Pedagogy of the Other: A Levinasian Approach to the Teacher-Student Relationship

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What conditions are present in the relation that creates the possibility of one person learning something from another? What central characteristics condition the events of teaching someone, for example, to ride a bicycle, to recognize a plant, to care for a pet, to know the name of something, or to understand algebra? What characterizes the relationship between teacher and learner? In this essay I explore these questions through the concept of "the other" developed by the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas.[1] I will argue that pedagogy is a set of asymmetric relations in which each side of the relation is "other" for the other side.

The Asymmetry of Pedagogy

To get to the "other" in pedagogy, we must make explicit that pedagogy is an asymmetric relation between persons. In the pedagogical moment, the teacher is teaching and not learning, and the student is learning and not teaching. Without this asymmetry, there may well be no learning or teaching. So how might we describe this asymmetry?

Levinas's notion of the other provides a good way of describing the relationship between people in asymmetric relations. Levinas paints the asymmetry by taking a first-person perspective rather than a third-person, spectator perspective. This gives him a powerful approach to discover something novel and important about human relations. In this he builds on Heidegger's analysis in *Being and Time*, which suggests that an objective description of humans and their relations is really a rational representation of something more primary.[2] Levinas discovers a deeper, more ancient relationship, between "me" and the "other," one that an objective description cannot capture.

From a first-person perspective, it is often the case that an ego or "I" — inhabiting what I will call the near pole of the relation — is the center of the world. All other things (and people) — occupying what I will call the far pole of the relation — are relative to the "I" who is at that center. A spatial example makes this clearer. An Euclidean description of space is a third-person account that treats the entire expanse as homogenous. From a first-person perspective, however, it makes sense to talk about space in terms of "high" and "low," "near" and "far," "right" and "left," and as having a horizon. These are all first-person categories that each of us uses to navigate and make sense of the world. Beyond the spatial, there are a multitude of additional categories — existentials in Heidegger's terms — that reflect a first-person relation to the world, ones we use to interpret the world as we navigate it.[3] These include, to mention just a few, "threatening" and "desirable," "useful" and "obsolete," "fast" and "slow," "caring" and "stifling." Even categories such as "chair" and "table," "driveway" and "car," "basketball" and "book" are, first of all, first-person designations that serve a similar function. In fact, it might not be too

much to suggest that a more primary mode of being-in-the-world is one with me as an "I" in the center and the things around me providing a surrounding arena for my actions in the world. Most of the everyday ways we understand (and name) things in the world suggest this.

Levinas has several names for interpreting the world — the far pole — in this manner: totality, sameness, economy. An I or ego's first-person interpretation of the world has a totalizing function: it puts everything in the world into a conceptual totality, with myself, an I, at the center. Thus everything has a certain sameness: things, events, states of affairs are in their place conceptually, creating a certainly familiarity or domesticity. The interactions in the world are thus economic: interactions are transactions that could be calculated and carried out in a medium of fair exchange. Things are interchangeable. The world is a managed home, an *oikonomos*, and the I's navigation of the world is a kind of economy.

What is true of the first-person approach that the "I" takes with respect to the world generally is also true of relations of the "I" to other people. Certainly, from a first-person perspective, my relations to other people in my life are understood first of all through first-person designations: my mother, my brother, my wife, my sons, my preacher, my colleagues, my students, my advisor. These terms designate my relations to people with respect to my life. They do not designate universal, objective characteristics of these humans. Most of our interactions and relationships with other people are like this. Other people are part of my totality, my sameness, my economy. It would seem that for each of us, a primary way of being-in-the-world-with-others is quite egocentric.

Levinas asks us to look below this egocentrism for another relation between people, one *more* primary although often less recognized. In that deeper relation, it remains that one person has a first-person stance. However, at the far pole, the other person is what he calls an "other." For the other person to be other, he or she must not be part of my totality, economy or sameness: he or she must not be simply a brother, mother, advisor, spouse, for those terms designate other people merely as part of my totalized surroundings. Instead, the other must be other than me, other than the human categories that constitute my totality. Here is an asymmetry more profound than that of "I" and that-which-surrounds-the-I. By "other," Levinas means to say not merely another person, one who may well turn out to be very much like me, but that person in his or her strangeness, alterity, difference, foreignness. The other does not fit within my categorization and expectations, my totality and economy, my sameness. The other is a stranger that I welcome into my home.

When the far pole of relation is "the other," the near pole of the relation is the first-person "me" rather than "I." Here a grammatical metaphor is helpful. The word "me" grammatically is in the accusative case, as direct object of the verb — he sees *me* — whereas the word "I" is in the nominative case, as subject of the verb — *I* see him. For Levinas this makes a great deal of difference. If an "I" is at the near pole, in the nominative position, then the far pole is a totality, in the accusative position. The far pole becomes an economy or sameness, that is, a support cast for me as an agent and (autonomous?) subject. In that case, the power is at the locus of the I,

conceptually, as well as in terms of being a sovereign actor in the world and in relation to other people. However, with a "me" at the near pole, in the accusative position, the "other" at the far pole escapes the totality for it now is in the nominative position. The shoe is on the other foot, so to speak: the "me" is now the support cast of "the other," and a kind of constitutive power is now on the side of "the other," something Biesta calls an ethical space of responsibility.[4] In a sense, in this description the "me" is constituted by "the other." The asymmetry of the "Other" is the relation that I wish to apply to pedagogy.

The Teacher as Other

Let us now bring this deeper asymmetry into the description of pedagogy. I would like to describe the pedagogical relation from the first-person perspective of the student first of all. What occurs when a student learns from a teacher? More particularly, what are the conditions that make possible successful learning from another person?

Each person is an I — a conscious subject — and therefore understands the world as a totality, an economy, a sameness — an object of consciousness. However, when a person is a student, at the very moment of being a student learning from a teacher, he or she is not an "I" but a "me." To become a student is to change from the nominative to the accusative, to use grammatical language. In the learning moment, from the first-person perspective of the student, the teacher is no longer merely part of his or her totality or support cast, but is truly "other," a stranger. The asymmetric relation between student and teacher is that of a "me" and an "other." Now, why would that have to be the case for learning from a teacher to be successful? What is it about teaching, from the first-person perspective of the student, that requires *this* sort of asymmetry?

To see why this is so, we must start at the end of learning. A student typically ends up with a new skill, knowledge, or habit. To use Levinasian language, an "I" has added something to his or her totality. Perhaps it is some theoretical, objective, disciplinary knowledge or some pretheoretical interpretation of the world. Something new has been thematized and integrated into the student's existing totality and economy of knowledge, into his or her consciousness.

But the possibility of gaining something new comes from the student's "welcoming the stranger." Teaching is not a kind of mid-wifery in which teaching is bringing out what is already latent in the mind. Nor is teaching transmission of objective content that is already embedded in a neutral matrix common to teacher and student. Instead, teaching is a kind of showing by the other, perhaps a verbal saying (*deik*; show, say). The teacher as other thematizes something outside of the totality of the student, and therefore outside of his or her grasp. Perhaps the sentences of the teacher's speech thematize an ambiguity of an up until then silent part of the world. In that sense, to use Levinas's words, "Teaching, the end of equivocation or confusion, is a thematization of phenomena" (*TI*, 99). But, for learning to occur successfully, the student must welcome the teacher, the *person* who thematizes.

Although the teacher draws attention to something, the key to the relationship is that "Attention is attention to something because it is attention to someone" (*TI*,

99). Only because the student is attending to the teacher in the pedagogical moment is it possible for the student to successfully attend to what is thematized. Thus the very presence of the teacher qua teacher is the condition for the possibility of the student's ability to thematize at all: "The first teaching of the teacher is his very presence as teacher from which representation comes" (Ibid., 100).

However, attending to the teacher as teacher occurs only when the teacher is other. What makes learning possible is that the teacher is outside of the student's totalizing economy. The possibility of the teacher's showing something new itself requires "the showing" to come from outside of the student's totality. The student qua student is incapable by him or herself of thematizing (Why would one need a teacher otherwise?). Thus the student needs to be in relationship with an other who speaks. The teacher qua teacher, in the pedagogical moment, is not in the circle of sameness of the student. Instead, the teacher is an other, beyond the totality of the student.

In Levinas's scheme, for the teacher to be other the student must be a "me" rather than an "I." Otherwise the student would not be able to welcome the teacher as other. Without the student as a me rather than an I, the potential exchange would be forced, a violence. As an I, the world is at my feet, for I am the sovereign center of my personal kingdom. To be an I, Levinas says, is to be a "being whose existing consists in identity itself, in recovering its identity throughout all that happens to it" (Ibid., 36). As such, there is no pedagogical room for learning. Instead, the I is always an "I can," as in, "I can do it by myself, alone, without help; I am an autonomous agent." This is the opposite of learning from a teacher, for it is the condition that shuts out the otherness of the other by enveloping the other into my totality. A "me," however, has a different relation to the other, a kind of passivity with respect to the other, an openness that is not part of an autonomous agent.[5] The switch from "I" to "me" shows up in the form of welcoming the other. In welcoming the speech of the teacher the student thereby suspends his or her own egocentricity.

In welcoming, in switching from an "I" to a "me," an unsettling takes place in the student. This is something central for learning. As a student, in welcoming the teacher as other, "the exercise of my freedom is called into question" (*TI*, 100). The student's passivity of welcoming the teacher, precisely as an other, calls into question the student's freedom as an I to think what I want in order to make room for the speech of the teacher. The character of the questioning is similar to the Socratic recognition of not knowing, an acknowledgement of ignorance. But it is not an active act on the part of the student. It is a susceptibility to a call from the outside, from the other. And the calling into question is precisely the movement that creates the room necessary for the student to learn something new. The teacher's speech is an exteriority with respect to the student. The student can learn precisely because of that exteriority; without it, nothing genuinely new would be learned. Learning is welcoming something genuinely other, new. What is welcomed is a new thematization.

Although being a student is having my freedom called into question, the role of freedom needs to be highlighted as well. The pedagogical moment of welcoming does require freedom for the student. Without the existence of the student's freedom,

there is no possibility of calling it into question, something that is central to the pedagogical moment. There is thus no teaching without freedom: "The rending of a totality can be produced only by the throbbing of an egoism" (Ibid., 175). Nevertheless, the teacher qua other does not oppress: "His alterity is manifested in a mastery that does not conquer, but teaches. Teaching is not a species of a genus called domination, a hegemony at work within a totality, but is the presence of infinity breaking the closed circle of totality" (Ibid., 171). Genuine pedagogy is inconsistent with oppression. Domination entails reinforcing the totality of a system, say, the teacher's. Pedagogy, by contrast, is breaking through the totality of the student. Thus for a teacher to merely reinforce his or her own existing system of concepts and themes is not to teach but to dominate. In that case, the teacher is an "I," a nominative center that radiates outward a web of domination that oppresses. In pedagogy, by contrast, the teacher is other, breaking through the totality of the student so that the student can move forward. True teaching is thus not inherently violent. Teaching is creating a breach in the sometimes-smug unity and satisfaction of the student. To be a student is to be disturbed by something. But not through domination. That would be injustice. For a teacher to truly be a teacher, an other, requires the student to begin as an "I," a subject with freedom, and change into a me. Teaching is freedom disturbed.

The Student as Other

By what right does the teacher disturb? What legitimizes that disturbance? Certainly not an arbitrary power of the teacher as an "I," the teacher's ability to dominate. No, something else must provide that authority. The legitimacy, from the teacher's perspective, derives from the *student* as other in the pedagogical relationship. What keeps teaching from being a form of domination — domestication — is the otherness of the student as other.

At first reading, from a first person perspective of the teacher, the phenomenon of being a student might seem merely part of the teacher's totality, sameness, economy. The role of student then might be considered an example of being-with *mitdasein* for the teacher.[6] In that case, the student figures only in the encircling first-person environment of the teacher as an I — nominative case — his or her totality (and by extension, the system or institution). As such, the role of the student would be — accusative case — to be led into domestication, a taming, a socialization. In its extreme form, this description of the teacher-student relationship is what Freire calls banking education.[7] And, as Freire astutely observes, this relation is not really (liberatory) pedagogy, but domination, oppression, dehumanization. A form of violence.

For teaching to be pedagogical, however, it must be non-violent. To the extent that it is pedagogical — that it gives rise to the moment of learning — it is non-coercive. And to be non-coercive from the first-person perspective of the teacher, the student is other. The student is out of reach, beyond the grasp, safe from the arbitrariness or power of the teacher as I. And for that to occur, the teacher's first-person relation to the student must be from the accusative position rather than from the nominative one. This means an asymmetry in the teacher's relation to the student, where the student is other.

But the asymmetry of the teacher-to-student relationship is not merely a duplicate, in reverse, of the asymmetry of the student-to-teacher relationship. That would make the two, together, a symmetry, a Buber-like I-Thou. In the teacher-to-student relation, from the first-person perspective of the teacher, the otherness of the student is his or her vulnerability. From the otherness of the student as other emerges the non-indifference of the teacher towards the student. The otherness of the other always calls into question the freedom of the I, the ego, the autonomous subject. Otherness always changes the teacher as an I to a me, the nominative to the accusative. In the teaching relation, the teacher is "accused" by the student, by the otherness of the student, by the student as vulnerable. This accusation is a kind of being held hostage by a responsibility that is never totally discharged. The vulnerability of the student creates in the teacher a non-indifference towards the student. *I* am responsible for *that* student, whether I want to be or not. I cannot escape it. Precisely because of the vulnerability of the student, because he or she is the weak partner in the teacher/student relationship, the student is other. His or her exposedness and need inevitably obligates the teacher, as a "me," to be a servant (*paidagogos*), responsible for the student as other. As a teacher, I cannot shrug off the accusing presence of the student by finding a substitute. Substitute teaching is a contradiction in terms. The phenomenon of being a teacher for a student, from a first-person perspective, is to be irreplaceable. It is, as it were, the vulnerability of the student that *chooses* me. Chooses *me*. The accusing presence of the student leaves me no choice but to be non-indifferent to the student. The otherness of the student breaks through my economy, my totality. As a teacher I become a supporting cast for the student rather than the student for me. That is what it means for the student to be other. That is the otherness of the student as other.

As a teacher I show. Often I say something. The moment of pedagogy is not so much in what is said as in its saying. It is in the saying that reveals the student as other: "Saying states and thematizes the said, but signifies it to the other, a neighbor."[8] Saying, suggests Levinas, is an exposure of my ego, my singularity, to the other. In the exposure, I reveal a non-indifference to the other ethically. It is a "risky uncovering of oneself, in sincerity" abandoning the shelter of being an autonomous subject and instead treating the student as a neighbor. Prior to the thematizing character of "the said" that is the result of any saying, I am exposed to the other, requiring that what I say responds to the need of the other. This non-indifference to the student calls into question my freedom to deliver arbitrarily any content I like as a teacher. The student's otherness means my saying must be for the good of the student.

Thus, what is central in my relation, as a teacher, to the student as other is responsibility. I have an obligation more primary than any freedom. In fact, it might not be too strong to argue that my singularity as a teacher comes into existence through my exposure to the student as other. Here the otherness of the student can be characterized as uniqueness, something that transcends my categorization. The uniqueness of the student is actually a call to me for assuming responsibility to that person. I am responsible to her precisely because she is irreplaceable in the pedagogical relationship, regardless of how many others there are. At this moment,

to that person, I am responsible. That student, whose face I see, is irreplaceably calling me to respond. I as a teacher am to be obedient to the obligations imposed on me by the face of the student. The uniqueness of the student is an appeal to the teacher's responsibility towards him or her.

The obligation is mine, personally. Pedagogy involves centrally heeding that call, succumbing to that elected obligation. I am irrecusably chosen to be responsible to that student. The otherness of the student, his or her vulnerability — neighborliness — creates this in me.

Precarious Pedagogy

Ethically, successful pedagogy requires two asymmetric relationships, each of which has "the other" at the far pole. Pedagogy occurs in the context of a double relationship between teacher and student. In that relationship, the teacher is other for the student while the student is other for the teacher.

This doubling is not merely an optional extra. It is central to pedagogy as pedagogy. On the one hand, to be teaching the teacher's showing must be embedded in an ethical relationship, heeding the call of the other to whom the teaching is directed. To be genuinely non-dominating, the student must be other, beyond the reach of the totalizing urge of the conceptual structure of the teacher. The student qua student must be a stranger, a site of obligation for the teacher qua teacher. Thus at its rock bottom, teaching too is a "passivity beyond all passivity," a listening before speaking.[9] On the other hand, to be learning the student's reception must be embedded in an ethical relation, one in which the student willingly allows his or her freedom to be called into question by the teacher's showing. To be genuine learning, the teacher must be other, beyond the reach of the egocentism of the student. The teacher qua teacher must be a site beyond the grasp of the student.

The double asymmetry is a double trust, something essential to pedagogy. Without trust the student's risk in accepting the teacher's "saying" would be too great. Without trust the teacher's risk of exposure to the student in "saying" would be too much. The double trust is thus a crucial dimension of pedagogy.

The double trust gives pedagogy a double precariousness. The student welcoming the teacher is really, pedagogically, a request, an entreaty (*precari*). To learn from an other is to ask the other (for) something. A request or entreaty involves a dependency on the favor of the other. An entreaty, from the perspective of the student, is for an as yet mysterious something. Learning is a request before one knows what to ask for, a kind of prayer. It is the student's exposure to change before knowing what the change will actually be, a change unforeseen. As such, learning inherently lacks security and stability; it is something outside of the control of the student.

To teach is to offer an other something before the assurance of its acceptance. An entreaty, from the perspective of the teacher, is an offering of something that may well not be accepted, or accepted differently from what was offered. It is the teacher's exposure to risk before knowing what will be taken, or whether it will be. As such, teaching inherently lacks in security and stability.

There are thus two ways in which pedagogy is pedagogy *of* the other. First of all, "of" refers to the student: the student being taught is the other. And second, "of" refers to the teacher: the teacher who teaches is the other. Both are vital in pedagogy. And thus, for pedagogy to be such, it is doubly pedagogy of the other.

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1. Levinas was the philosopher who introduced Edmund Husserl's phenomenology to France early in the twentieth century, but he quickly gravitated towards Martin Heidegger's critique of Husserl. However, Levinas developed his own fundamental critique of Heidegger in *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 1969) [This text will be cited as *TI* for all subsequent references.] and *Otherwise than Being* (Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 1981). Here Levinas developed a highly original philosophical approach in which he puts ethics rather than ontology as first philosophy. In applying Levinas's general insight to education, I follow other philosophers of education such as Gert Biesta, "Radical Intersubjectivity," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 18, no. 4 (1999): 203-20, Ann Chinnery, "Levinas and Ethical Agency" in *Philosophy of Education Society 2000*, ed. Lynda Stone (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2001), 67-74, Julian Edgoose, "An Ethics of Hesitant Learning" in *Philosophy of Education 1997*, ed. Susan Laird (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1998), 266-74, and Abunuwara Kimberly, "Drawing on Levinas to redefine education" *Education* 119, no. 1 (1998): 147-50. Asking these questions from a Levinasian perspective leads to different descriptions of learning than, say, the Popperian direction Joanna Swann takes in "What Happens When Learning Takes Place?" *Interchange* 30, no.3 (1999): 257-82.

2. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 89-101.

3. Ibid, 39-47.

4. Biesta, "Radical Intersubjectivity," 212.

5. Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. B. Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

6. Heidegger, *Being and Time*.

7. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. M.G. Ramos (New York: Continuum, 1970, 1983).

8. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 46.

9. Ibid.