

***The very subjection of the subject: Levinas, heteronomy and the  
philosophy of education***

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### **Introduction: autonomy and the philosophy of education**

Autonomy, the philosophy which aims to ensure the freedom, or the identity, of beings, presupposes that freedom is sure of its right, is justified without recourse to anything further, is complacent in itself, like Narcissus. (Levinas 1998: 49)

The description of autonomy might strike the reader unfamiliar with Levinas as at odds with the dominance of autonomy within philosophy of education. Against the grain of much contemporary moral and political philosophy, Levinas argues for the priority of heteronomy over autonomy, the determination of self by another, an idea sitting in uneasy tension with the idea of education as liberating. What can Levinas mean? Is he really against the ideal of autonomy that is seen as fundamental to liberal democracy and human flourishing, often cited as the most important ideals of education?

The importance of autonomy within moral philosophy cannot be overstated. Indeed, as Harry Brighouse points out, many philosophers have seen it as *the* key to a good life (2006: 14). From Socrates via the Enlightenment to contemporary political philosophy, the appeal of self-determination has not dimmed. The idea that education should be liberating has a history stretching back to Plato, and the importance of the ideal of personal autonomy within education can be seen as part of this broader desire for freedom. As well as its significance for promoting personal freedom, autonomy has also been stressed within philosophy of education as a central, if not *the* central value, for the promotion of liberal democracy. The extent of the dominance of autonomy is exemplified in the following:

Since the 1960s one key role for British philosophy of education has been to reflect on the educational prerequisites of autonomy for all... Examples, many known to have influenced policy makers, are to be found in work on: child-centred education; the school curriculum; aims; authority; competition; indoctrination; moral education; children's and parents' rights; selection; privatisation; higher education; educational research; education for democratic citizenship; assessment. (White 2003: 148)

The classic defence of autonomy within educational theory is to be found in Robert Dearden's 'Autonomy and Education.' Here he defines autonomy:

A person is autonomous, then, to the degree that what he thinks and does in important areas of his life cannot be explained without reference to his own activity of mind. That is to say, the explanation of why he thinks and acts as he does in these areas must include a reference to his own choices, deliberations, decisions, reflections, judgments, plannings or reasonings. (1972: 452-454)

This is a broadly Kantian definition of autonomy: a free action is an action that is *mine*, in which I am not a passive channel through which external forces become enacted. Following on from Dearden, the theme of autonomy has been extensively covered within educational theory, with the emphasis in recent years shifting to a link between autonomy and human flourishing. John White, for example, links autonomy

to well-being: in 'Education and the Good Life' (1990), he argues that educating for personal autonomy allows students to flourish. White develops Joseph Raz's argument that personal autonomy is not necessarily an intrinsic aspect of human flourishing, but since we live in an autonomy-supporting society, it is difficult to imagine an individual's well-being not involving autonomy (ibid. 103). Brighouse likewise argues that autonomy plays an important part in enabling people to live flourishing lives (2006: 15). He suggests that to live well, one needs to know what living well consists of; autonomy means educating children in the skills of rational reflection and comparison which provide them with the opportunity to decide what living well means. Indeed, personal autonomy is a central enough goal of education for Brighouse that it is the major theme of his recent introduction to the philosophy of education<sup>1</sup>. This is a fair reflection of the dominance of the ideal of autonomy within much contemporary philosophy of education.<sup>2</sup>

How then can we make sense of Levinas's scandalous assertion that autonomy must be replaced with heteronomy? In this paper, I will examine the relationship between autonomy, heteronomy and education in Levinas's writing and demonstrate that despite his privileging heteronomy over autonomy, his notion of the subjection of the subject to the Other does not necessarily undermine the ideals of autonomy and liberal democracy so beloved to philosophers of education. I will compare Levinas with Kant on this, since most of the definitions of rational autonomy within educational theory are broadly Kantian. I will also consider how Judith Butler's interpretation of Levinas provides a helpful extension of these ideas. Through this, I show that Levinas's writings are not the rejection of autonomy that they appear, but rather highlight that much writing on autonomy leads to an excessive focus on the self. His view challenges the *primacy* in philosophy of education of a self primarily acting in relation to her own choices and reasonings, while nevertheless allowing education to be transformative and liberating.

### **Autonomy as violent reduction of the Other to the Same: Philosophy and the idea of infinity**

Levinas's most extended discussion of autonomy is in 'Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity'<sup>3</sup>. Here he rejects autonomy because it does violence to the alterity of the Other, reducing him to the activity of *my* own mind:

Freedom, autonomy, the *reduction of the other to the same*, lead to this formula: the conquest of being by man over the course of history. This reduction does not represent some abstract schema; it is man's ego. The existence of an ego takes place as an identification of the diverse... [T]he ego remains the same by making of disparate and diverse events a history – its history. And this is the original event of the identification of the same, prior to the identity of a rock, and a condition of that identity. (1998: 48)

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<sup>1</sup> *On Education*, 2006

<sup>2</sup> It should of course be noted that the dominance of autonomy has been questioned by some within educational philosophy, most notably by those arguing from either an existentialist (for example Cooper [1983] 1991, Cuypers and Bonnett 2003) or communitarian standpoint (Alexander 2007)

<sup>3</sup> Originally published in French in the *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 62 (1957): pp.241-253

Levinas here criticises autonomy as reducing the Other to the same. 'Ego' should not here be taken as a psychoanalytical construct, but as the rational subject, seeking to understand things by bringing diverse events and people within the identification of its own terms and history. Autonomy, in this scheme, makes alterity disappear. This criticism of rationality and autonomy, Levinas subsequently expanded as a theme of *Totality and Infinity*. Here he distinguishes between two types of knowledge: knowledge bringing the other into the category of the same (which he terms as comprehension / ontology) and knowledge allowing the known to manifest its alterity. Of the former, he writes:

[T]heory... designates comprehension ... that is, a way of approaching the known being such that its alterity with regard to the knowing being vanishes... This mode of depriving the known being of its alterity can be accomplished only if it is aimed at through a third term, a neutral term, which itself is not a being; in it the third term may appear as a concept thought. ([1969] 2004: 42)

Levinas states that philosophy has sought to reduce the Other to the comprehensible third term, and this he sees as the essential approach of Greek philosophy. So that the self is undisturbed and free, the Other is neutralised and brought within the realm of the same:

This primacy of the same was Socrates's teaching: to receive nothing of the Other but what is in me, as though from all eternity I was in possession of what comes to me from the outside – to receive nothing, or to be free. (Ibid. 43)

Freedom here is not the spontaneity of free will, but the freedom of reason and cognition, unlimited by anything other than itself. The other is neutralised in this approach, through thematization and comprehension to the same: 'the neutralization of the other who becomes a theme or object – appearing, that is, taking its place in the light – is precisely his reduction to the same.' (Ibid.)

It is this freedom of the self, seeking to bring the other within the realm of the same, that Levinas equates with autonomy. In 'Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity' he describes philosophy as tending towards autonomy and the exclusion of alterity in polemical terms:

Autonomy or heteronomy? The choice of Western philosophy has most often been on the side of freedom and the same. Was not philosophy born, on Greek soil, to dethrone opinion, in which all tyrannies lurk and threaten? With opinion the most subtle and treacherous poison seeps into the soul, altering it in its depths, making of it an other... Against the turbid and disturbing participation opinion presupposes, philosophy willed souls that are separate and in a sense, impenetrable. The idea of the same, the idea of freedom, seemed to offer the most firm guarantee of such a separation. Thus Western thought very often seemed to exclude the transcendent, encompass every other in the same, and proclaim the philosophical birthright of autonomy. (1998: 48)

It is not difficult to see that the goal of the autonomy within education might be open to Levinas's attack. The educational ideal of autonomy tends to suggest a self comparing different beliefs, opinions, ways of life, from a neutral standpoint, to decide the best, in rational terms. This appears in direct opposition to Levinas's description of the self's relation with the Other in which I am taught. According to

Levinas, I am taught only in relation to what is outside myself, bringing ‘me more than I contain’. The Other who teaches me remains beyond my comprehension. That this description of the self taught by the Other stands in such sharp opposition to the prominence given to the rational, autonomous self in educational theory is perhaps not that surprising. Much contemporary liberal thinking on autonomy is heavily indebted to Kant,<sup>4</sup> and since Kant is one of Levinas’s philosophical targets, it is natural that there should appear to be significant tension between the different ideals of education.

Given Kant’s influence in the philosophical genealogy of autonomy, let us now turn to consider the relation between his concept of autonomy and Levinas’s.

### **Heteronomy before autonomy?**

Levinas makes it very clear that Kantian philosophy is in opposition to his own project. Paul Davies points out that Levinas equates Kantianism with the ontology of which he is critical:

One of the key subtexts of *Otherwise than Being* will... be a polemical engagement with Kant, a polemic that reaches its harshest judgement ... with the book’s last reference to Kant and the claim that ‘Kantianism is the basis of philosophy if philosophy is ontology.’ (2002: 164)

In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas questions the conditions of the possibility of knowledge. For Kant, it is possible to separate sensibility and intuition, and cognitive understanding is derived from the pure intuition that separates from the thing to be comprehended all that sensibility would attach to it. Such an approach makes ontology possible. For Levinas, it is impossible to separate sensibility from intuition and knowledge thus; refuting this approach is, in many ways, the project of *Otherwise than Being*. For Levinas, it is only through sensibility to the otherness of the Other that I could have knowledge. This is not to deny the possibility of knowledge or rationality, but to question the grounds of knowledge that Kant’s project established. It is therefore this difference in their attitudes towards sensibility and rationality that underlies their divergence on autonomy.

The term heteronomy literally means, as its etymology suggests, being ruled or governed by the other, but Levinas’s use of the term is not the same as Kant’s. For Levinas, heteronomy is the state of the self approached by the Other and elected to a position of responsibility for them. It is through this approach that I can have language, in that it is through their address and appeal for my response, that language has meaning and sense. In this sense, I am indebted to the other and ‘ruled’ by them in a non-reciprocal relation of responsibility. The language of mastery of the Other in *Totality and Infinity* intensifies to the language of persecution and the state of being hostage to the other in *Otherwise than Being*, signifying the intensity of the moral responsibility I as a unique subject have for another, a responsibility I can never escape. I am always responsible to the Other and it is only in this condition as subject to them that I am.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> We have already seen something of the Kantian influence on Dearden, and it can also be seen, for example, in Brighouse 2006: 14

<sup>5</sup> Michael Morgan makes this idea of the inescapability of responsibility, and why it seems such a troubling idea, very clear in the following passage: ‘When Levinas says that the subject is

Levinas appears to be attempting to unsettle us, challenging the complacency of the self-sufficient I. Rather than a subject who chooses to accept responsibility, I only become a subject through this heteronomous relationship with what I cannot know. Levinas suggests that this strand of thinking of subjectivity as heteronomous rather than autonomous does have a philosophical history, even if autonomy has more often been the preference, finding recognition of the alterity of the Other in Plato's vision of the good beyond Being and Descartes's analysis of the idea of infinity. He describes this acceptance of alterity and transcendence within philosophy as 'a tradition at least as ancient [as the tendency towards autonomy], that which does not read right in might and does not reduce *every other* to the same.' (1998: 53)

Having considered the differences between autonomy and heteronomy for Levinas, closer attention needs to be given to the relation between these ideas and freedom in his writing and in Kant's.

### **Levinas, Kant, Heteronomy and Freedom**

The most detailed commentary on autonomy as the major fracture between Kant and Levinas is given by Catherine Chaliel. Chaliel argues that freedom is important for both, but while Kant sees autonomy as intrinsic to freedom, Levinas separates freedom from autonomy:

Unlike Kant, [Levinas] distinguishes the concept of freedom from that of autonomy, conceiving of the former as the subject's accession to its irreplaceable uniqueness or as election. For Kant, the moral law appeals to the self as lawmaker – hence the constitutive autonomy of ipseity. Conversely, for Levinas, it entails the imperative of an exteriority – hence heteronomy. (Chaliel 2002: 6-7)

This is important. Why is it that Levinas links freedom to heteronomy, whereas for Kant, autonomy and freedom are inextricably bound? Since the concern for autonomy within education can be traced to a broader concern for freedom, this point needs elaboration. Kant postulates the concept of freedom as the key to the autonomy of the will: will is a property belonging to rational beings, and freedom of the will is the possibility of its exercise without the coercion of external forces. The autonomous will, uncompelled by 'alien causes,' is free to make its own rational choices, and therefore be a moral agent. For Kant, the moral subject is free to obey the dictates of reason unaffected by anything else. In contrast, Levinas does not distrust the influence of the sensible. Indeed, the subject's ethicality for Levinas is rooted in the possibility of being affected by the other's suffering. It is only from this condition of being affected by 'alien causes' that language and thought could follow. For Levinas,

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responsibility before it does anything, then, this should not be read temporally. It is puzzling, but in the end it is not obscure. For what it means is that whenever I am engaged with another person or persons, whatever I am doing, my relationships and my actions are ultimately of significance, in a sense before I am and before my capacity to think or act, precisely because of the capacity I have and the necessity that falls on me to respond to that other person's needs and very existence. I may be blind to this capacity and necessity to respond – my responsibility as responsivity – but it is always there, an aspect of me and my relationship with each and every other person, whether I realize it or not. (Morgan 2007: 160)

I could not be ethical were it not for this prior affectivity. Chalier describes the implications of this for the difference in how Levinas and Kant view freedom:

The Kantian idea of a transcendental freedom and of a timeless choice defends... the idea that freedom is primary and foundational. The subject's responsibility is deduced from it, whatever the chance events of its existence. In supporting the thesis of the moral subject's election, Levinas displaces the axis of that mode of thought. Only the response to election or to that appeal – responsibility – gives man a sense of freedom. In discovering that it alone is capable of responding, the subject discovers its uniqueness and only then its freedom. (ibid. 7)

Levinas challenges the idea that freedom is foundational. Responsibility is what is primary: it is only as one uniquely capable to respond to my neighbour that I am free.

Kant rejects heteronomy as 'the source of all spurious principles of morality' (Kant [1998] 2005: 47). Heteronomy means, for Kant, following one's desires, emotions and, most likely, self-interest. The moral moment, for Kant, happens when the individual *decides*, rationally, to follow the moral law, which he sees as innate and *a priori*. Our responsibility for others follows from respecting their rationality and moral capability: I treat my neighbour as an end in herself because she, like me, is autonomous and likewise author of the moral law. This ideal of shared universal morality and rationality, promoting both a negative and a positive conception of freedom, has had a significant appeal since the Enlightenment and could be seen as underlying the emphasis on autonomy within philosophy of education.

Levinas's starting point is very different: for him, the ego is self-interested, but that complacency is shattered by the Other. The appeal of the neighbour is present to me before reflection and defers the opportunity for self-reflection. Although Kant rejects heteronomy as self-interested, for Levinas, the reciprocity implied in the universal moral law is too self-interested. Furthermore, it is potentially dangerous. It requires someone to recognise the Other as like me: if the Other is seen as incapable of rationality, then he is not a member of the kingdom of ends. Hilary Putnam explains the significance of this: if ethics is grounded in the idea that we are all 'fundamentally the same', then 'a door is opened for a Holocaust. One only has to believe that some people are not "really" the same to destroy the force of such a grounding.' Even if Kant is not necessarily presuming a fundamental sameness of persons, by grounding ethics in common rationality, the question is raised of 'what becomes of our obligations to those who rationality we can more or less plausibly deny?' (Putnam 2002: 35)

For Levinas, ethics cannot be grounded on shared rationality, but must be grounded in heteronomy: the rule of the Other. It is important to note that Levinas is just as opposed as Kant to any tyranny or servile submission to the Other. Heteronomy here is no form of masochism or obedience to the will of the Other: freedom is acted out in the address of peace between self and Other.<sup>6</sup> Levinas emphasises that freedom,

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<sup>6</sup> We can see this in 'Freedom and Command', in which Levinas describes how it is the self formed through its relationship with exteriority, through heteronomy that makes freedom itself possible: 'In the light of a face we have sought to bring out the relationship that is nontyrannical, and yet transitive. We have sought to set forth exteriority, the other, as that which is nowise tyrannical and makes freedom possible, opposes us because it turns itself toward us. This exteriority is beyond the violence of brutality, but also that of incantation, ecstasy and love. One could call this situation religion, the

founded on heteronomy, means the creation of a just order in which there is no tyrannical rule: 'To conceive of and to bring about a human order is to set up a just State, which then is the possibility of surmounting the obstacles that threaten freedom. It is the only way to preserve freedom from tyranny.' (1998: 17)<sup>7</sup> We are commanded to set up such a state, but this is a command addressed to me by the Other rather than a categorical imperative:

we must impose commands on ourselves in order to be free. But it must be an exterior command, not simply a rational law, not a categorical imperative, which is defenceless against tyranny; it must be an exterior law, a written law, armed with force against tyranny. Such are commands as the political condition for freedom. (Ibid.)

This notion of heteronomy is, then, opposed to the tyrannical will of the Other. The Other is not imposing on my freedom as in Kant's notion of heteronomy, since my freedom is only possible through the Other's approach, electing me to responsibility.<sup>8</sup> This election is intimately linked with the question of freedom. As Chalier writes, '[u]nlike Kant, Levinas does not think that the subject is moral and free by reason of its autonomy but rather by reason of that election.' (2002: 79) This election to responsibility shows the subject as unique in the way that it alone can respond to the appeal of the Other in heteronomy.

But why is this notion of heteronomy helpful for thinking about education? Let us now turn to examine what this means for education and why it provides a third way between the self-sufficient 'I' of the Kantian autonomous subject and the subject completely subjected to systems of control of some forms of poststructuralism.

### **Educating for heteronomy?**

The end of humanism, of metaphysics, the death of man, the death of God (or death to God!) – these are the apocalyptic ideas or slogans of intellectual high society. Like all the manifestations of Parisian taste (or Parisian disgusts), these topics impose themselves with the tyranny of the last word (Levinas 1998: 141)

These 'apocalyptic slogans' Levinas criticises are taken for granted by many today. Yet it was the anti-humanist critique of postmodernism that cleared the path for Levinas's conception of the subject in terms of subjection:

Modern antihumanism, which denies the primacy that the human person, a free end in itself, has for the signification of being, is true over and above the reasons

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situation where outside of all dogmas, all speculation about the divine or – God forbid – about the sacred and its violences, one speaks to the other. We have taken the position that commanding is speech, or that the true speech, speech in its essence, is commanding.' (Levinas 1998: 23)

<sup>7</sup> Chalier points out that Levinas admits of the possibility of such a law being violent, and suggests that within Levinas's notion of the command, 'the face intrudes on the subject's world as a weak and defenceless appeal' that peacefully resists tyranny, whereas any law that disregards the face remains violent. (2002: 74)

<sup>8</sup> Levinas's describes the face of the Other as what approaches and resists. This is in opposition to me, but not in hostility so much as what resists and cannot be grasped: 'The face... is what resists me by its opposition and not what is opposed to me by its resistance. This means that this opposition is not revealed by its coming up against my freedom; it is an opposition prior to my freedom, which puts my freedom into action... The opposition of the face is not a hostility.' (Levinas 1998: 19)

it gives itself. It makes a place for subjectivity positing itself in abnegation, in sacrifice, and in substitution. Its great intuition is to have abandoned the idea of person as an end in itself. (1996: 94)<sup>9</sup>

Although Levinas criticises ‘modern antihumanism’, the deconstruction of the subject as the product of social discourses opens the way to thinking of the subject as never a self-sufficient I. It is not I who am an end in *myself*, but the Other: I only exist through responsibility for that Other. This space for recognising the self as formed by the address of the Other was only made possible by first conceiving of the self as dependent on other structures beyond its own conscious control, be they linguistic, psychoanalytic, ontological, economic. In different modes of poststructuralist discourse (from Lacan to Althusser), the self is overwhelmed and overflowed by different forms of alterity it is unable to master, and to which it is subjected. Levinas’s particular distinction is his recognition of the ethical moment of subjectivity, of the subject’s responsibility to the Other as the source of its uniqueness. This election to responsibility is also the source of freedom, rationality and consciousness. Freedom plays an important part in Levinas’s thinking of the subject in a way perhaps absent from the ‘antihumanist’ discourses he criticises. Yet at the same time, his view of the subject, called into being by the Other, admits of the social construction of the subject in a way perhaps underemphasised in the ‘old’ humanism of those who have given excessive emphasis to the autonomy of the self.

In relation to education, Levinas’s approach is attractive, admitting of the structuralist and poststructuralist insights into subjectivity as always already conditioned. Yet there is an unconditionality in the moment of responsibility, prior to and necessary for conditioning to happen.<sup>10</sup> The responsibility of the subject that makes it possible for her to be acted upon socially, psychologically, linguistically, and thus emerge as a human being is also the space of the possibility of her freedom. That moment of responsibility is transcendent and cannot be reduced to the social conditioning of the human. Thus Levinas’s humanism is not aimed at restoring the sovereignty of the self as a free autonomous ego, but recognising that the self can have freedom in responsibility even in its condition of being brought into being through being acted upon, called upon, by others.

Levinas, therefore, could be seen as construing the subject as heteronomous *and* autonomous. Education here depends on the human condition of heteronomy. Ethical maturity might be seen as recognising this heteronomy *and* becoming autonomous, in the sense of choosing to impose rules and commands on the self that enable us to live in peaceful relations in society. Autonomy for Levinas means protecting ourselves against tyranny through the creation of a just State that aims to protect the freedom of its citizens. Levinas suggests that in freedom we can see the possibility of being

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<sup>9</sup> This is from an early version of ‘Substitution’, presented as a lecture in Brussels in 1967, before being revised for publication in *La Revue Philosophique de Louvain*

<sup>10</sup> As Simon Critchley writes: ‘Although the human being is undoubtedly and massively determined by the contexts – sociohistorical, psychobiological, linguistic, biological – into which he or she is inserted, this in no way negates the unconditional priority of the ethical moment which rends those contexts. Thus the insights of anti-humanism and post-structuralism might well be necessary conditions for the determination of subjectivity, but they are not sufficient to explain the extraordinary event of my responsibility for another, what Levinas calls, in a key word of his later work, the holiness or saintliness of the human being.’ (Critchley 1999: 69-70)

degraded by others, and in choosing to submit to the rules and principles of law we are arming ourselves against such degradation:

Freedom consists in instituting outside of oneself an order of reason, in entrusting the rational to a written text, in resorting to institutions. Freedom, in its fear of tyranny, leads to institutions, to a commitment of freedom in the very name of freedom, to a State. (1998: 17)<sup>11</sup>

Throughout his writings, Levinas emphasises how any sense of rationality or instituting rules within the self as described above depends on that prior relationship between self and Other, the relation of responsibility, which Levinas variously terms ‘discourse’, ‘conversation’ and ‘teaching’.

Although we have seen how Levinas tends to privilege heteronomy over autonomy, elsewhere he does describe the self as autonomous *and* heteronomous:

The possibility of finding, anachronously, the order within obedience itself, and of receiving the order from oneself – this reversal of heteronomy into autonomy is the very way in which the Infinite comes to pass – all of which the metaphor of inscribing the law in consciousness expresses in a remarkable manner, reconciling autonomy and heteronomy (1996: 105)

This passage captures the sense in which the condition of subjectivity is essentially ambiguous. In passivity, the Other addresses me and I am heteronomous, yet the address founds my responsibility: it is I who am the author of my response. Levinas goes on to suggest that it is this ambiguous duality of the self as both heteronomous and autonomous that makes ethics possible:

An ambivalence that is the exception and the subjectivity of what was, *without my knowledge*, inspired in me – to have received, whence we know not, that of which I am the author. The unheard-of saying is enigmatic in its an-archic response, in my responsibility for the other. This ambiguity within the subject is the trace of the infinite, alternately beginning and intermediary, the diachronic ambivalence that makes ethics possible. (ibid.)

Thus autonomy is part of what it is to be ethical for Levinas: he equates the state of being responsible as a type of autonomy, envisioned as a state of ultimate concern for the Other and awareness of this concern.

Is freedom not that which is most remarkable in the mortal, finite, and interchangeable being who then raises himself to his unique identity as a human being? This is the meaning of the notion of election. *To be aware of it, to be able to say “I”, is to be born to a new autonomy.* (Levinas 2001: 193, emphasis mine)

We have seen then that for Levinas, the subject is autonomous *and* heteronomous. If one of the aims of education is the promotion of autonomy, how does Levinas help us understand this better?

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<sup>11</sup> This seems to suggest the taking on of rules for the sake of self-protection against the tyrannical rule of the other as a negative limitation. Elsewhere, Levinas describes the individual choosing to act with responsibility for the neighbour in much more positive terms, as an experience of grace.

If we follow Levinas, the autonomous self is aware that subjectivity is predicated on the discourses and relationships into which they were called. This is not to diminish rationality: Levinas sees rationality belonging to the juridical order necessary for the protection of individuals. That juridical order and sphere of rationality may depend on the unequal relation of subjectivity, but does not undermine the importance of the creation of a state founded upon principles of justice and equality. Levinas makes this clear in many different writings, for example when explaining substitution, he clarifies the practical outworking of justice in relation to the state:

Judgment, comparison, are necessary... The State, general laws, are necessary. Institutions are necessary to carry out decisions. Every work of politics and justice is necessary... This is the order that, perhaps, will be able to reveal its charitable roots in democracy. Justice and the just State constitute the forum enabling the existence of charity within the human multiplicity... As the issue of a certain limitation of charity, yet still grounded in love, the State can always review its law and its justice. Is this concern for reconsideration – for amelioration – not in effect the essence of democracy and of the liberal State, the sign of a mercy and charity that breathe there? An effort in view of an always better law. (Levinas 2001: 230)

This conception of a justice and rationality founded in infinite responsibility means that the law can never be static<sup>12</sup>. Education should therefore aim at the development of rational autonomy, whilst also striving for autonomy in the sense of an awareness of the infinite responsibility that makes each subject unique. Such an autonomy leads to a conception of citizenship in which I, an inhabitant of the State, seek to create a state in which charity can breathe.

We might see Levinas as calling us to work in education towards an autonomy founded on a sensibility prior to rationality. Judith Butler, drawing on Levinas's conception of the ethical subject, has suggested that we must conceive of autonomy in relation to our physical proximity to others. In 'Precarious Life', she argues that our struggle for autonomy must not privilege the rational at the expense of recognising our embodiment and the demands that others make on us in appealing to us in their physical vulnerability:

If I am struggling for autonomy, do I not also need to be struggling for something else as well, a conception of myself as invariably in community, impressed upon by others, impinging upon them as well, and in ways that are not fully in my control or clearly predictable? (Butler [2004] 2006: 27)

This is surely an important insight to consider when thinking of autonomy as an educational aim. If we want students to become autonomous, it is also necessary to encourage awareness that autonomy is only possible through the condition of existing in community, a community that makes demands on us and forms us in ways we cannot always control. Butler goes on to question:

Is there a way that we might struggle for autonomy in many spheres, yet also consider the demands that are imposed upon us by living in a world of beings

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<sup>12</sup> Levinas warns that a state that does not admit of the possibility of change must be suspected of 'Stalinism and fascism.' (2001: 231)

who are, by definition, physically dependent on one another, physically vulnerable to one another? Is this not another way of imagining community, one in which we are alike only in having this condition separately and so in having in common a condition that cannot be thought without difference? (ibid.)

This passage highlights why it is so important that we think very carefully about the ideal of autonomy we want to prioritise within education. The challenge of Levinas, and Butler in her interpretation of him, is to recognise that the distinction between autonomy and heteronomy is artificial. There could never be autonomous subjects that are not already heteronomous. The challenge for educationalists is not to turn away from rational autonomy, but to recognise that we can only be autonomous because of the transcendent moment of responsibility, in which I am always already in community and acted upon. Autonomy depends on the vulnerability and proximity of heteronomous subjects. The story of autonomy that has so far been told within philosophy of education has not paid sufficient attention to the condition of subjectivity as subjection to the Other and the importance of sensibility as fundamental to both heteronomy and autonomy. Sensibility to the Other's need, for Levinas, takes priority over the universal principles of Kantian autonomy. In front of the fact of another's distress, the condition of infinite responsibility is clear: I can never be satisfied that I have done enough. In educating for autonomy, we as teachers might hope to draw attention to the precariousness of life, my life and that of my neighbour, on which autonomy is founded.

If we are to educate students for autonomy, therefore, we need to enable students to become aware of the social discourses and relationships that have formed them, but also help them to see that while being acted upon, they are also acting, responding to those who address them in multiple situations, contexts and relations. As Butler writes:

We are at once acted upon and acting, and our "responsibility" lies in the juncture between the two. What can I do with the conditions that form me? What do they constrain me to do? What can I do to transform them? (ibid. 16)

These are questions that formal education should enable students to consider. As subjects formed by the process of subjection to social discourses, there remains nevertheless the choice of how to respond to the condition of responsibility. Butler makes this point powerfully:

The self at issue is clearly "formed" within a set of social conventions that raise the question whether a good life can be conducted within a bad one, and whether we might, in recrafting ourselves with and for another, participate in the remaking of social conditions. (2005: 134-135)

This, I would argue, is the condition of autonomy that education should strive for: remaking the self with and for another, and in doing so, participating in changing society to bring about a justice that is never satisfied. How educationalists might do this is not something that can be neatly prescribed,<sup>13</sup> as much depends on the personal

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<sup>13</sup> It is certainly not something that could be taught within moral education classes: it entails a different metaphysics to the dominant utilitarian ideologies underlying current education policies, and is not just about particular interpersonal relationships, but about our relations to everything.

relationships at stake in the recrafting, between students, teachers, and many others. However the challenge of Levinas and Butler is to recognise this richer notion of autonomy that extends beyond the rational and consider how as teachers we might lead students into an awareness of the conditions of their autonomy, intimately bound up with recognising the conditions of their heteronomy. Recognising the condition of vulnerability and sensibility as the basis for autonomy could have profound implications for our understanding of political communities and the fragility of peace.<sup>14</sup> My own experience as a teacher suggests that there are teachers who do teach in a way that draws students' attention to otherness and vulnerability, yet this is not something that can be easily planned for, assessed and measured, and so tends not to be prioritised within an education system dominated by aims, outcomes and assessment. The challenge is for education to become a space in which students might be enabled to begin the task of recrafting themselves, with an awareness of their own autonomy and heteronomy.

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<sup>14</sup> In her provocative *The Last Resistance*, Jacqueline Rose provides the following example of how the refusal to admit of vulnerability might prevent the possibility of peace: 'Responding in July 2003 to questions about the killing of Palestinian children by the Israeli army (in the conflict at that time, one in five dead Palestinians was a child), the commander in Gaza starts by taking responsibility: 'Every name of a child here, it makes me feel bad because it's the fault of my soldiers', but by the end of the conversation he has – in the words of the interviewer – returned to being 'combative', invoking the Holocaust as his rationale: 'I remember the Holocaust. We have a choice, to fight the terrorists or to face being consumed by the flames again.' There are suicide bombings on the part of the Palestinians in which Israeli children have died; they have rightly been described as unacceptable crimes. But the flames on the streets of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv are not the flames of the Holocaust... Nor can the building of the wall, targeted assassinations, the destruction of the entire infrastructure of Palestinian life and the daily humiliation of the people be justified as a legitimate security response. Something is in excess. For psychoanalysis, something arises in excess when there is something you cannot bear to think about. What would the situation in Israel-Palestine look like if the commander in Gaza deduced from his 'memory' of the Holocaust, for example, a shared vulnerability of peoples? What kind of nation would Israel become if the state ceased to promote omnipotence as the answer to historical pain? To recall Hareven: 'Even if often in history I have been the victim of others, I will never oppress those weaker than myself and never abuse my power to exile them.'" (2007: 55-56)

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