

LEVINAS'S IMPOSSIBLE IDEAL OF EDUCATION

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In this paper, I question how relevant Emmanuel Levinas's concepts of ethics and justice are to education. How realistic is his call for responsibility to the Other¹ in a world where the persistent focus on competition and self-interest appears to be at the antipodes of what he advocates in his notions of dis-interest-edness and primacy of the Other? I open by arguing how Levinas's movement towards justice raises for him the question of the violence inherent in the struggle to affirm oneself and the "right-to-be," concepts also found at the heart of American education. I then explore Levinas's quest for justice and its link to responsibility. I conclude with a discussion of his "idea of a possibility" and his promise of an ideal of education.

Violence of being and right-to-be

Levinas shows how consciousness and moral conscience² are developed through the encounter face-to-face³ with the other, through an interpersonal, intersubjective relationship, through the responsibility and the respect one must develop for the Other as other.

One of Levinas's declared "fundamental themes" developed in *Totality and Infinity* is precisely this interpersonal, non-symmetrical "intersubjective relation" (Levinas 1985: 98). He considers it as essential and insists on his responsibility for the Other, "without waiting for reciprocity, were I to die for it" (1985: 98). In support, he often cites Alyosha Karamazov's words: "We are all responsible for everything and for everyone before everyone, but I more than any other" (Dostoyevsky 1957: 264). This is also in keeping with the ancient Talmudic expression: "All in Israel are responsible for one another,"⁴ in which Israel is understood as "humanity."⁵ He argues that this responsibility is "total" in as much as it includes the responsibility *for*, it "answers for all the others and for all in the others, even for their responsibility" (1985: 99). In that sense, since the "I" is always responsible even *for*

the responsibility of the Other, “[t]he *I* always has *one* responsibility *more* than all the others” (1985: 99, original emphasis). This theme is crucial to understand Levinas as evidenced by the numerous occasions where he develops it.

This is where the individual’s right-to-be begins to become problematic.⁶ Levinas argues that already being (*être*), existing, raises questions: Am I taking someone else’s place in the world? Is my life usurping someone else’s life? Do I have a right to be (*être*)? In *Alterity and Transcendence*, Levinas stresses the importance of this line of questioning: “I have written a lot on this theme” but “now, it is my main theme” (Levinas 1999: 178). Thus absorbed in its intent to be, its “insistence to be,” the individual, sustained by its “instinct of preservation,” perseveres in its “adventure to be” as if it were what it is meant to be, as if it were “its [very] meaning” (Levinas 1998: 10). In this insistence, in this “concern” to be, Levinas sees a violence, even a “savagery” in this struggle to affirm oneself “without regard, without care” for the Other (1998: 10). He cites Pascal as often as he cites Dostoyevsky and placed this sentence in exergue of *Otherwise than Being*: “That is my place in the sun. That is how the usurpation of the whole world began” (Pascal 1995: 295, 451).

For Levinas, it is before the Other (*autrui*) and the face of the Other that the individual can have the pure experience of the other (*autre*) which he sees as one and the same with ethics, in as much as one is aware that one is responsible for the Other, that the existence of the Other is more important than one’s own. According to him, this approach to ethics, this concern for the other-than-I, this non-indifference to the Other constitute the trigger which could release the obstinacy of the individual in his or her perseverance, his or her insistence to be. This obligation to, and responsibility for, the Other is unlimited. Many a time Levinas insisted that “[i]n ethics, the Other’s right to exist has primacy over my own” (Cohen 1986: 24).

This call to responsibility through the encounter with the Other would be what Levinas described as “the release of this ontological contraction said by the verb *être*, the *dés-intér-essement* opening the order of the human, the grace, and the sacrifice” (Levinas 2000: 238). He developed this notion of *dés-intér-essement*, and presented his concept of *il y a* as a trace of the “necessary” “test of dis-inter-estedness’ [*dés-intér-essement*]” (Levinas 1985: 52). Levinas split this term in three segments to underscore “the uprooting of being” (Levinas 1993: 36), “the escape from being” (Levinas 1985: 52) which, according to him, it signifies. *Dés-intér-essement* characterizes the human being parting with, discarding his or her condition of being which Levinas discussed at length in *Otherwise than Being*, arguing that it does not merely mean “to be otherwise,” since to be otherwise is still to be. In “Ideology and Idealism,” he goes as far as using the term *dés-intér-essement* in the sense of “a suspension of essence” (in Hand 1989: 242). It is in this rupture of indifference, this concern for the other, that ethics emerges, that surges the ethical event. There, the emergence of ethics disrupts, pierces, breaks through the shell of being and essence, as “the otherwise than being and beyond essence.” In this sense, for Levinas, “[t]he forgetting of self moves justice” (Levinas 1999: 159).⁷ With this concept of dis-inter-estedness, “the responsibility for the Other, being-for-the-other,” which appear to him as what could “stop the anonymous and senseless rumbling of being” (Levinas 1985: 52) Levinas explores the first level of disruption of being in his move towards justice.

The second disruption is brought about by a third party, *le tiers*. The above discussion is based on an encounter face-to-face with *one* Other, through an interpersonal relation eliciting the responsibility and the respect called for by the Other for the Other (*autrui*) as other (*autre*). However, going back to some arguments he developed earlier in *Totality and Infinity*, in *Otherwise than Being* Levinas established that humanity cannot be reduced to two individuals, because there is always *un tiers*, a third party – the reality of society – who

disrupts, upsets the simplicity of this one-on-one encounter with the emergence of this third party next to the Other. “Indeed,” responded Levinas during the discussion which followed a presentation of “Ideology and Idealism” in 1972, “if there were only two of us in the world, I and one Other, there would be no problem. The Other would be completely my responsibility. But in the real world, there are many Others” (1975: 121-38).⁸ With him or her, the third party brings “the proximity of a human plurality” (Levinas 1998: 101).

Quest for justice and responsibility

For Levinas, this situation raises several questions: In this plurality, which one comes before the Other in my responsibility? What are they, then, the Other and the third party, in relation to each other? and so on. Ultimately, he sees “the first question in the inter-human” as the “inevitable” question of justice, when it is necessary to “weigh, think, judge” within a relation of proximity, where everything is owed to *each* and *every* Other, demanding the impossible – “a comparison among incomparables” (1999: 142).⁹ Thus the movement from ethics to justice is triggered by the entrance of the third on the scene of the intersubjective relation. Levinas writes: “it is the fact of the multiplicity of men and the presence of someone else next to the Other, which condition the laws and establish justice” (Levinas 1985: 89). This is where Levinas sees “the quest for justice” as going back to the face of the Other, “the source of my obligation toward other men” (1999: 170) the source of responsibility and ethics. For him, it is “[t]hat initial obligation, before the multiplicity of human beings, [which] becomes justice” (1999: 175-6). The individual’s choice to acknowledge the Other as other is an ethical decision, and it is this acknowledgement which Levinas calls justice.

In *Totality and Infinity* (“The Other and the Others”) Levinas argues that the Other already carries “a third,” that is to say another Other: “The third party looks at me in the eyes of the Other” (2004: 213). In the face-to-face encounter with the Other, the other Other (*le*

tiers) is already there, or manifests itself simultaneously. In this sense, Levinas can write: “The others concern me from the first,” in a “fraternity” which is not based, however, on genus, but on responsibility (1998: 159). This concept of “fraternity” renders justice accessible to all, which is the essence of justice in the fact that “I am another for the Other...the reciprocal relationship binds me to the other man in the trace of transcendence, in illeity” (1998: 158). A few pages down, Levinas confirms that “justice can be established only if I, always evaded from the concept of the ego, always desituated and divested of being, always in non-reciprocatable relationship with the other, always for the other, can become an other like the others” (1998: 187 n8). The importance of this “fraternity” for justice cannot be overlooked since it is thanks to this fraternity that there can also be justice for “I.” Several years later, in an interview with Raoul Mortley (1991), Emmanuel Levinas acknowledged that “there is a sense in which another is in conflict with my relationship with a third party,” which precludes “liv[ing] in society on the basis of this one-to-one responsibility alone” (in Mortley 1991: 18). Levinas sees there a relationship of “pity” through which “we enter into knowledge, judgment and justice.”

Ideal of Education

Levinas’s concepts of ethics and justice have raised several questions.¹⁰ The most salient and most frequently voiced concern his texts about an ideal deemed impossible to achieve in “an age of dis-aster – an age without a guiding star” (Cohen, in Levinas 1987: 26) in a world which has lost its markers and has gone awry, in which “[t]here [is] no longer any measure to contain monstrosities” (Levinas 1996: 120). How realistic is his call for a responsibility to the Other in a world where the persistent focus on self-interest appears to be at the antipodes of what he advocates in his notions of dis-interest-edness and primacy of the Other? When

questioned by Philippe Nemo, Levinas explained: “My task does not consist in constructing ethics; I only try to find its meaning” (Levinas 1985: 90).

Levinas does not believe that philosophy should necessarily develop a program. Although he is aware that one might be able to construct such a program on the basis of his theories, it is nevertheless not his specific aim. In the discussion which followed his presentation of “Ideology and Idealism,” he was questioned on his lack of concern with “concrete reality,” and his ability “to solve actual ethical problems.” He asserted again that it was not “[his] purpose to moralize or to improve the conduct of our generation.” In his view, the interpersonal relation he discusses in his works “stands behind practical morality,” as a relation of responsibility, no matter how poorly or weakly this responsibility is perceived or acted upon, “even when it takes the form of politics or warfare.” In any case, one cannot claim “no concern,” for whether one chooses it or not, “it is always and inescapably my concern” (Levinas in Hand 1989: 247).¹¹ In his reading of Levinas’s work, Dudiack understands Levinas’s “descriptions of the ethical...not at all of an ideal, of something that might be realized,” but “of the conditions of possibility, the ‘inspiration,’ of every realized situation” (Dudiack 2001: 259 n45). He explains that Levinas’s discourse “is justified only to the extent that...it be taken as ‘prophetic’” rather than prescriptive or legislative (Dudiack 2001: 163).¹²

Levinas was convinced of the paramount importance of justice, and situated it at the core of first philosophy – which for him was ethics – as it is at the core of the Talmud, one of his main sources. He also saw demanding justice for the Other as a return to a profound morality which defies ideology. Posing the problem of fundamental justice through the arrival of a third party in the intersubjective relation led him to raise the question of rights, which, in the context of Levinas, is always necessarily “the rights of the Other” (1999: 102). We saw that in his model of ethics and justice, he argues that responsibility to the Other

implies responsibility to all others, which for him leads to responsibility for social justice. Although his task was obviously left incomplete when he died in 1995, Levinas nevertheless left some rich, robust, and moving writings to sustain reflection on the possibilities of an ethical and just education. Recalling the episode of the Saint-Exupéry's Little Prince asking for the drawing of a sheep – a Little Prince who is satisfied only with the sketch of a box where he is told a sheep he cannot see is asleep – Levinas confesses: “I do not know how to draw the solution to insoluble problems.... I have no idea other than the idea of the idea that one should have...I have the idea of a possibility in which the impossible may be sleeping” (Levinas 1999: 89).

Following this line of reflection, and returning to the concept of education as the development of consciousness and moral conscience through the encounter face-to-face with the other, through an interpersonal relationship, through the responsibility and the respect one must develop for the Other as other, it may be that, at the core of the concept of education, there is the idea of a possibility, of a promise, that of an ideal of education. Here, Derrida's notion of “to-come” (*à-venir/avenir*),¹³ expanding on Levinas's (1985: 56) is very helpful to better understand the profound meaning of education and its “promise,” and the “possibility” Levinas writes about. For Levinas, the concept of a future “to-come [*à-venir*]” means that it “is not described right-away in its reference to the present” (1985: 56). Derrida explains that the notion of “to-come” entails “some openness to the future, and...openness to the other” (2001: 176-85). Extending this concept of “to-come” to education, it can be understood as Levinas's “concept of a promise” which can manifest itself only where there is disruption and upheaval, when there exists a gap between the present state of education, in this case, and the possibility of an ideal of a just and ethical education. In fact, it is in this very gap that education would be shaped, and Derrida's following words can aptly apply here:

between an infinite promise (always untenable at least for the reason that it calls for the respect of the infinite singularity *and* the infinite alterity of the other as much as for the respect of the countable, calculable, subjectal equality between anonymous singularities) and the determined, necessary, but also necessarily inadequate forms of what has to be measured against this promise.

(1994: 65, original emphasis)

It is in this gap that questioning and disruption must be preserved, “as the only chance of an affirmed or rather reaffirmed future” (Derrida 1994: 37). Without this gap, without this disjunction, we may simply believe, in all good conscience, that we have succeeded and achieved a just and ethical education, that its duty is accomplished, and as a consequence of this smugness, education may “[lose] the chance of the future, of the promise or the appeal...(that is its ‘own’ possibility)” (Derrida 1994: 28). Levinas sees there a possibility in which “the impossible may be sleeping” (1999: 89), but, as Derrida writes, “there is no responsibility that is not the experience and experiment of the impossible” (1992: 44-5).

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¹ I have tried to follow accepted conventions in the use of “Other” and “other”; see R. Cohen, in Levinas (1987) “I have always translated *autrui* as the ‘Other,’ with an uppercase ‘O’ and *autre* as ‘other,’ with a lower case ‘o’” (30 n3, and viii), thus distinguishing *autrui/autre* as the personal other, from *autre* the otherness in general, alterity.

² Fairly consistently, most English texts translate the French word *conscience* with “consciousness.” Since the term “consciousness” may be perceived to mean “awareness” more readily than “moral conscience,” (in fact, some American dictionaries – e.g., *World Encyclopedia* – make no mention of the potential “moral” connotations of this term), in the English translation, the “moral” semantic connotations might be left out of Levinas's text or overlooked.

³ Much has been written on Levinas's use of “the face” to articulate his notion of ethics. However, Biblical connotations to “the face” must be kept in mind when reading Levinas, as well as in Franz Rosenzweig's writings, especially *The Star of Redemption*. Levinas was very familiar with Rosenzweig's work (e.g., Levinas 1993: xxii-xxiii and 49-66) and *The Star* in particular. He wrote a “Foreword” for Stéphane Mosès's analysis of Rosenzweig's book (1992) in which Mosès discusses Rosenzweig's use of “the human face” as “the way the transcendence of the other is revealed to me,” harking back to “the face of God” and “Truth” (284-6). In his introduction to *The Levinas Reader* (1989), Seán Hand recalls that already, in *Totality and Infinity* (2004), “[t]he term ‘face’...denotes the way in which the presentation of the other to me exceeds all idea of the other in me” (5). In the introduction to his translation of *Alterity and Transcendence*, Michael B. Smith writes: “The face of the other is the locus of transcendence in that it calls into question the *I* in its existence as a being for itself” (Levinas 1999: xiv). See also Adriaan Peperzak (1993: 20), and Max Picard's works and Levinas's “Max Picard and the Face” (1996: 94-8).

⁴ Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shevuot, 39a.

⁵ Also used as such in “The Pact.” Levinas in Hand (1989: 224-6).

⁶ See in particular “The Meaning of Meanings,” in Levinas (1993), a text which challenges Martin Heidegger's position on meaning as derived from Being, and in which Levinas asks: “Is it just to be?” (90-5)

⁷ See also Dudiack 2001: 243-5.

⁸ See also Levinas 1998: 158.

⁹ See also 170, and Levinas 1998: 16, 158.

¹⁰ Questions which would take us further than the limits of this essay. See for example Dudiack (2001), and Levinas and Peperzak (1993), especially 167-84. Questions on the Other as thief or murderer and practical applications of Levinas's concepts are also among questions which have been raised. See for example Fox (1986), especially 147-50.

¹¹ Also, see Jean-Paul Sartre's *Huis Clos*.

¹² See also chapter 7.

¹³ Especially as developed around the theme of “democracy-to-come,” in particular in *The Other Heading* – a concept clearly linked to justice.