VULNERABILITY AND SALVATION: LEVINAS AND ETHICAL TEACHING

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Over the last twenty-five years the work of Emmanuel Levinas has been taken up by philosophers in North America and more recently by educators. A central theme in Levinas’s writings is the way in which ontology reduces Otherness. François Raffoul (2005) offers this helpful summary, “Ontology, the thinking of Being, as it has defined the entirety of Western philosophy from Parmenides to Heidegger, is a thinking of the Same, a thinking which reduces otherness to the Same by the very power of its theoretical comprehensiveness...In the traditional philosophical correlation between Knowledge and Being, knowledge represents, as Levinas explained in the 1982 lecture Ethics as First Philosophy ‘an activity which appropriates and comprehends the alterity of the known’” (p. 138). The intentional subject appropriates or comprehends the object. In this dual relationship Otherness is compromised. Furthermore, Levinas argues that the self’s action of knowing creates an endless succession of identical presents. Hence, Levinas refers to the self as “the Same.” This endless succession of presents, or “Time of the I,” does not pass smoothly. It is full of stops and starts; the self must return to itself—re-present itself—because existence threatens to repossess the ground it has laid claim to. As a result, “the Time of the I” offers no genuine future. When being is understood in terms of the self, time is a prison and every instant is a returning to the Same.

From a Levinasian standpoint, the self cannot be creative. She cannot of herself bring about anything new. It is because of the suffocating time of the I that the self desires the Other; it desires something that exceeds its grasp completely. Since time is full of stops and starts there is a lag between the I and itself, an interruption that the I must always reach across to assert itself. In this reach the I is called into question, and into this gap comes the relation with the Other. But this is
not an Other that is part of an intentional duality. This Otherness is not an unknown that can become known; it is unknowable. This alterity cannot be brought into the present; it always escapes. As a result, the Other fundamentally disrupts the self’s cycle of identification and a genuine future is possible. Though the Infinite is radically disruptive and unsettling, it is also saving since it “brings me more than I contain” (Levinas TI, p. 51). This paradox of disruption and yet salvation is the crux of the encounter with the Infinite: the thing that saves me also undoes me. Sharon Todd (2001) writes,

To follow Levinas, it is our openness to the Other, our susceptibility to the Other’s stories, our capacity to enter into a “veritable conversation” that places us on ethical ground. When I think I know, when I think I understand the Other, I am exercising my knowledge over the Other, shrouding the Other in my own totality. The Other becomes an object of my comprehension, my world, my narrative, reducing the Other to me. What is at stake is my ego. But if I am exposed to the Other, I can listen, attend, and be surprised; the Other can affect me, she “brings me more than I contain” (p. 73).

Let us consider specifically the teacher’s ego being at stake. The teacher in the ethical relation is susceptible; she is leaving the world she knows. Levinas uses the characters of Ulysses and Abraham as metaphors. The legendary King of Ithaca took ten years to return home to Penelope, whereas Abraham of the Old Testament never returns home. Ulysses makes a journey like the self in the time of the I; it always returns to what is familiar. In the ethical relation, however, the self’s journey is like Abraham’s; its journey back to itself is interrupted and it does not return home again.

Many scholars have discussed the implications of Levinasian thought for education; I will make reference to a few. Clarence Joldersma applies Levinasian thought to challenge traditional theory defining the worth of a student. He explains that traditionally students are deemed worthy insofar as they are capable of reason where reason is connected to autonomy. By applying Levinas’ theory Joldersma (2008) demonstrates the inadequacy of valuing our students not based on an encounter with them but on a law. He writes,

“Given the worthiness of the law itself, the worth of the individual as rational agent follows. Part of being a rational agent, however, is universalizing this reflection—hence others
are rational agents like myself, a kind of preestablished harmony of alter egos” (p. 41).

This universalizing creates a totality in which students and teachers are alter egos and Otherness is compromised. According to this model, a teacher’s success depends on her ability to reproduce herself in her students. This justifies the teacher point of view that the student is just like the teacher and needs to adopt the attitudes and beliefs that the teacher has. Sharon Todd (2001) puts her finger on this danger, “If educators seek to persuade, convert, or cajole students into adopting certain attitudes, no matter how desirable those attitudes may be, then is education performing the very violence it is seeking to remedy?” (p. 68). Joldersma concludes that the application of Levinasian thought to the teacher/student relation doesn’t just provide an interesting answer but changes the question itself from an ontological to an ethical one; teaching must no longer be understood as the dissemination of knowledge but as responding to the Other.

In her article, *On Not Knowing the Other, or Learning from Levinas*, Todd looks at the problems educators have had with Levinas’s use of the term “Other”. In education, the Other has very often meant someone outside power upon whom social injustices are perpetrated. Therefore Levinas’s use of the term has been met with skepticism. The tool of educators is knowledge, but the other of the ethical relation cannot be known. Here Otherness is not an undesirable quality that can be surmounted with knowledge. Todd calls this the “Levinasian shift from ethics as knowledge to knowledge as ethics” (p. 69). Redefining the classroom in terms of the ethical relation means we must consider the significance of susceptibility in teaching. I as a teacher am susceptible to another who is not like me, who is not my alter ego, who cannot be defined in any totality. This means that I am vulnerable. Todd asks “Can we educate (teachers) for susceptibility? Is responsibility in the Levinasian sense something that can be taught?” (p. 71).

On the one hand ethical teaching may be boiled down to behaving morally toward one’s students. To this Paul Standish (2001) replies, “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?” (p. 76). The answer is probably yes. On the other hand, responding in the Levinasian sense is pre-voluntary; the self desires the Other before it can choose. This passivity is described here: “Metaphysics is characterized as the individual’s possession of the idea of infinity—the Desire of transcendence—a movement toward the Infinite
that begins not with me, but with the Infinite inciting me in particular. In the metaphysical relation, I am revealed as fundamentally passive” (Steinbock, 2005, p. 120). The Otherness of my student is something that happens to me, not something I choose. Teachers can react poorly to this because they are taken off guard.

Ann Chinney's (2010) study of Levinas the teacher reveals that he was not afraid to genuinely pursue new pathways of thought as they came up in class. Levinas directed the Ecole Normale Israelite Orientale in Paris for thirty years where he also taught philosophy and the Talmud for over 40 years. Chinney examines memories and testimonials of former students and colleagues and though the reviews of his teaching are mixed, it is clear that Levinas served and listened to his students and took a special interest in them. Most importantly, students also report he was what Chinney calls a *maître a penser* or master thinker. Being a master thinker is to be aware of and at peace with the limits of one's knowledge a critical component in responding to the Other.

For a *maître à penser* in this sense, there is always something more to be learned from a text, always something to be taken from the questions and challenges posed by students. One is called back to the text again and again. In contrast to the view of a master as someone who has conquered the subject matter and who views teaching primarily as a task of transmitting that body of knowledge to students, the concept “master of thinking” implies someone who knows how to think and who is committed to the activity of intellectual labour itself. This means that the teacher as *maître à penser* also embodies a posture of humility—both before the text and before others (Chinney, 2010, p. 1708).

Fundamental to ethical teaching is receiving “more than I contain”. In order to achieve an Abrahamic classroom, in which the destination of the journey is not known from the beginning, a posture of humility is essential. Levinas writes “to renounce the...pedagogy rhetoric involves is to face the Other, in a veritable conversation” (TI, p. 70). Todd points out that pursuing knowledge already acknowledges one’s limit, that one is susceptible to something outside oneself. She notes that it is not knowledge *about* the Other but susceptibility to the Other that must characterize education. It is because of the teacher's need to be vulnerable that we should consider the similarities between teachers and actors. Not the age old comparison about teachers needing to be
charismatic performers but, on the contrary, a new comparison about their vulnerability.

Both teachers and actors work in front of an audience. Teachers, like actors, prepare and study their words in advance and often work from notes or a script. Preparation of class content creates a similar challenge for both actors and teachers: since each has some knowledge from the outset about where the encounter is going, both may be tempted to stop listening and responding as they would in an unpremeditated situation. To meet this challenge actors are trained to find the living part of an otherwise memorized and predetermined scene; they are taught to focus on their partners as a reliable source of the unknowable; a conclusion born out by Levinasian philosophy. Actors know when they become too comfortable they have lost that living spark, which means that they have shut off from their partner. The best teachers realize this too. Yet, out of fear, teachers cling to their notes. They don’t wait for responses to questions. They plow ahead. The unpredictable relation with the student is frightening but teachers need to learn, like actors, to see their vulnerability not as a problem but a gift.

Since it is natural to protect oneself, actors study listening and relaxation to cultivate the skill of remaining open. Teachers would certainly benefit from the same training. Acting exercises essentially teach the susceptibility experienced in the ethical relation. Because of their advanced preparation, and the pressure of working in front of an audience, both actors and teachers are uniquely in danger of resisting the call of the Other. Teachers are not taught enough about remaining open, changing course, and following impulses in front of students. To do so feels unprepared and unpolished, and it is. Teachers want to have all the answers, and genuinely thinking in front of their students shows that they may not. This is the humility to which Chinney refers. Of course it is uncomfortable; the salvation which the encounter with the Infinite promises requires discomfort.

Sanford Meisner was one of twenty-eight original actors to form the Group Theatre in 1931 and later became the head of the Neighborhood Playhouse where he developed one of the most influential acting techniques in America. An exercise that is central to his actor training is the Repeat Exercise. It is a very basic activity that gives partners the chance to surrender control to each other. Two people sit opposite one another, relaxing and observing each other closely. The one designated to begin makes a simple observation about the other such as “You’re wearing a white shirt.” The second person then repeats what the first
person said. Back and forth they repeat this statement to each other. Participants are not responsible to create interesting things to say; the repeating absolves them of the need to invent and keeps them very focused on what is coming from their partner. Being freed from thinking about making conversation, the two are available to really observe each other. Their instructions are to repeat; they are forbidden from doing anything entertaining with the words or making up words on their own. They simply send back what they get from their partner. In spite of the repetition, eventually they will say something different. This difference will arise in the subtext; an inflection implying a meaning will enter in. At that point the partner that observes such a meaningful inflection must respond verbally and the text will change. For example, if after repeatedly saying “You’re wearing a white shirt,” one of the participants repeats the words but seems slightly bored, then the partner who observes that will say “You seem bored.” The two will ideally be so in tune with each other that any nuance in behavior will be verbalized. The repeat must change when one of the partners receives anything from the other, even if it is subtextual.

According to Meisner’s (1987) text there are two rules to the Repeat Exercise: 1) Don’t do anything until something happens to make you do it, and 2) What you do doesn’t depend on you, it depends on the other person. Both rules make very clear that vulnerability is the goal of this exercise. Participants open themselves up to be affected by the exchange. The point is to get each participant to relinquish control of what he or she is doing/saying and turn it over to the partner. Though very simple, the exercise is quite difficult because we naturally resist vulnerability.

The teacher’s challenge is in large part the actor’s challenge; how to let a pre-planned encounter be alive and malleable to students. Classrooms can be a place of revelation if teachers are taught that their goal is not merely the dissemination of knowledge but also taking part in a conversation. The application of Levinasian thought to teaching created a new focus on the teacher’s response to the student as Other. The need for teachers, as actors, to cultivate the skill of vulnerability is clear. Levinas teaches that the Other comes to the self from a height; that the Other is always teacher. Teachers who know this will learn to let the student shape the lesson in the ethical classroom. Meisner’s Repeat Exercise could do for teachers what it does for actors: limit the presenting aspect and enhance the response. It is a way to practice our vulnerability or, otherwise stated, our ethical responsibility. It is a
disruptive experience for the self; a very positive and essential disruption—indeed, one that sets us free.

REFERENCES


Levinas, E. *Time and the other*. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.


