
21. Monroe et al., "Altruism and the Theory of Rational Action," 119.
22. Ibid.

23. See, for example, John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971) and Michael Slote, *From Morality to Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).
24. This notion of a common humanity is captured succinctly in the claim made by rescuer ‘Tony’ that “every other person is basically you.” Monroe et al., “Altruism and the Theory of Rational Action,” 114.
25. Levinas and Kearney, “Dialogue,” 27.
26. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*; Tina Chanter, *Ethics of Eros: Irigaray’s Rewriting of the Philosophers* (New York: Routledge, 1995).
27. Monroe, *The Heart of Altruism*.
28. Ibid., 217-18.
29. Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, trans., Richrad Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 96-7.
30. Emmanuel Levinas, “Transcendence and Height,” in Peperzak et al., *Emmanuel Levinas*, 18.
31. Levinas and Kearney, “Dialogue,” 27.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid., 26-7; J. Miller, “Deconstruction and Suffering: The Way to the Ethical,” in *Transitions in Continental Philosophy*, eds. Arlene B. Dallery and Stephen H. Watson (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 259-71; Peperzak, *To the Other*.
34. Levinas and Kearney, “Dialogue,” 27.
35. Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 101.
36. See Levinas’s *Otherwise than Being* for a full explication of his “ethic of unconditional responsibility for the other.”
37. Levinas and Kearney, “Dialogue,” 32-33.
38. The erasure of difference, which has historically marked assimilationist policies and practices, is also at the heart of much heated debate in educational circles today around the so-called “emancipatory” discourses of inclusion; however, the details of the controversy are beyond the scope of this essay. See, for example, Elizabeth Ellsworth, “Why Doesn’t This Feel Empowering? Working Through the Oppressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy,” in *Feminisms and Critical Pedagogy*, eds. Carmen Luke and Jennifer Gore (New York: Routledge, 1992), 90-119; bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Leslie Roman and Linda Eyre, eds., *Dangerous Territories: Struggles for Difference and Equality in Education* (New York: Routledge, 1997); and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York: Routledge, 1993).
39. Emmanuel Levinas, *Outside the Subject*, trans., M.B. Smith (London: Athlone, 1993).
40. Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 101.
41. For evidence of this subtle self-focus, see, for example, Richard Curwin, “The Healing Power of Altruism,” *Educational Leadership* 51, no. 3 (1993): 36-39; Alfie Kohn, “Caring Kids: The Role of Schools,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 72, no. 7 (1991): 496-506; and Thomas Lickona, *Educating for Character* (New York: Bantam, 1991).
42. Due to constraints of space, I shall defer a gender analysis of Levinassian ethics to another time, and have therefore intentionally chosen a gender-neutral name for the example here. See Luce Irigaray’s essays on Levinas and the feminine, especially “The Fecundity of the Caress,” in Richard Cohen, *Face to Face with Levinas*, 231-56; and “Questions to Emmanuel Levinas: On the Divinity of Love,” in Bernasconi and Critchley, *Re-reading Levinas*, 130-46. Additionally, see Jacques Derrida’s questioning of Levinas around gender in “Violence and Metaphysics,” in *Writing and Difference*, and his later elaboration of those issues in “At This Very Moment in This Text Here I Am,” in Bernasconi and Critchley, *Re-reading Levinas*, 1-48. For a foundational text on gendered conceptions of moral agency, see Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*.