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LEVINAS, ETHICS, PEDAGOGY, AND THE FACE

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Emmanuel Levinas is one of those thinkers whose ideas about ethics and morality have something to say about teaching. Concerned with ethics in a world that seemed devoid of morality, Levinas posited the ultimate responsibility of the I for the Face. The Face, or the Other, the not-me according to Levinas, requires and demands this responsibility precisely because the Other is transcendent. Just why and how the Other becomes our ultimate responsibility, why the Other is transcendent, and how these things impinge on pedagogy is the topic of this essay.

Emmanuel Levinas's insights into the responsibility of the I for the Other emerged from and were shaped by the degradation, destruction, and chaos of the twentieth century. He was personally subjected to the violence of the Bolshevik Revolution, the rise of Hitler and the Nazis, and World War II. Born into a Jewish family in 1906 in Lithuania, he moved with his family to the Ukraine when he was 10. Here he experienced the upheavals of the Russian Revolution while attending high school. In the early 1920s, Levinas was in Strasbourg, France, where he later attended the university. In 1930, he became a French citizen, married, and met his military service obligation. Drafted into the French army in 1939 at 33 years of age, Levinas found himself in a German prisoner-of-war camp in 1940 where he was subjected to forced labor until the end of the war. He discovered after the war that many of his family members had been murdered by the Nazis. These experiences led to Levinas's great concern: how humanity might exist ethically and morally in a world devoid of morality and ethics. Just how does humanity mete out justice with integrity and compassion in a world without belief, a world devoid of a logocentric core? Levinas's answer to this question resulted in his most influential works. The major focus of these works is always the potential victimization of the Other, what he terms "the face" or "the Face of the Other" by the "I," or the one(s) in charge. "The I is bound up with the non-I as if the entire fate of the Other was in its hands," he writes (*Basic 18*). And again, "before the Other (*autrui*) the I is infinitely responsible. The Other is the poor and

destitute one, and nothing which concerns this Stranger can leave the I indifferent" (*Basic* 18). Because teaching automatically juxtaposes the I as instructor to the Other as student, these concepts have a certain bearing on pedagogy. Teaching is a dialogue between the instructor and the Other, the "Face" that comes to us, as Levinas puts it, in its "weakness, without protection and without defense . . . disarmed" (*Basic* 18).

This relationship can be especially poignant in writing instruction, where the language of the Other is sometimes superior and sometimes impoverished and substandard. Regardless of its quality, the language of the Other comes under scrutiny by the I, always with the potential threat of punishment in the form of grades or negative comments. One contemporary reaction to this threat, in which the Other may be punished by grades or negative comments is captured by the contemporary phrase "just deal with it." However, the just-deal-with-it response ignores the fact that language is almost a fifth appendage. Unlike the language of mathematics, for example, which we do not grow up with and which therefore remains a kind of foreign language throughout our lives, we begin learning our native tongue at such an early age that it becomes part of us and a reflection of our selfhood, of who we are: it becomes, in effect, a fifth appendage. Hence the intense response to negative judgments about our use of it. Of course, this dynamic can also be applied to other courses and disciplines, especially disciplines in which writing forms part of the final grade.

Just how does this happen; how does the I become infinitely responsible for the Other? How does the instructor become infinitely responsible for the student? According to Levinas, we construct our world in our individual minds, and this constructed reality has boundaries or "horizons" as Levinas calls it. But when the Face of the Other intrudes into this boundaried construction, what Levinas terms our "same," the Other inevitably becomes part of our construction. The key phrase is "our construction," because our construction of the Other is not the Other; the Other can never become one with our "same": it continually transcends our poor attempt to know it. Here is how Levinas puts it: "The other (*L'Autre*) thus presents itself as a human Other; it shows a face and opens the dimension of height, that is to say, it infinitely overflows the bounds of knowledge" (*Basic* 12). The "bounds of knowledge" constitute the frame that surrounds, or contains, the reality we have constructed in our minds, our "same," to use Levinas's language. The Other exists, despite our attempt to contain it, outside of this frame. Furthermore, height is significant here. The other does not slide down beneath our same. Rather, the Other rises up above our boundaries, our constructed knowledge and thus transcends us, transcends our poor attempt to know and categorize it. This transcendence makes the Other holy according to Levinas (*Totality* 195); furthermore, the Other becomes "the one for whom I am responsible . . . the one to whom I have to respond" (*Basic* 19).

It is possible, of course, to renege on our responsibility, to walk away from it. When we do so in the global environment, we become complicit in genocide, holocaust, terrorism. But even on a much smaller scale, as in a classroom, for instance, over which we have total control, our responsibility, according to Levinas, is to the holy, transcendent Other. When we arbitrarily ignore this responsibility, which has been thrust upon us by circumstance, we acquire the potential to perpetrate a kind of violence against those who have innocently intruded upon our Same. When we concentrate on student transgressions against form, for example, or even transgressions against established custom, we are engaged in a kind of negation in which we ourselves become the transgressors. "Partial negation," writes Levinas, "which is violence, denies the independence of being. . ." (*Basic* 9). This denial of the independence of being happens when we refuse to allow the Other to be transcendent within our presence, within our same, in complete disregard of the Other's obvious, natural, irrevocable transcendence. Faced with this negation, the Other shuts down, the Face becomes closed, and the educational experience is compromised.

A pertinent example is the problem of grade inflation. When, under the pressure of grade inflation, we spend time actively searching for students to fail, our transgression is multiplied because it is not just against the Other; our own transcendent independence is denied by the academic machinery of compliance, and we compound the tragedy because we have embarked on the dark seas of academic profiling. "When the awkwardness of the act turns against the goal pursued, we are at the height of tragedy," writes Levinas (*Basic* 4). Thus if the goal pursued is education, learning, or the intellectual growth of the student Other, but a given academic machinery turns us against the goal, we have tragedy.

Though Levinas's notion of the complete and infinite transcendence of the Other, the one for whom the I is responsible, runs up against the brick wall of student responsibility for success or failure, his ideas, I think, provide some answer to restrictive, uncreative pedagogies that act as gatekeepers against student desire and need. The nurturing educator who assumes ultimate responsibility for the Other allows the Other to create a space in which to be, to grow, to become a reflective and productive I, transcendent and serene in knowledge. If the student's attempt to become an I through the construction of a boundaried reality by the creation of meaningful wholes out of hitherto chaotic and seemingly disconnected experience is to succeed, it must be an open-ended experience. To close experience by the enforcement of conditions foreign to the Other cannot be fruitful because doing so stifles transcendent growth and thus becomes a violence. To resist this approach requires heroes in the traditional sense, because all the forces of order are brought to bear against the attempt.

A couple of years ago, my colleague Dr. Bauer and I were invited to address students who hoped to teach in the public schools in Georgia and who were graduating with credentials in teaching. One young woman, speaking of the negative psychological effect of the red pen on her papers in high school, said that she began writing only simple sentences. That way she couldn't be punished for wrongly punctuating her essays. A young man across the room said that he had done precisely the same thing. For these young people, who had been subjected to what Levinas calls "partial negation" of themselves (the language we use not only reveals, but also creates us), the only way they could survive when the system was closed against them was to withdraw and refuse to grow.

In fact, Levinas's idea of the total responsibility of the I for the Other, applied to pedagogy, is not entirely without precedent. It functions to some degree as part of the Japanese idea of *sensei*. If you were to consult a Japanese/English dictionary you would discover that *sensei* roughly translates as "teacher," or "master." But these terms do not really capture the idea of *sensei*, because in traditional Japanese culture, *sensei* was much more than what we understand as "teacher," or even "master": the word also connotes the kind of responsibility for the student Other that Levinas posits in his writings on ethics, especially ethics and the face.

In 1914, Japanese author Natsumi Soseki wrote a novel called *Kokoro*. The word "kokoro" has been variously translated, but the translator of the novel writes, "The best rendering of the Japanese word 'kokoro' that I have seen is Lafcadio Hearn's, which is 'the heart of things'" (Foreword VI). The novel concerns a young college student and his *sensei*. The young protagonist relies on his *sensei*, even when *sensei* is no longer his classroom teacher. And *sensei* accepts his responsibility in the relationship. While *sensei* was not on the student's thesis committee, it is to him that the student feels the obligation to give thanks: "So you have finally finished your thesis. I'm glad," *sensei* says to the student. The student replies, "Yes, thanks to you I have finished it at last" (56).

I understand well that these ideas run counter to prevailing Western ideologies of the responsibility of the individual, or in this case, the student. And I recognize that the Other is, paradoxically, also an I when faced with the instructor as Other. But these conflicting sets of responsibilities do not cancel one another out; instead, they exist simultaneously, independent of each other.

Perhaps Levinas was shouting to the void. But the implications for all of us go beyond the classroom: "Certainly I believe that this [the infinite responsibility of the I for the Other] is our most valuable everyday experience, one that allows us to resist a purely hierarchical world" (*Basic* 23). It is the purely hierarchical world, with power over others coagulating at the top from which tyranny always comes, whether in the world at large or in a classroom. In such a world we are on our own, whether we are students closing our face to academic profiling and pedagogical violence, or whether we are teachers faced with acknowledging the ultimate responsibility of the I for the Other.

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