Levinas: Teaching "Conscience" and the Other

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In this response to Julian Edgoose's essay, I follow up on Levinas's notion of ethics and what he called "conscience." I briefly recall how an increase in ethico-political concern has been seen as a consequence of the loss of our ethical markers and then extend and elaborate on the central explication from Edgoose. Lastly, I consider the suggestions for education he draws from a reading of Levinas, and question whether "conscience" can be taught in the classroom, today, and on whose terms.

In the past years, traditions have been under attack and ideologies have undergone an unprecedented shakedown. We have witnessed a distanciation from what the Enlightenment and the nineteenth century had established. Furthermore, especially since mid-century, sciences and the technology they produce have experienced an unprecedented powerful rise and hegemony. They expanded the frontiers of knowledge, pushing the limits of what we cannot control, leading the (Western) world to believe that perhaps they could free humanity of all boundaries. Our decisions, choices, actions were previously guided by the distinctions we had learned to make, between what was deemed to be "right and wrong," but also between what we could and could not control, and that for which we were and were not responsible. Parallel to the apparent triumph of the sciences one can witness a degradation of culture and education and a proliferation of ignorance, prejudices, and "alternate" beliefs. While the scientific fields grow exponentially, questions of ethics become increasingly pressing. A new problematic is needed, and new ways of thinking. What can the new markers be?

In this contemporary context, Levinas's work has profoundly influenced thought on major questions of metaphysics and ethics, especially as relating to religious experience. One of his major books, *Totality and Infinity*, opposes to the Hegelian rigidity of totalitarianism and closed systems the notion of infinity linked to the idea of God, and it is this notion which Levinas sees as "moral." He questions Hegel's unifying notion, arguing that once we reject the (closed) totality, we can gain the conscience of divine infinity through the space of intersubjectivity.[1] It is this rupture with the obsession of totality which leads him toward acknowledging the other, not as object of relation, but as infinite distance. In his thinking, in order to enter ethics through the space of intersubjectivity — this trace of infinity, this indirect meeting with a transcendental God — one must renounce Hegel.

For Levinas, respect of the other defined as "the face" is the first condition of ethics, and what he calls "the face of the other" is the first relation to it. In face-to-face encounters, he sees, beyond all knowledge, an "elevation" of the ethical order. He writes, "The term ethics always signifies for me the fact of the encounter, of the relation of I to the Other [*autrui*]."[2] It is before the Other and the face of the Other that one can have the pure experience of the other. Levinas sees that as one and the

same with ethics, in as much as one is aware that one is responsible for the other. One seizes infinity and enters ethics the moment one assumes this responsibility of/for the other.

Levinas is no more accepting of Martin Heidegger's ontology than he is of Hegel's dialectics. Again, in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas affirms the primacy of ethics over ontology and any theory of knowledge (which he considered secondary).[3] He acknowledges that "the first pronouncements of Heidegger on fundamental ontology, at that time, promised new philosophical possibilities," but he denounces ontology as "the philosophy of injustice."[4] For him, Heidegger's distinction between subjects and objects is "the most profound thing of *Sein und Zeit*."[5] However, this does not satisfy Levinas, who does not favor the ontological relation (what he sees as an "abstract" relation to Being) and who places ethics and religion before speculative ontology. Being is "man," says Levinas, and it is as "a face" that a human being is accessible. In his view, "[t]here is sainthood in someone's face (*visage*), but most of all, there is sainthood or ethics toward oneself in a stance which encounters a face as face";[6] what he does not accept is that in Heidegger "there is a distinction, [but] there is no separation."[7] The term *Jemeinigkeit* used by Heidegger expresses the fact that *Sein*, *exister*, is always "possessed" by, always the "property" of, someone. However, in Heidegger's notion of *Geworfenheit*, usually translated by dereliction or abandonment, appears the possibility of *Sein*, *exister*, which might occur without a subject — *exister*, without *existant*, *Sein* without *Seiendes*, Being without being.

How is it possible, wonders Levinas, to encounter Being without being? What happens if everything disappears? What is left, he says, is the "*il y a*, there is." And it is by "a vigilance, without possible recourse to slumber, that we are precisely going to characterize this *il y a*, 'there is,' and the way that *exister* has to affirm itself in its own annihilation."[8] He describes this "vigilance" as what makes it impossible to retreat in slumber, to take refuge in "inconscience." This is where the notion of "conscience" appears. "In fact," notes Levinas, "conscience is already constitutive of vigilance. But what characterizes it especially is that it always keeps this possibility to retire 'behind' in order to sleep. Conscience is [also] that power to sleep [to escape reality, responsibility];" he sees this escape as "the very paradox of conscience."[9] The two meanings of "conscience," in French and in English — moral conscience and consciousness as awareness — merge in this notion. In order to develop a moral conscience, one must be vigilant, aware, remain highly conscious and not succumb to slumber or take refuge in sleep.

For Levinas, ethics is connected to this notion of vigilance in the experience of the other, of the relation with/to the other, the "conscience," the awareness that one is responsible for this other, unavoidably. Within this relation, alterity appears as a "non-reciprocal relation." The other is experienced as other not only as *alter ego*, but it is other because "it is what I am not."[10] This intersubjective relation cannot be synthesized; no totality can integrate it. Through this interaction and awareness, the "conscience" of this interaction, Levinas sees the compelling and inescapable emergence of interconnection, of responsibility to/for the other. This understanding

leads to what is called empathy, which Levinas describes as the experience of "substitution" and Edgoose mentions in his essay. It is a compelling call to respond to the other, to be responsible.

For Edgoose, reading Levinas suggests "ways we structure our classrooms to maximize the mutual co-implications of our students …[that is,] peer teaching and other relationships of responsibility." He discusses how Levinas's concept of "conscience is an important part of moral education," although he points out "not the only part." Levinas shows how "conscience" is developed through the encounter face-to-face with the other, how it "grows out of the very nature of interaction," through the responsibility and the respect one must develop for the other as other. Yet how does one teach respect and responsibility in the classroom, in the context of the Western culture? Can "conscience" be taught here, today, and on whose terms?

At this point, when trying to distinguish what can be acted upon and what cannot, I find it helpful to turn to Jürgen Habermas's clear separation between the viewpoint of concrete ethical life, and that of moral issues. He sees the latter as focusing on the universal, therefore effecting "a universal breaking of barriers among individual perspectives."[11] He distinguishes questions of moral issues which can be discussed and about which decisions can be formulated after developing an argument, and questions of ethics, which are a matter of preference and subjectivity. He argues for a "deontological, cognitivist, formalist and universalist moral."[12] It is deontological in as much as it deals with questions of foundation and prescriptive validity of obligations or norms, and cognitivist where it sees the possibility of truth when responding to practical questions. It becomes formalist or procedural when it simply attempts to justify moral norms; and when the structures of communication exceed the narrow limits of cultural space and time, it is universalist. Thus the existential question of "How to live?" becomes the deontological question of "Under which conditions is a norm valid?"

In education, no matter how terms are problematized, decisions on "right and wrong" are never clear-cut. Although authors like Levinas cannot bring easy answers for the classroom — nor should they — engaging with their thought can help educators raise questions, gain a sharper awareness of the issues, articulate problems more clearly, and work toward a more ethical re-thinking of education. The arguments formed in their works cannot be reduced to statements used to talk about easy solutions for schooling. Reading these texts in the context of education actually calls for an engagement of their authors' very forms of reasoning with educational issues. This approach has a chance to engage a thoughtful reader in some re-thinking of education, while analyzing previous assumptions, especially when discussing ethics, the moral, and conscience.

1. See Emmanuel Levinas, *Éthique et infini: dialogues avec Philippe Nemo* (Paris: Fayard, 1982), 70; see this as *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985).

2. Levinas, *Autrement que savoir* (Paris: Osiris, 1988), 28.

3. See also Levinas, *Autrement qu'être; ou au-delà de l'Essence* (The Hague: Martin Nijhoff, 1974; Paris: Livre de Poche "Biblio Essais," 1991); see this as *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*,trans. A. Lingis (The Hague: Martin Nijhoff, 1981; Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1988).

4. Levinas, *Le temps et l'autre* (Paris: Quadridge/Presses Universities de France, [1979] 1991), 12; see this as *Time and the Other* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1997).

5. Levinas, *Le temps et l'autre*, 24.

6. In François Poirié, *Emmanuel Levinas, Qui Êtes-Vous?* (Lyon: La Manufacture, 1987), 95.

7. Levinas, *Le temps et l'autre*, 24.

8. Ibid., 27.

9. Ibid., 30.

10. Ibid.

11. Jürgen Habermas, *De L'Éthique de la discussion* (Paris: Editions de Cerf, 1991-1992), 139.

12. Ibid.