

Bordering on Violence: A Levinasian Critique of Ontology and Ethics in Giroux's Critical Pedagogy

Matt Jackson

Brigham Young University

I believe that if we are going to overcome the crises that at present assail us, we must return to ethics.¹

Henry Giroux's pedagogical theorizing has taken shape as an ethical response *of a kind* to the ongoing injustice in schools and society. In his most recent book, *Take Back Higher Education*, Giroux asserts that the "Take Back" in the title is an "ethical call to action for educators" to reclaim higher education as a "democratic public sphere."² He argues that educators need to reclaim "a sense of ethical responsibility" (TB, 84). In doing so, they may "reclaim the meaning and purpose of higher education as an ethical and political response to the demise of democratic public life" (TB, 237).

While I am in tentative agreement with Giroux's argument here, I have concerns about *how* Giroux's pedagogical theory is ethical. Inasmuch as Giroux's theory relies on the primacy of the political being of reason, I am concerned with the kind of ethical response Giroux's work embodies and the type of subject or being that his theory assumes. Viewed through a Levinasian lens, this means that Giroux's conceptualizations of pedagogical relationships are inherently violent because alterity or difference is reduced to *something* to be comprehended; the other is relegated to a self-same notion of being within the closed economy of self-reflexive reason. As a result, Giroux's pedagogical theorizing is ethically limited to what the self can know.

One of the most provocative aspects of Giroux's work, particularly in light of Levinas's philosophy, is his interest with the comprehension of totality. For Levinas, the political totality is the violent world resulting from the perseverance of beings-for-themselves that is ruptured by the ethics of an infinite and asymmetrical responsibility for the Other. For Levinas, it is my inability to comprehend the infinity of the other that precipitates the rupture of the totality. Whereas for Levinas the alterity of the Other eludes my grasp; for Giroux, it is precisely the Other who must be grasped and controlled in order to become a being of reason within the political totality. The goal of the primacy of politics in Giroux's theory is not to break the totality, but rather to critically comprehend the totality so as to control it. It is a belief that, if I can just understand a problem well enough by gaining the right kind of knowledge, and if I can make everyone else understand it in the same way, then I'll be able to make things right. For example, according to Giroux's way of thinking, if all white people understood whiteness theory well enough and in the same way, then we might be able to put an end to white racism.

Ironically, while he critiques modern pedagogies for their unproblematic formation of consciousness through the reproduction of dominant hegemonic ideologies, Giroux's critical pedagogy is driven by the need to reform the student's

political consciousness into that of the critically enlightened teacher. The reformation of political consciousness, even when in solidarity with students, requires ontological violence as the teacher must comprehend — literally grasp and control — the student's subjectivity in order to fit them into the political totality.

Pedagogical violence is heightened when we teach resistant students in a way that disrupts their socio-political framework so it can be critically reconstructed in harmony with the teacher's enlightened political consciousness. This happens when we discuss issues of race, class, and gender with economically privileged white male students who respond in an agitated or defensive manner. In pedagogical situations such as this, ontological violence is grounded in the teacher's authority, as his will is pitted against the student's will and violence is done in the name of what the teacher knows is right.

My concern here is that too many of us who lay claim to critical pedagogy feel that inasmuch as we are doing progressive work such as anti-racism, then the politics of our pedagogies are ethically justified in terms of the rightness of our being and reason. What is at stake here for critical educators is the question of how we will continue to pedagogically "be" in what is, in Levinasian terms, an inherently violent and ethically limited paradigm of pedagogical relationships. Through the work of Levinas we might begin to approach pedagogy in a way that ruptures the closed economy of the self and opens pedagogical ethics to that which is beyond the violence inherent in egoism; we might approach pedagogy *otherwise* than through conventional modes of being and reason in a way that gives primacy to ethics without being driven by consciousness and politics.

POLITICS AS FIRST PHILOSOPHY IN PEDAGOGY

Against the Levinasian notion of "ethics as first philosophy," Giroux's pedagogical theory may be summed up as "politics as first philosophy." Giroux's view is that "pedagogy is inevitably political," and "teaching and learning are profoundly political practices" (*TB*, 245). The free and critically self-reflexive political being of reason is posited as the paragon of Giroux's pedagogical project. The critically conscious subject — what I will call the comprehending being of pedagogy — serves as an *arche* in Giroux's theory. In Levinasian terms, this means the comprehending being serves as the guiding principle of the political totality; all experience, including ethics, is understood and controlled in relation to this term.

While the mantra of Giroux's theory might be "education is profoundly political," for Levinas the statement would read "pedagogy is profoundly ethical," keeping in mind that, for Levinas, this is not the *a priori* known of ethics. What is worrisome in Giroux's formulation is that, because pedagogy is *rightly* concerned with politics, it assumes that it is ethical. The danger of reducing pedagogy to the equation of "right thinking will lead to right action," is that ethics is a forgone conclusion controlled and limited by the certainty of what is already known to be ethical. In contrast to pedagogical ethics as the foreseen outcome of critical citizenship education directed by the comprehending being of reason, Levinas would have us approach ethics in a way that is less limiting. Ethics as first philosophy in pedagogy means responding to the other without recourse to the right of reason;

part of the fine risk of pedagogy in a Levinasian sense is that, while there is no guarantee my response will be ethical, there is the possibility that it will exceed or transcend what I already think I know to be ethical.

THE IDEA OF DEMOCRACY AS ETHICAL REFERENT

For Giroux, pedagogy needs to have an “ethical and political referent”; in his theoretical framework this means defining schools as democratic public spheres.³ Giroux’s suggests that we work to fulfill “the promise of an unrealized democracy against its really existing forms” (*BC*, 72–73). In doing so, he seems to assume that, since we know what a democracy *ought* to look like, we should all be convinced to work toward it. This happens when we talk about working toward a racist-free society — as if we knew what that was like — when a racist society is all that we have known. It’s as if there is, in his use of the term *democracy*, nostalgia for something for which we have no real referent — a democratic state wherein all are free and equal. The formation and perpetuation of democracy becomes the already known “end” goal of education, wrought by the political pedagogical “means” of rightness in reasoning.

While Giroux relies heavily on a classic liberal notion of democracy, we cannot fault him too much; it seems so intuitive: the reasonable being theorizing what the republic should be like and subsequently legislating ethics therein. In fact, it sounds quite natural when Giroux states: “a substantive and inclusive democracy provides the political and ethical referent for framing what we do as educators and the role we play in using particular forms of knowledge and practice to offer specific visions of the world” (*TB*, 108, 107). When we see how Giroux bases his ethics on an *intellectual* idea of what a democratic society *should* look like, we get a glimpse of Levinas’s concern with the primacy of reason in ontological ethics: it puts reason *a priori* and places ethics as a literal *after-thought*.

While Levinas certainly believes in the necessity of the concrete work of political action to solve problems such as racism, his ethical referent is the infinite alterity of the Other, a referent that is beyond my comprehension, and yet one that I cannot escape. In my uncertainty of what is ethical, however, I cannot stand by wringing my hands in deliberation. I am under immediate obligation, already too late for the work to be done; I must respond immediately to the other without *a priori* deference to consciousness. The absolute alterity of the other ruptures the interiority of my being and reason and presents my responsibility as limitless and asymmetrical. In this way Levinas ensures that I can never refer to my autonomy — as a law unto myself — as a way to justify limiting my responsibility. When I reduce ethics to the reason of my being — my preconceived ethical notion of what is right — ethics is limited in the sense that I can rationalize my failure to be more responsible for the other. For Levinas, ethics must be asymmetrical and infinite — limitless — so as to leave me without excuse, without refuge from my responsibility.

However, because there are always more than just the two of us in the world, the demands of the other cannot go unchecked. Ethics is thus limited in a different sense for Levinas by the presence of the third party. While the third limits my

responsibility for the other in terms of demanding a division or distribution of my responsibility, my responsibility is not diminished but rather *magnified* by the third. With the presence of the third comes the need for reason in dividing my responsibility among many others. But still, this is not a moment of consciousness wherein the comprehending being-for-itself controls and determines what is best for others.

Inasmuch as the *arche* of Giroux's pedagogical theory is the "comprehending being of pedagogy," this conceptualization of subjectivity and subsequent intersubjectivity results in a version of democracy as a "community developed around a shared conception of social justice, rights, and entitlement" (BC, 81). In such a system, citizens act as equals with shared values; it is a *symmetrical* political society of self-same beings. And, while there may be an allowance for and even an embracing of difference as diversity in terms of outward adornment, it seems that Giroux's theory implies the expectation that each member be the same kind of essential democratic being in order for the society to be ethical.

A Levinasian concern with theorizing ethical being and intersubjectivity in terms of equality and symmetrical rights and responsibilities is that it does violence to the absolute uniqueness of difference and transmutes alterity into the known and the same of the political totality. For Levinas, violence is inherent in human rights; the "violence of war is the extension of pure perseverance in being" and, paradoxically, the unbridled exercise of freedom is the course of conflict: the "war of all against all [comes] forth out of human Rights."⁴ This is why he is so adamant about asymmetry in ethics. If everyone demands equal rights for himself, these rights will come at a cost to others. The radicalness of Levinas's ethical responsibility is that it comes to me from the other and is not of my own choosing.

PEDAGOGY AS POLITICAL SELF-EMPOWERMENT

Levinas's version of the subject who is obligated to the demands of the other might not be very appealing to Giroux, who sees the central political goal of critical pedagogy as "the need to create a public sphere of citizens who are able to exercise power over their lives and especially over the conditions of knowledge production and acquisition" (BC, 224). Against the "passive" model of being who simply "lives as he is affected in the society," caught up in *de facto* support of the dominant hegemonic forces of society, Giroux posits a model of being who can "constitute his own meanings, order his own experience or struggle against the forces that prevent him from doing so."⁵ This is the active being of freedom, the critically consciousness subject who is self-determined.

Against both of the active being of freedom and the passive being of inaction, Levinas positions the self who is responsible for the other in passivity, not to be confused with the passive model of being that Giroux is critiquing. Levinas's passivity is not one of apathy or even non-violence, and yet it is not one directed by the consciousness of being to autonomous willful action. For Levinas, passivity is "the way opposed to the imperialism of consciousness open upon the world"; though it is not "a congenital and lamentable powerlessness to detach oneself from oneself and reflect totally on oneself... Its insomnia is but the absolute impossibility to slip

away and distract oneself.”⁶ In other words, I cannot concern myself with myself and let my conscious will guide my actions. Rather, I respond vigilantly to my *a priori* responsibility for the other.

Concerning responsibility, Giroux asks the pointed question: How do we teach in order to defend public schools as “democratic public spheres” that can awaken the “moral, political, and civic responsibilities of its youth” (*BC*, 241)? This is a good question, but not one that is answerable in Giroux’s theory in any way other than through a reliance on the imposition of political reasoning on being; a reliance on the pedagogical goal of transforming students into “agents of social change.” These are Gramscian social agents who can “locate themselves in history,” who can control and have power of self over the subjective and objective world, the critically conscious citizen who subsumes everything under its knowing gaze (*BC*, 22). In a quote that highlights the ontological violence of the comprehending being in an unexpectedly precise way, Giroux argues that one of the central concerns of critical pedagogy is to understand how “student identities, cultures, and experiences provide the basis for learning,” and how, consequently, teachers need to “grasp the totality of elements that organize such subjectivities” (*BC*, 182).

THE COMPREHENDING BEING OF PEDAGOGY

Giroux argues that we should “comprehend” pedagogy as “a configuration of textual, verbal, and visual practices that seek to engage the processes through which people understand themselves and the ways in which they engage others and their environment” (*BC*, 3). This kind of “comprehending” is as a form of “hermeneutic understanding that is historically grounded.”⁷ In this hermeneutic framework, knowledge is treated as a “specific social act with its underlying social relationships.”⁸ In contrast to traditional hermeneutics, Giroux thinks that, with the caveat of critically reflexivity, the comprehending being of pedagogy can perhaps see more clearly than the rest.

Levinas’s philosophy argues that such a being commits ontological violence upon the world in its very comprehension of totality — particularly of the other — as objectified and recognizable entities that are transmuted into the totality of the self. Giroux seems to condemn himself along these lines in Levinasian terms when he states that critical pedagogues must “understand Otherness on its own terms” (*BC*, 245). Albeit on “its own terms,” the Other is apparently encompassed into the economy of the known and the same of the self. That is, I can comprehend the Other’s own terms of being as if they were my own. This becomes a problem when, in our pedagogical authority, we impose a particular version of political being on our students.

THE PARADOXES OF PEDAGOGICAL AUTHORITY: IMPOSING ON AGENTS

One of the inherent paradoxes of critical pedagogies is found in the conflicting claims that “teachers should not impose on students” and, at the same time, that “students should become agents of social change.” This formulation presumes a sense of what should be known and done by the individual in society, and also a sense of how to teach this to students. Giroux’s pedagogical goal is,

to get students to think critically about their lives; the specific objectives and ideologies they choose to address and take up are not something that can be forced upon them. Any pedagogy that acts in the service of only one outcome generally constitutes a form of terrorism. (*BC*, 107, fn 2)

At the same time, Giroux's pedagogy is designed to produce particular political results: "Political pedagogy seeks to educate students to be responsible enough to "fight for those political and economic conditions that make democracy possible" (*TB*, 117).

Critical pedagogy is put in the friendly framework of "allowing" students "the opportunity" to become agents of social change. "One of the imperatives" Giroux states, "of a critical pedagogy is to offer students opportunities to become aware of their potential and responsibility as individual and social agents" (*TB*, 84, 243). Evident here is the fundamental ontology of critical pedagogy — that students are beings *qua* recognizing themselves as political agents. Giroux posits his students as *a priori* beings of political consciousness — as social agents in embryo; all that is needed for students to develop is exposure to the proper politicized pedagogy.

For Giroux, the proper pedagogical environment is established through pedagogical authority, which provides the "ontological grounding for teachers who are willing to assume the role of transformative intellectuals." From this apparently self-established proving ground, the teacher is endowed with "the imperative to judge, critique, and reject those approaches to authority that are unjust."⁹ Giroux's asserts that some who politicize education cannot distinguish between "critical teaching and indoctrination" because they have "no sense of the difference between encouraging human agency and social responsibility" on the one hand and, "molding students according to the imperatives of an unquestioned ideological position" on the other (*TB*, 118). The key here for Giroux seems to be that the "sense" through which he is able to tell the difference — to make the crucial judgments about what is good and right — is through reason, the self-checked goodness of his own thinking.

Giroux exhorts us to "always be mindful of our obligation not to run away from authority but to exercise it in the name of self- and social formation." Giroux argues further on this point in a disturbing phrase: "I have no trouble at all in exercising authority as long as I'm constantly self-critical about the limits of my own knowledge" (*BC*, 157). Fortunately, in contrast to this statement Giroux contends that "reason is not innocent, and any viable notion of critical pedagogy cannot exercise forms of authority that emulate totalizing forms of reason that appear to be beyond criticism and dialogue" (*BC*, 77). The troublesome assumption here is that as long as forms of authority remain under the rubric of criticism and dialogue — encompassed in the economy of my self-reflexive reason — then they are inherently ethical.

CRITICAL SELF-REFLEXIVITY AS THE GUARANTEE OF THE ETHICAL

Giroux frames the critical crisis of reason in this way: "If reason was to preserve its promise of creating a more just society, it would have to demonstrate powers of critique and negativity." He critiques more "simplistic" theories of reason that are,

“unable to step beyond the modernist celebration of the unified self, totalizing notions of history, and universalistic models of reason”; he contends that “liberal and radical discourses have generally failed to explore the absolutist character of their own narratives regarding race and difference” (*BC*, 115).

In similar fashion, he asserts that critical pedagogy will have to “free itself from the burden of its own intellectual and ideological history. In doing so it will have to develop a new rationality and problematic for examining the relationship between school and wider society.”¹⁰ The remedy for Giroux to objectivist rationality is a new mode of *self-reflective* rationality that is “construed as the capacity of critical thought to reflect on and reconstruct its own historical genesis, i.e., to think about the process of thinking itself.”¹¹

The assumption here is that even if there are self-serving, violent, or totalizing problematics in my rationality, they can eventually be overcome with more or better reasoning. It is tantamount to saying that we have blind spots, but if we just look harder and better then we will be able to see through them clearly. Critical pedagogy can, therefore, through self-reflexive reason, *right* itself. It is in of this kind of circular theorizing, where *my* critical inquiry determines what *I* do for the Other, that Levinas finds the *self-ish* economy of being and reason that limits ethical possibilities to an egoism of violence and injustice.¹²

The problem in Giroux’s theory is not simply with the idea that we need to be critical and reflexive about our knowledge, nor is it found in the need for more and new knowledge; these are both important movements. The problem in Giroux’s theory is found with the *a priori* positioning of the rational self as the source of that knowledge that leads to the assumption that my well-reasoned political actions are inherently ethical. From a Levinasian perspective, it might be said that Giroux ironically assumes that, since he is being critically self-reflexive, his reasoning is free from violence. And Levinas is most distrustful of this sort of self-assuredness about being right — of a private righteousness — that is the *hubris* of virile consciousness caught up in an egoistic ethics.¹³

RESPONSIBILITY AS BEING RIGHT-MINDED: THE DANGERS OF EGOISTIC ETHICS

In an attempt at fairness, it is important to point out that Giroux posits pedagogy as “a project of educating students to feel compassion for the suffering of others” (*BC*, 99). He encourages students to think about and work on problems of oppression — about the poor, hungry, and unemployed — the “disposable” as he terms it (*TB*, 118, 99). He urges educators to link education with “modes of political agency that promote critical citizenship and engage the ethical imperative to alleviate human suffering.” (*TB*, 118). What is important to remember, however, is that Giroux’s ethical imperative issues forth from the critical rational ego charged with knowledge and virtue that exercises agency for the good of the other. And while this certainly resonates with some of Levinas’s concerns, the vital difference is found in the source of their ethics: for Giroux it is the autonomy of the self, for Levinas it is the heteronomy of the self wrought by the Other.

The significance of this difference is that, for Levinas, a sense of responsibility founded in the self might always become a case of the sympathetic being of reason

taking discretionary compassion on the less fortunate. The danger in relying on reason in being responsible is that the reasonable being always tends to revert back to its own interests — to its perseverance in being-for-itself. Giroux's ethical theory can thus be reduced to what Levinas might refer to as a "calculus" of caring wherein everything runs back through the comprehending being's critical knowledge of universal and *a priori* principles. While it may be said that Giroux's pedagogical project is "ethically-minded," it is this "mindedness" that is the very source of the ethical limitation of his pedagogical theory.

And perhaps Levinas would interject a word of caution here; he might question whether the political being of reason is really the kind of citizen we want. Perhaps we are, as Levinas would say, "duped by reason" in that we think everyone will exercise their reason and freedom *nicely*.¹⁴ Perhaps we have romanticized too much our notions of empowerment through critical consciousness. Perhaps the model of the autonomous rational being is flawed for pedagogy.

Individual empowerment sounds like a good idea as we project it onto students: if they could all just be empowered like me — then we would all be free, equal, and happy. But limitations of thinking about ethics in terms of the reason-able autonomy of being comes to the fore if we change the dynamics of a classroom and begin to think about critical pedagogy in a predominantly white classroom where the students are already empowered. What kinds of dangers do we run into when we try to instill in students the notion of ethical responsibility as reason-able autonomy? If I claim that ethics begins with my own reasoning, I must allow everyone else to make that same claim. And it is the propensity for violence in the unbridled exercise of freedom and reason in being that Levinas exhorts us to study in our most mundane interactions.

If my pedagogical ethics hinges on the primacy of the political being of reason, can I be surprised or disappointed if my students exercise that self-same freedom and autonomy in their reasoning to diverge or dissent in their political action from what I think they ought to be? As pedagogues, we must ask ourselves: "If there is violence inherent in the free political being of reason, how much we can rely on reason in teaching our students to be ethical?" Do we dare to think of the free exercise of critical reason in terms that point to Levinas's concerns with the crisis of reason and the Shoah? (Or have I gone too far?) For Levinas, a being-for-itself guided by its own reason can never approach the other in responsibility as substitution of the self for the other. In order to approach a pedagogy that is *otherwise* than the comprehending being-for-itself, I must open myself up to the radical asymmetrical responsibility that comes to me from the other.

1. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy and Civic Courage* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 117.

2. Henry Giroux and Susan Searls Giroux, *Take Back Higher Education* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 11. This work will be cited as *TB* in the text for all subsequent references.

3. Henry Giroux, *Border Crossings* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 154. This work will be cited as *BC* in the text for all subsequent references.

4. Emmanuel Levinas, "Les Droits de L'homme," in *Les Droits de L'homme en Questions*, ed. Commission Nationale Des Droits de L'homme (Paris: La Documentation Francaise, 1988), 43–45.
5. Henry Giroux, *Pedagogy and the Politics of Hope* (Boulder: Westview, 1997), 14.
6. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1974/1998), 92–93.
7. Giroux, *Politics of Hope*, 27–8.
8. Henry Giroux, *Theory and Resistance in Education* (Westport: Bergin & Garvey, 1983/2001), 184–185.
9. Giroux, *Politics of Hope*, 103.
10. Giroux, *Theory and Resistance*, 170.
11. *Ibid.*, 190–91.
12. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 46.
13. Robert D. Walsh. "Action, Passion, Responsibility: Levinas' Circumcision of Consciousness," in *Reinterpreting the Political*, eds. Lenore Langsdorf, Stephen H. Watson, and Karen A. Smith (New York: SUNY Press, 1998), 93–106.
14. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 21.