
MEAD, HABERMAS, AND LEVINAS:
CULTIVATING SUBJECTIVITY IN EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRACY

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For several decades education has struggled to find a way out of the entanglement of modernity, the premises and assumptions under which modern education has operated. According to Robin Usher and Richard Edwards, modern education, as the “dutiful child of the Enlightenment,” has been “allotted a key role in the forming and shaping of subjectivity and identity, the task of making people into particular kinds of subject,”¹ specifically, self-realizing and self-directing modern subjects. Since the last century, however, the critique against the philosophy of the subject, including that from postmodern and poststructuralist thinkers and critical theorists, has been so devastating that for many philosophers, it is imperative that new approaches to the subject be introduced. Jürgen Habermas is among these philosophers. After World War II, he proposed a paradigm shift from the philosophy of consciousness to the philosophy of language, attempting to completely reconfigure the subject so that intersubjectivity can be established and genuine community and democracy can be achieved. His reconfiguration is particularly tailored to ensure its ethical, political, and practical applications. As appealing as his theory should be for a field as practical as education, his theory has not attracted a great number of educators. For many, his propositions still fall short of viable alternatives. Some have complained that his propositions cannot deal with the radical Otherness of the Other we often encounter in education.² His linguistic self is also too thinly grounded to be sufficiently convincing.

At the same time, educational philosophers have been increasingly drawn to Emmanuel Levinas’s philosophy and his approach to human subjectivity. While some have also complained that Levinas’s theory is not practical—it “offers no practical advice, no straightforward answers or prescriptions for practice”³—his radical idea of the Otherness of the Other and his novel approach to human subjectivity have had great appeal for educational theorists. Gert Biesta, for one, has argued that Levinas’s subject is centrally defined by its “irreplaceability,” in the sense that when we are called upon by the Other, we cannot be replaced, and thus provides a “completely different

¹ Robin Usher and Richard Edwards, *Postmodernism and Education* (London: Routledge, 1994): 24–25.

² See Trevor Maddock, “The Nature and Limits of Critical Theory in Education,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 31, no. 1 (1999), 43–61.

³ Anne Chinnery, “Aesthetics of Surrender: Levinas and the Disruption of Agency in Moral Education,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 22, no. 1 (2003), 5.

avenue to the question of human subjectivity.”⁴ He argues that this approach has escaped a “theory” or “truth” of the subject, and consequently is essential for the educational mission of “subjectification.” Based on his interpretation of Levinas’s subject, Biesta proposes the pedagogy of “interruption,”⁵ which is, nonetheless, not without problems. For example, one may ask how the pedagogy of “interruption” helps bring into being future citizens who have to actively deal with the complex social and political issues of the world.

In this paper I provide a different structure of Levinas’s subject. Levinas’s philosophy is a theory of ethics as well as a theory of the subject. More importantly, a reinterpretation of Levinas’s subject as open, ethical, and transformative and one that breaks away from its “essence” is vital for building a humane world where differences can be received and intersubjectivity can be established. Based on a critical analysis of the philosophies of both Levinas and Habermas, I make the case that a Levinasian subjectivity is necessary for the genuine democracy Habermas is striving for, and Habermas’s communicative community is where Levinas’s subject can be “present” without losing its openness and responsibility to the Other. The proposed synthesis intends to draw on the strengths and overcome the shortcomings of both. In education where students grow and come to presence in their encounters with different others and where they learn to become active citizens facing the political and ethical challenges of the world, I suggest that such a synthesis allows education the critical role of cultivating a subjectivity that will make a genuine and vibrant democracy possible.

THE PROBLEM WITH THE PHILOSOPHY OF CONSCIOUSNESS AND HABERMAS’S LINGUISTIC SUBJECT

While modern Western philosophy has been criticized by many, not least by Nietzsche and Foucault, as the new invention of a power strategy or as driven by the “will to power,” the original intent of some of the key architects of modern thinking, such as Descartes and Kant, may have been the emancipation of humanity from external forces. In philosophizing a subject that contains an internal source of creativity and autonomy, modern philosophers have mostly looked at the consciousness inside us as the sole origin of actions and the essence that distinguishes humanity from other species. Habermas calls this philosophy the philosophy of consciousness. Descartes first developed a notion of the knowing subject located in the realm of consciousness, equated with the *ego cogito*, which is “the spontaneous source of cognition and

⁴ Gert J.J. Biesta. “Education after the Death of the Subject: Levinas and the Pedagogy of Interruption,” in *The Handbook of Cultural Politics and Education*, ed. Zeus Leonardo (Rotterdam, Netherlands: Sense, 2010), 295.

⁵ Gert J.J. Biesta, *Good Education in An Age of Measurement: Ethics, Politics, Democracy* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2010).

action.”⁶ This transcendental *ego cogito* was seen as the origin of the universe (as we know it), carrying out the double roles of observing the external world and reflectively turning back to the self, as if in a mirror, in creating knowledge about the world and the self. This isolated ego and consciousness, however, separate from the world and detached from itself, only approaches the world and itself as an observer, and therefore everything under its gaze is objectified. As Habermas comments, from the observer-perspective, the subject has to “view itself as the dominating counterpart to the world as a whole or as an entity appearing within it.”⁷ Such a subject follows a logical procedure of reason, but rationality is only assessed by how “the isolated subject orients himself to representational and propositional contents.”⁸ Rationality becomes instrumental in the sense that it splits subject from object and “looks, above all else, to gain control over nature and render it predictable.”⁹

This particular line of modern thinking has been highly influential in shaping modern society and modern education. The problem with this philosophy, unsurprisingly, is also widely and painfully felt in modern society, as illuminated by works of modern and postmodern critical thinkers such as Marx, Horkheimer, Adorno, and Foucault. Achieving freedom and emancipation seems inherently difficult, and sometimes paradoxical. Not only is everything Other in the world of the knowing subject objectified and dominated, but also the subject itself. Freedom means the unlimited domination of the conscious subject over the world and its own material and empirical experiences. As human beings, therefore, we are simultaneously empowered and dominated.¹⁰ Since rationality is solely measured by how effective the subject realizes its own goals and purposes, rationality only makes the domination more effective and more efficient. Modern education, which is based on, and devoted to, the Kantian idea of cultivating autonomous and rational individuals, is, therefore, also inevitably entangled and fraught with paradoxes.

With a critical analysis of the modern philosophy of the subject, Habermas attempts to move away from the focus on the isolated ego and consciousness. After World War II, Habermas was further convinced that the

⁶ Jürgen Habermas, “Individuation through Socialization: On George Herbert Mead’s Theory of Subjectivity,” in *Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays*, trans. William Mark Hohengarten (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 158.

⁷ Jürgen Habermas, “Selections from ‘An alternative way out of the philosophy of the subject: Communicative versus subject-centered reason,’” in *Critical Theory: The Essential Readings*, eds. David Ingram and Julia Simon-Ingram (New York: Paragon House, 1992), 273.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 276.

⁹ Michael Crotty, *The Foundations of Social Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998), 141.

¹⁰ See my “Freedom Reconsidered: Heteronomy, Open Subjectivity, and the ‘Gift of Teaching,’” *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, published online December 17, 2013.

German philosophical tradition could not provide the conceptual resources he needed, and he turned to Anglo-American thought for inspiration, in particular the American form of democracy and its foundation: Dewey's pragmatism and George Herbert Mead's theory of the social self. Eventually Habermas developed a philosophy of language, instead of consciousness, in which communicative acts become the quintessential human activity and social life.

In attempting to move the origin of human actions from the consciousness inside each individual to a social, intersubjective, and communicative origin, Habermas saw that Mead has paved the way for such a move. Mead, Habermas says, has "analyzed phenomena of consciousness from the standpoint of how they are formed within the structures of linguistically or symbolically mediated interaction."¹¹ Mead's self, which takes "the attitude of the other" and internalizes the "generalized other" is a subject that "finds itself . . . in something external, inasmuch as it takes into itself and makes its own something that it encounters as an object."¹² Such an approach is in the "opposite direction"¹³ of the philosophy of consciousness. "In an action schema or in a schema of relations, something subjective that has been externalized."¹⁴

However, for Habermas, the Meadian concept of "symbolically mediated interaction"¹⁵ is still "tied to the model of the philosophy of consciousness"¹⁶ in that whatever comes from the external has to be internalized within the consciousness to coordinate the actor's actions. Habermas wants to further ensure that the origin of our actions is located squarely in the intersubjective, in particular, in the communicative and linguistic world. According to Habermas, what is lacking in Mead's symbolic interactionism is an inquiry into "how a differentiated system of language could replace the older, species-specific innate regulation of behavior."¹⁷ When "signal language develops into *grammatical speech*, . . . the medium of reaching understanding detaches itself simultaneously from the symbolically structured selves of participants in interaction and from a society that has condensed into a normative reality."¹⁸ The linguistic structure of communication itself has the power to coordinate the ego's and alter ego's actions without force or conflicts.

For Habermas, communicative actions are essentially actions of giving and accepting reasons and when speakers "raise claims to the validity of what

¹¹ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 2 (Boston: Beacon, 1987), 4.

¹² *Ibid.*, 9.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

is being uttered, they are proceeding in the expectation¹⁹ that their communicative partners will coordinate their actions based on the acceptance of the speakers' claims. People are essentially rational beings and through "communicative action embedded in a normative context,"²⁰ they can "achieve a rationally motivated agreement and can coordinate their plans and actions" accordingly. The giving and accepting of reasons is based on three measures: "subjective truthfulness, . . . normative rightness, [and] the truth claim."²¹ Therefore, "With the differentiation of the basic modes, the linguistic medium of reaching understanding gains the power to bind the will of responsible actors. Ego can exercise this illocutionary power on alter when both are in a position to orient their actions to validity claims."²² When the validity of the claims is contested, the communicative actors proceed to "discourse" where argumentation and dialogue are performed and the claims are tested for their truthfulness, correctness, and authenticity.

In this way, Habermas seeks to establish the linguistic and intersubjective origin of human actions. Rationality is no longer inside consciousness and represented by ego; it becomes intersubjectively locked and tied to language communication. In this philosophy of language, the subject and the others are equal partners, or ego and alter ego, in Habermas's terms. We are still conscious beings, but our ego does not operate in isolation, taking itself as the dominant counterpart to the world, but is interlocked and operates within the communicative world. Further, this relationship with others also "allows him to relate to himself as a participant in an interaction from the perspective of alter, [which allows him to escape] the kind of objectification inevitable from the reflexively applied perspective of the observer."²³ Thus no one is objectified in this communicative approach to the world.

Based on such a philosophy of communication, Habermas attempts to build a democracy where different interlocutors, treated as equals and free of social and economic pressure, can develop mutual understanding and critical rationality. Through critical discussion, consensus and understanding on matters of common concern can be reached.

THE PROBLEM WITH HABERMAS'S LINGUISTIC SUBJECT

As hopeful as Habermas is and as influential as his philosophy has been in the areas of philosophy, political-legal thought, sociology, communication studies, developmental psychology, and theology, his philosophy of communication has not been as enthusiastically embraced by educational philosophers as one would expect. Some recognize the importance of "deliberative competence" through which "critical and autonomous

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Habermas, "Selections," 274.

thought²⁴ can be developed and see the rational deliberation on matters of common concern as an essential component of democratic education. Others regard Habermas's proposition of a rational intersubjectivity that relies much less on the subject and consciousness as a reasonable answer to postmodernists, but many still think "Habermas's alternative . . . retains a fundamental plank of subjectivist idealism and liberalism."²⁵ His communication theory is "too idealistic to relate to communication in real life"²⁶ or classroom dialogue, and his theory has the "potential to suppress significant social differences."²⁷

The problem with Habermas's philosophy of language, I suggest, is that his theory of the linguistic subject is too submerged, as is Mead's social self, in a social web and the linguistic threads are too thin to be the ground of human subjectivity. His communicative subject does not necessarily break away from the power of ego and consciousness; in Habermas, we still operate as ego and alter ego but without explanation, the ego has lost its power to stand back in orienting his plan, and his action becomes automatically bound by the intersubjective rationality. One may ask how an ego can "mindlessly" conform to the norm and act accordingly, or why participants "are in a position to orient their actions to validity claims" since they are still egos and alter egos. How can a group of diverse peoples make the same judgment on whether the "norms . . . can be justified, [or] . . . deserve to be recognized as legitimate"?²⁸ In Habermas's account of the intersubjective relationship, all subjects are conceived of as equal but the same, and we can "know" and interchangeably take each other's perspectives as first and second persons. This account does not take into consideration the different Other, who might not be the same, who might be incompatibly different, and thus has the "potential to suppress significant social differences," as Maddock argues.²⁹ Even though Habermas intends his theory of communication to be a moral-political theory, such insensitivity to difference would make justice difficult to achieve. As Love suggests, justice requires "a greater sensitivity to the diversity and complexity of life."³⁰

In addition, unlike Mead, Habermas relies mainly on the linguistic structure of communication to ensure the individuality and autonomy of the

²⁴ Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education*, rev. ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 30.

²⁵ Maddock, "Nature and Limits," 44.

²⁶ Robert E. Young, *A Critical Theory of Education: Habermas and Our Children's Future* (New York:

Teachers College Press, 1999), 76.

²⁷ Maddock, "Nature and Limits," 44.

²⁸ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, *Reason and the Rationalization of Society* (Boston: Beacon, 1984), 89.

²⁹ Maddock, "Nature and Limits," 44.

³⁰ Nancy S. Love, "What's Left of Marx?" in *The Cambridge Companion to Habermas*, ed. S. K. White (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 62.

actors. Avidly embracing the “linguistic turn,” Habermas claimed as early as 1967 that language is “the web to whose threads subjects cling and through which they develop into subjects in the first place.”³¹ He agrees that Mead’s social self “exposes itself to the objection that it only applies to the reflected self-relation of a subject speaking with itself, but does not apply to *originary* self-consciousness,”³² and that self agency only “functions in the consciousness of the socialized individual as society’s agent and drives everything that spontaneously deviates out of the individual’s consciousness.”³³ Habermas suggests that “in communicative action everyone . . . recognizes in the other his own autonomy.”³⁴ “The communicative actor is encouraged by the bare structure of linguistic intersubjectivity to remain himself, even in behavior conforming to [the] norm. . . . The initiative to realize oneself cannot in principle be taken away from any one—and no one can give up this initiative. . . . [With] the logic of the use of the personal pronouns, . . . this speaker cannot *in actu* rid himself of his irreplaceability, cannot take refuge in the anonymity of a third person, but must lay claim to recognition as an individuated being.”³⁵ We are unique, autonomous individuals because of the linguistic structure of communication!

One may ask, how can I realize my autonomy and initiative by saying “I am a slave”? Does that personal pronoun make the fact *my* initiative? Would the listener recognize me as his equal and as a human being because I used “I”? While Habermas is correct in that no matter what objectifying situation we are in, when recognizing and saying “I am a slave,” we have distinguished ourselves from an object, but such an *initiative* is still far from that of an active subject. The linguistic structure of communication, it seems, is still insufficient to render a person a subject.

The radical reconstruction of the philosophy of the subject, for Habermas, is an attempt to redeem modernity, upholding its passionate pursuit of human freedom and rationality. Habermas believes that modernity is at variance with itself and only by moving away from the ego- and consciousness-centered subject and by locating the source of our subjectivity in intersubjective communication are we able to realize the modern inspiration of emancipation. But to really redeem modernity, Habermas needs a stronger and more thoroughly developed theory of the subject, and Levinas provides exactly such a theory.

³¹ Jürgen Habermas, *On the Logic of the Social Science* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 117.

³² Jürgen Habermas, “Individuation,” 172.

³³ *Ibid.*, 180.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 190.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

LEVINAS'S THEORY OF THE SUBJECT

Levinas's account of the subject is developed precisely to reverse the long Western tradition that centers on ego and consciousness as the origin of human subjectivity.³⁶ Levinas locates the origin of subjectivity instead in the pre-ego, pre-conscious, and pre-reflective experiences of human existence, and in the encounter of the self with the other and the world. According to Levinas, before ego and consciousness "gather" us and our sense of the world, we live in the world, dwelling in happiness without knowing and coming to terms with ourselves. This is the state of unintentional interiority and singularity that cannot be captured by our knowing ego and consciousness, and therefore, we become radically alterior to each other and to ourselves. We cannot know the Other in his entirety and our "coming to presence" cannot exhaust the rich and irreducible unintentional experiences of existence.

Our encounter with the radical Other, however, at the pre-ego and pre-consciousness stage, interrupts the all-encompassing power of ego and consciousness and prevents it from taking the dominant role. Levinas maintains that since the radical Other cannot be known and assimilated into the total territory of the "I," the power of ego and consciousness is undermined and instead, our sociality, the phenomenological basis for love, kindness, and holiness, becomes the origin of our subjectivity. Our uneasiness in front of the face of the Other, for fear of having usurped the Other's space and the unbearableness of watching others suffer or die, is rooted in our sociality. Before ego and consciousness isolate us, therefore, we are already called into responsibility to the Other. Responsibility is the primordial origin of human subjectivity. Ego and consciousness are secondary, coming only when the third party appears. According to Levinas, for the purpose of justice, we need to thematize, evaluate, compare, and judge. The power of ego and consciousness is justified only on the ground of justice. Thus Levinas paints a subjectivity that appears and is manifest, but bears the trace of its own interruption and destruction in the face of the Other. The "coming into theme" while "getting out of phase" in the face of the Other, the being that is always at risk of disappearing, is the structure of our subjectivity. This subject is capable of being led by the beyond; and the very possibility of our going beyond our nature, the possibility of transcendence and spirituality, is found in our subjectivity.

In this way, Levinas breaks away from the isolating and dominating power of ego and consciousness that totalize the self and others. Along the line of thinking of the French philosophy of difference (Derrida, Nancy, Deleuze), Levinas approaches the subject from the insight that it is open and transformative, beyond being and otherwise than being. At the same time, Levinas provides an ethical framework for the coming to be of the subject. Our

³⁶ See my "Levinas and the Mission of Education," *Educational Theory* 62, no. 6 (2012): 659–675.

encounter with others is situated in a normative context of responsibility to the Other. Norms and ethics are not cognitively determined, as Habermas suggests, but are categorical, *a priori*. Thus Levinas's theory of the subject directly addresses the problems of Habermas's philosophy of language and provides a normative context for a genuine realization of Habermas's democracy.

However, since Levinas's emphasis is on the non-being and subjection phase of the subject, on the primacy of responsibility, he never elaborated on what happens when ego and consciousness finally arise when the "third" arrives. How are thematization and presence carried out without falling back to the consciousness and ego-centered subject? In particular, how is rationality developed and how is it different from the instrumental reason of the subject of consciousness? These questions were never answered by Levinas. This inadequacy of his theory of the subject, along with his insistence that the "absolute difference . . . is established only by language"³⁷ and the possibilities of totality and ethics are both realized in language, provide the point where Habermas's insights regarding speech acts and communicative reason can play a part.

CULTIVATING LEVINAS'S SUBJECT FOR HABERMAS'S PUBLIC SPHERE: AN EDUCATIONAL PROJECT

Introducing Levinas's subject into Habermas's public sphere means that in communication and critical discussion, the subject has pre-established a bond of responsibility to the Other and recognizes the irreducibility of the Other's subjectivity and difference. It presupposes that the ego and consciousness of the subject do not have absolute autonomy and self-complacency; their power is interrupted, affected, and undermined by the face of the Other and is only justified on the grounds of justice and the common good. It also presupposes that both the self and the Other's subjectivity, singularity, and alterity cannot be compromised. The Other is never completely known, or objectifiable, but remains a mystery, a radical difference that cannot be fully comprehended by the subject. While Habermas's system is of equal subjects able to completely know and undertake the perspectives of the Others, Levinas confirms that the Other is not my equal and my relationship with the Other is asymmetrical, and my encounter with the unknown Other will open me up and lead to my responsibility and transformation. Communication is not just about understanding the logos, about what is said; the very act of saying and addressing is the first and the utmost way to respond and attend to the Other. For Levinas, rational language is preconditioned by and made possible only through language as an expression. This is exactly what Levinas means when he suggests that, to maintain the absolute separation (instead of integration and assimilation) between the self and the Other, to preserve the alterity and subjectivity of the Other, the only ways of expression and communication are

³⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 195.

through responsibility and discourse. “To present oneself by signifying is to speak.”³⁸ “Discourse is . . . an original relation with exterior being.”³⁹

But Habermas’s explication of the communicative act also sheds light on how the singular subjects, responsible to each other, can engage in critical discussion of the “said” that helps mediate social differences and reach common goals. Habermas’s insight that communicative rationality is the “binding force of intersubjective understanding and reciprocal recognition”⁴⁰ also sheds light on how rationality is developed in the public sphere and how it is different from instrumental reason. In communicative acts and critical discussion, therefore, rationality is assessed not by how well the subject masters his environment, as in instrumental reason; rather, it is about how well the subject recognizes the Other’s subjectivity, respects the Other’s differences, and is responsible for both the Other and the “third,” for justice and for the common good—the normative correctness in Habermas’s terms. For the subject of consciousness, the world is just the “world of fact,”⁴¹ but in a speech act, as Habermas points out, the world is “postulated for legitimately regulated interpersonal relationships and for attributable subjective experiences—a ‘world’ not only for what is ‘objective,’ . . . but also one for what is normative, . . . as well as one for what is subjective.”⁴² Critical rationality is developed to assess not just the “truth of the proposition asserted, . . . [but also] the *rightness* of the speech act . . . or the *truthfulness* of the intention.”⁴³ The responsibility to the “third” makes it necessary that the participant exert rational and critical power to ensure justice and the common good; but at the same time, the responsibility to the Other ensures that we do not dominate and manipulate; we are indefinitely responsible for them, so that genuine, just, and critical discussion can take place.

Habermas has proposed that an ideal speech act occurs when participants are free of social, economic, and cultural pressures and are communicatively competent and when communication is free from systematic distortion. Such a speech act has been criticized as too idealistic, impractical, and impossible. In fact, what is impossible is the creation of a public sphere without a cultivation of Levinasian subjectivity that is open, modest, and transformative and that is responsible with a strong sense of justice. Levinasian subjectivity prevents manipulation, domination, and objectification of others. It is similar to Kant’s idea that nobody should treat others as means instead of ends, the difference being that, for Kant, the source of this idea is rationality, but for Levinas, the source is others’ unique singular subjectivity. Only as it is

³⁸ Ibid., 66.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 279.

⁴¹ Ibid., 275.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

based on such cultivated subjectivity can the Habermasian ideal public sphere be realized. And only in such a public sphere can a Levinasian subjectivity be cultivated.

Both Levinas's subjectivity and ethics and Habermas's communication act are idealistic and normative. In this sense, the project of introducing Levinas's subject into Habermas's public sphere is an educational project. If modern education has been "allotted a key role in the forming and shaping of subjectivity," perhaps now education needs to be restructured for the emergence of a new subjectivity so that genuine democracy can be realized. Currently the public sphere we frequently see in democratic nations is a battleground where egoist individuals fight for their self-interests, as Dewey observed decades ago.⁴⁴ When a controversial issue arises, parties are pre-determined opponents, asserting their opinions, imposing their interpretations, and distorting and deriding opponents' ideas. They are self-assured "subjects" who are only concerned with their own interests. Others are not partners but obstacles to be overcome, and the others are "penetrated" with a harsh gaze, measured, reduced, and dismissed. Very little listening takes place and there is little openness to others' points of view as well as to others as people. With such self-mastery and self-realizing subjects, communication for the common good, as Habermas has envisioned, is hard to find. This scene of abusive use of public debate is probably why Habermas is less-than-enthusiastically embraced in the country from which he draws most of his inspiration.⁴⁵

Introducing Levinasian subjects to the public sphere thus means that egoist autonomy is not encouraged in education; instead, a deep sense of unconditional responsibility and care for the other is cultivated. Attentive listening and good speaking skills are taught in school so that in students' encounters with each other, they first see the other as an irreducible human being whose alterity and singularity cannot be compromised. Their first responsibility is to receive others as who they are and to welcome differences. The educational language of sameness, identity, inclusion, and unity is changed to differences, unknowingness, and responsibility. As educators we are responsible for creating a school and classroom community where students can emerge as unique individuals who are respected and responsible to each other.

The public debate built on such subjects, therefore, is not between groups of self-assured and self-projecting individuals attempting to dominate others but between participants who are open to others, to their ideas and to them as irreducible human subjects. Each listens carefully and respectfully, allowing others full expression, and ready to change their own ideas of the other. A new relation among the participants has to be established before

⁴⁴ John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (1927; repr., Athens, OH: Swallow Press, 1954).

⁴⁵ See my "The Public and Its Problem: Dewey, Habermas, and Levinas," *Journal of Educational Controversy* 8, no. 1 (2014), <http://www.wce.wvu.edu/Resources/CEP/eJournal/v008n001/a006-PublicProblem.pdf>

communication can be carried out. Insofar as the public sphere needs formation, the Levinasian subjectivity has to be cultivated. Also insofar as the Levinasian subjectivity needs cultivation, education must be a public sphere. The synthesis of Levinas and Habermas allows the cultivation of active, critical thinking in students without granting them unlimited autonomy to pre-judge and dominate the other. It encourages human bonds and responsibility among different others before they engage in rational and critical discussion for justice and the common good.

When the significance of Levinas's subject has been so widely acknowledged in education, it is unfortunate that its interpretation and analysis has been inadequate. It is also an unfortunate omission of educational theorists that Habermas's insights have not been sufficiently appreciated and utilized. As long as education is a social and political sphere, and as long as education is responsible for the emergence of critical, active, and independent thinking, we in education cannot continue to ignore Habermas's insights.
