

Title: Encountering the Philosopher as Teacher: On Levinas and Teacher Education

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Ann Chinnery

After Auschwitz, I had the impression that in taking on the directorship of the École Normale Israélite Orientale I was responding to a historical calling. It was my little secret. . . . I am still mindful and proud of it today. (Levinas cited in Malka, 2006, p.84)

Introduction

Although Emmanuel Levinas has long been considered one of the most influential philosophers in Europe, it is only over the past 15 or 20 years that his work has been taken up in North American philosophy, and even more recently within philosophy of education. Almost without exception, the educational literature on Levinas has focused on how we can draw on his philosophical writings to inform our own thinking about educational theory and practice.¹ Curiously, however, even those of us who work in Faculties of Education have done little with the fact that for over 30 years Levinas served as director of the École Normale Israélite Orientale (ENIO), a Jewish teacher training school in Paris, and that he was a teacher of philosophy and Talmudic classes there for more than 40 years. In this paper I want to begin to fill that gap, starting not from Levinas's philosophical work *per se*, but from his pedagogical practices and everyday interactions with students, in order to think through our own projects of teaching and teacher education.

¹ See, e.g., Denise Egéa-Kuehne, *Levinas and education: at the intersection of faith and reason* (New York: Routledge, 2008); Sharon Todd, *Learning from the Other: Levinas, psychoanalysis and ethical possibilities in education* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003); the 2003 special issue of *Studies in Philosophy and Education* devoted to Levinas; as well as numerous articles in academic journals and the *PES Yearbook*.

First, however, a couple of caveats. Even though Levinas's pedagogy was framed by his ethic of unconditional responsibility to and for the Other, it is very difficult (if not impossible) for any of us to live up to the often saintly ideals we espouse, and, as we shall see below, Levinas was no exception. More importantly, since his ethics cannot be flattened into prescriptions for practice, his work at the ENIO ought not to be seen as a litmus test of his philosophy.² Finally, while he wrote about Jewish education in general during his years at the ENIO, especially in two essays in *Difficult Freedom* (1990), he did not write specifically about his directorship or his own teaching practice, so I will not attempt here to construct what might be called a "Levinasian approach" to teacher education. Rather, I will rely largely on interviews with Levinas (Poirié, 2001; Wright, Hughes, & Ainley, 1988; Levinas & Kearney, 1986), on Salomon Malka's biography of Levinas (2006, hereafter *LL*), on memories and testimonial accounts from his former students, and on speeches given at a colloquium on the centenary of Levinas's birth, as a way to begin to "think teacher education" alongside Levinas.

From these various accounts, I have sketched three pedagogical postures that Levinas embodied in his teaching: teaching as bearing witness, teaching as response, and a conception of teacher as *maître à penser*. I will take up each of these pedagogical postures in turn, and in the

² I cannot go into a detailed description of Levinas's ethics here, but for readers unfamiliar with his work, what is most important to know is that, especially in the aftermath of World War II, he sought to reclaim "the human" from what had previously passed for humanism. In contrast to the prevailing conception of subjectivity, which rests on the Enlightenment ideals of reason and individual autonomy, and which therefore privileges self-interest over the interests of the other, Levinas inverted the traditional understanding of self and other. He posited instead a conception of subjectivity wherein the "I" comes into being only in responding to the appeal of the Other and which therefore renders subjectivity as a position of inescapable debt and unconditional responsibility for the Other. For Levinas, then, ethics precedes ontology. For a fuller discussion see especially his *Totality and Infinity* (1969) and *Otherwise than Being* (1981). For connections to educational theory and practice, see the texts by philosophers of education cited in footnote 1, as well as various pieces by Claire Katz and Susan Handelman.

last section of the paper, I will reflect on them in relation to our own philosophical work in teaching and teacher education.

Teaching as Bearing Witness

In the epigraph to this paper, Levinas says that he saw his directorship of the ENIO as “responding to a historical calling” (in *LL*, p.84). His response, I want to suggest, could be characterized as bearing witness to the work of those scholars—both secular and religious—who preceded him. In commonsense terms, to bear witness means to give an account of something that one has either experienced firsthand or of an experience one has heard about through the testimony of someone who experienced it. Pedagogical witnessing, then, can be seen as the practice of taking the teachings of the past and bringing them to life for a new generation. Prosper Elkouby, one of the Moroccan students in Levinas’s first class after the war, recalls the Saturday morning Rashi³ course:

You had the sensation of a discourse being constructed before your eyes. [Levinas’s] thought would visibly grow with each sentence he spoke. For my part, I grew up in the traditions of my grandfathers, but at that time I was in a phase of rejection. We were stuck on the letter of the text, we didn’t go beyond it. And there, suddenly, this knowledge that I thought belonged to another era found itself validated, actualized. ...Levinas played a very important role. He allowed us to reconnect the lines with the past. (in *LL*, p.88-89)

However, just as memories of any event are often contradictory, so too the accounts of Levinas’s classroom practices and interactions with students are inconsistent. Former student Meyer Sisso, for example, did not hold Levinas’s teaching in high regard:

³ Rashi is the shortened name of Rabbi Salomon (Schlomo) ben Itzhak, a commentator on Jewish sacred texts and the Talmud who lived from 1040-1105. Levinas’s course on Rashi’s commentaries, which was open to the public as well as students at the ENIO, was very well-attended and ran for several decades.

At the risk of being shocking, I would say that he was not a good teacher. He had a philosophy course that was very rich, but disorganized, muddled. You couldn't always understand what he was saying. He would open up a parenthesis without ever closing it. It was afterwards, in reviewing the notes that you could make sense of it, after giving some order to what he said. We were teachers ourselves, and we came to think of his class as, in effect, a lecture. There was very little exchange with the students. (in *LL*, pp.104-5).

Others took Levinas's tendency toward impatience and his quick temper as signs of his mind being preoccupied with other concerns, whether his commitment to the larger purpose of the ENIO or his own philosophical work. Simon Hazan, for example, who was a student at the ENIO in the mid-1960s, was critical of Levinas's teaching ability, seeing him more as a philosopher who happened to end up as head of a school than as an educator (*LL*, p.89). But Hazan's criticism did not stand in the way of his admiration for Levinas's thought, and he has continued to keep a smaller version of the Rashi course going at the ENIO—his own way, perhaps, of bearing witness to Levinas's influence as a teacher:

In the Talmud, the question is asked: How do we know about the resurrection of the dead? The rabbis discuss the issue over a dozen pages or so, wielding arguments, citations and allusions. And among the allusions, a reference is made to a passage from the *Song of Songs* where there is mention of 'one who makes the dead move their lips.' This is given as proof that the dead are resurrected. But in what situation does this happen? When one quotes someone who is dead, when something is said in his name, when what he said is now relevant. Levinas may not have left any disciples behind, but thousands of students are still able to make his lips move. (Hazan in *LL*, pp.105-6)

Echoing the same passage from the *Song of Songs*, Ami Bouganim (in Chalier & Bouganim, 2008, p.23) writes, “Although Monsieur Levinas is dead...I feel his lips permanently quivering in the tomb as we so often quote him, invoke him, and discuss him.”

A common thread running through these memories is that whether Levinas was making the lips of a long dead philosopher move or labouring over exegetical work in the Rashi class, he did not approach teaching as “a matter of ‘taking’ the floor in a magisterial fashion” but rather of taking up the call to pass on what he had received as a way to keep the words alive (Chalier & Bouganim, 2008, p.13). For Levinas, teaching as bearing witness was not a matter of simply repeating what he had learned, but of “blowing on the embers” of the ancient texts “so that the flame rises” for a new generation (in Poirié, 2001, p.80).

Roger Simon (2005, p.54) notes that, as a pedagogical posture, witnessing requires a certain attentiveness and susceptibility to the past as Other, in which we are called to greet the past “with a binding allegiance: ‘Here I am.’ Here I am to learn and *attempt* to exceed the limits of my knowledge. In my approach as apprentice, I submit myself to learn the limits of myself and, in doing so, bare myself to a wounding—a trauma inflicted by the other’s [words]” (emphasis in original). As a pedagogical posture, then, to submit ourselves to the past and bear witness to it means that we risk learning not only what we had originally set out to learn, but also that which might shatter our existing knowledge, and even our self-understanding as knowing subjects. Simon’s description of pedagogical witnessing as an ethical posture of “Here I am” is a direct reference to Levinas’s conception of subjectivity as, at the most fundamental level, a reply or response to the appeal of the Other, and it is clear that Levinas saw his work with future teachers as a way of bearing witness to the past in order to ensure that the ancient texts would live on.

I will not take up here the more nuanced philosophical discussions of Levinas's "Here I am" as a posture of unconditional responsibility to and for the Other; that work can be found in the texts I cited earlier and especially in Levinas's own *Otherwise than Being* (1981). Rather, I will briefly address some of the more practical, even mundane, ways in which Levinas attempted to fulfill his responsibility for the students in his care by embodying a conception of teaching as response.

Teaching as Response

In Levinas's life, ethics did not exist simply in the realm of theory. In fact, on two separate occasions, when challenged that his ethics was too utopian and unreal, he conceded that while "there is a great separation between the way the world functions concretely and the ideal of saintliness of which I am speaking" (Wright, Hughes, & Ainley, 1988, p.177), "its 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" (Levinas & Kearney, 1986, p.32). Acknowledging that an ethics of unconditional responsibility is impossible to fully realize, it is nonetheless the ideal that guided Levinas in his day-to-day interactions with the students at the ENIO. Thérèse Goldstein, who was hired as Levinas's secretary in 1953 and worked at the school for over 40 years, put it this way:

I didn't know very many philosophers, but this was someone who lived out his philosophy in his life from day to day. He was no different in his attitude. He had a humanism, or a humanity, that was—I'm not sure how to say it—quite remarkable. He lived the lives of others. He was concerned with those who had a problem, either a personal one or in

relation to the other students. He did everything to help people and to get them out of their difficulties. (in *LL*, p.103).

Simon Hazan (in *LL*, p.100) echoes Goldstein, saying, “Besides the great philosophical ideas that he dealt with, he also knew how to handle situations of distress that were close at hand.” In one case, he offered room and board in exchange for teaching to a former student living far from home, and there are countless other stories from students who were recipients of Levinas’s acts of kindness and care, even if they were often perceived as paternalistic and not always appreciated.

Levinas and his family lived in an apartment within the ENIO, and in the early years he was responsible for everything at the school, from broken showers to student outings to complaints about the meals to making sure the girls and boys did not go out together. Given his well-known propensity for fretting and his nervousness about the littlest things, Goldstein (2006) remembers that he rarely left home, even for a walk, for fear that something would go wrong, and he worried constantly about his students, their studies and their future. He would wait up for them if they had gone out in the evening and would scold them if they were late in returning. In the morning, he would be waiting for the students to come down from their rooms and he sent them off to bed with prayers (Chalier & Bouganim, 2008, p.18).

Levinas’s attentiveness to students’ needs and his insistence on responding to the smallest request for help or companionship was not limited to the practical side of his life; it carried through to his intellectual engagement with students as well. I will explore this aspect more fully in the next section, but for now suffice it to say that Levinas’s pedagogical postures of bearing witness and response reflected his ongoing commitment and attempt (however inadequate) to live toward an ethics of unconditional responsibility to and for the Other, an approach that

Chalier & Bouganim (2008, p.20) characterize as “a great pedagogical mansuetude,” or gentleness. So let us now move on to the third of Levinas’s pedagogical postures, the role of teacher as *maître à penser*.

Teacher as *Maître à Penser*

At the 2006 colloquium on the centenary of Levinas’s birth, Roger Burggraeve⁴ spoke about his longstanding relationship with Levinas. The two often met on Monday afternoons to discuss various aspects of Levinas’s philosophical work, beginning with their initial encounter in 1976 through to 1993, two years before Levinas’s death. Burggraeve notes that over the years, he also saw the same hospitality and intellectual generosity being extended to others. In a speech at the colloquium, Burggraeve (2006) described Levinas as a *maître à penser*. The term ‘*maître à penser*’ is not readily translatable into English; it includes but is not fully encompassed by ‘mentor,’ ‘master of thinking,’ and ‘master of thought,’ so I will say a bit about each of these aspects in relation to Levinas’s pedagogical practice.

Burggraeve’s relationship with Levinas was primarily one-on-one rather than in large classes, and it began when Burggraeve was a doctoral student; therefore, his memory of Levinas as a mentor seems quite natural. The students who attended the ENIO, however, were divided on their views of Levinas as a mentor. Malka notes that “some of the old students came to hate him for a long time...for his roughness, his moods, his unpredictable side” (*LL*, p.90). Former student Gabriel Cohen claimed that Levinas always “had a monopoly on speaking. He did the talking. If one asked him a question, it would immediately make him uncomfortable, he would actually

⁴ Burggraeve is currently a professor emeritus of moral theology at the Katholieke Universiteit in Leuven. He defended his Ph.D. dissertation on Levinas in 1980, and continued throughout his career to write on Levinasian themes.

become destabilized and lose his train of thought” (in *LL*, p.104). However, Jean Ellouk, an early student of Levinas, disagreed, saying:

I had a very peculiar relationship with him, very different from the ones I’ve heard about. I suppose now that it was a challenge at the time, but I let myself talk to him as an equal. Outside the philosophy course, on Saturdays, I would sometimes go on walks with him in the gardens of the ENIO... . We’d walk around and chat. About philosophy, phenomenology, psychology. ...[I]n any case, I can say that it was easy to communicate with him, he welcomed discussion, and contradiction. It was not merely a lecture, one could speak freely. (in *LL*, p.105)

Despite the conflicting memories about Levinas’s capacity for mentorship, it is clear that he was deeply committed to the life of the mind and that he embodied the sense of *maître à penser* as a master of thinking. According to Mme. Goldstein (2006), the atmosphere at the ENIO was one of “exceptional intellectual life,” a culture of study where students developed “a thirst to learn and a desire to flourish.” In Annette Aronowicz’s (1999, p.98, fn 16) introduction to Levinas’s *Nine Talmudic Readings*, she says that Levinas saw “intellectual work as the only road back to a living Judaism,” and the energy he put into his teaching certainly bore this out. If any of the students showed an interest in learning Greek or Latin or Italian, Levinas would go out of his way to hire a private tutor (*LL*, p.91); and his passion for study and teaching led him to “put so much heart into what he wanted to convey to his students, and into encouraging them in their work, that he left class each day with his face bathed in sweat” (Goldstein, 2006). Malka, too, says that Levinas was often remembered for his “out of breath speech in search of just the right word, the labor of thinking so evident in his work, always unfolding in a succession of

awkwardness and illumination, like the opening of a clearing, a concrete vision of the psyche...” (LL, p.95).

For Levinas, being expected to prepare a course where it appeared that he already had everything figured out, and could anticipate the students’ questions and objections, was not only abstract and artificial but also, in his words, “somewhat anxiety-producing” (in Poirié, 2001, p.79). In contrast to colleagues who excelled at prepared lectures, and for whom he maintained a certain kind of admiration, in Levinas’s view the most exciting part of teaching was “the explication of a text which poses its questions to you as much as to your auditors, and where the effort consists in reanimating dissimulated questions” (in Poirié, 2001, p.80).

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. As former student Ariel Wizman recalls, ““At no moment could we show pride or self-satisfaction. [Levinas’s] very presence made this impossible. He himself never showed it. This was a person untouched by any aspiration to notoriety”” (in LL, p.96). To be a master of thinking is therefore to remain forever a student.

However, the conception of *maître à penser* as a master of thought also implies a substantial mastery of content. According to Aronowicz (1999, p.69), Levinas believed that “what ultimately moves people is truth, truth arrived at through the intellect, through a skillful

probing and analyzing.” In his own case, this meant pursuing study in Russian literature (especially Dostoevsky, Pushkin and Tolstoy), philosophy (both ancient and modern), Hebrew, the ancient Jewish texts and Talmudic teachings, Proust and other modernist novelists, and so on; and he brought this formidable store of knowledge to bear not only in his work with students at the ENIO, but also in the yearly colloquia of Jewish intellectuals in France which began in 1957. According to Jean Halperin, Levinas was known amongst his peers for the “mastery and care” with which he responded to the demand of preparing and presenting a lecture, “reflect[ing] for weeks and months on a talmudic page that he had chosen to illustrate the thematic question of each colloquium” (in *LL*, p.132-133).

In Burggraeve’s (2006) reflections on his afternoons with Levinas, he remembers initially being thrown off by what appeared to be a kind of intellectual stubbornness on Levinas’s part, and his tendency to correct Burggraeve or contradict his interpretation. However, Burggraeve later came to recognize this aspect of their relationship as one of student and *rav* (or *rabbi*). In Bouganim’s words (Chalier & Bouganim, 2008, p.22), Levinas’s “pedagogical wager was on intelligence, clarity, and generosity,” and he engaged with his students accordingly.

“There Exists a Teacher”

Of the three pedagogical postures I sketched above—teaching as bearing witness, teaching as response, and the role of teacher as *maître à penser*—I find the latter to be the most theoretically interesting, and one that, to the best of my knowledge, has not yet been taken up in the English language literature on teacher education. In closing, then, let me offer some preliminary thoughts on what that conception might mean for our own projects of teaching and teacher education.

In an article entitled “Martin Heidegger at eighty,” Hannah Arendt recalled the excitement that greeted Heidegger’s arrival at the University of Marburg in the early 1920s:

The rumour about Heidegger put it quite simply: Thinking has come to life again; the cultural treasures of the past, believed to be dead, are being made to speak, in the course of which it turns out that they propose things altogether different from the familiar worn-out trivialities that they had been presumed to say. There exists a teacher; one can perhaps learn to think. (1978, p.295)

It goes without saying that Heidegger’s later moral and political transgressions make him a problematic role model in many respects.⁵ And I do not think that we can simply separate his philosophical work from his political actions, explaining away his involvement with National Socialism as an error or temporary lapse in judgment, as Heidegger himself and Arendt later tried to do. However, what I want to focus on here is the description of a teacher as someone of whom it can be said, “thinking has come to life again,” and who can help others learn to think. These two qualities, it seems to me, offer a promising direction for theorizing teaching and teacher education in our own time.

When asked about his own teachers, Levinas said of Edmund Husserl that “he gave me eyes to see” (in *LL*, p.40), and of the Heidegger of *Being and Time*, Levinas (1989, p.485) wrote that he was “the interlocutor and equal of the greatest—those very few—founders of European philosophy... [whom] all modern thought would soon have to answer.” From Mordechai Chouchani, an itinerant Talmudic scholar with whom he studied intensely after the war, Levinas

⁵ I am referring here especially to Heidegger’s well-documented involvement with Nazism. For a fuller treatment of this issue, see, for example, the symposium on Heidegger and Nazism in *Critical Inquiry* 15(2). While never denying Heidegger’s betrayal and moral transgressions, Levinas also maintained a lifelong admiration for *Being and Time*, saying, “I always try to relive the ambiance of those readings, when 1933 was still unthinkable”; and he declared that “[anyone] who undertakes to philosophize in the twentieth century cannot not have gone through Heidegger’s philosophy, even to escape it” (1985, p.42)

got back his “trust in the books” (in Poirié, 2001, p.78), and he learned an approach to Talmudic scholarship that consisted in “introducing [oneself] to the text and then nourishing [oneself] by drilling, by returning, by turning it over and over; a subversive way of reading”—an approach that Levinas then fostered among his own students (*LL*, p.126).

While the term *maître à penser* is often conferred as an honorific toward the end of someone’s life, or even only after death, when the full impact of his or her work is recognized, I want to investigate more fully what it might mean for teacher education if we were to take seriously the idea of teacher as a mentor/ master of thinking/ master of thought. In other words, instead of focusing on developing a teacher identity or on fostering particular pedagogical dispositions, what if we were to focus on cultivating teachers who were passionate about thinking and who modeled the capacity to mentor students both in a particular content area and in the process of thinking itself? Such a shift requires some careful unpacking, and several questions come immediately to mind. For example, Is ‘*maître à penser*’ used primarily to refer to qualities of an individual, or is it an inherently relational concept? In other words, can there be a master without a student? And what difference might that make in terms of how we conceptualize teaching within the field of teacher education? Does the image of a ‘master of thinking’ or ‘master of thought’ risk turning the pedagogical relationship into one of idolatry or discipleship? If so, how might we ensure that what is fostered instead is a somewhat irreverent kind of inspiration that keeps intellectual freedom (but not necessarily autonomy) at the fore?

The various, and sometimes contradictory, accounts of Levinas’s time at the ENIO depict a philosopher who also took his responsibilities as a teacher and teacher educator seriously. In *Outside the Subject*, Levinas remarked, “It might astonish some that—faced with so many unleashed forces, so many violent and voracious acts that fill our history, our societies and our

souls—I should turn to the *I-Thou* or the responsibility-of-one-person-for-the-other to find the categories of the Human” (1993, p.42). But this is precisely what he did. As Catherine Chalier put it, “he wagered on an education that does not separate human beings” (2008, p.16). In his philosophical work, Levinas pushed continental ethics into radically new territory, and in his Talmudic scholarship he paved the way for a new generation of Jewish teachers and scholars. By turning and returning to the texts even while he struggled with the day-to-day anxieties of the directorship, Levinas modeled for his students a conception of teaching as equal parts intellectual endeavour and ethical responsibility, and I want to suggest that, as philosophers of education, we too might have something to learn in thinking through our own projects of teaching and teacher education starting from practice.

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