

A Twitch Upon the Thread: Levinas, the Conscience of Teaching, and the Teaching of Conscience

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INTRODUCTION

The history of educational and social thought echoes with cries of moral and social decline. Such laments have been voiced by writers as far back as Hesiod and still maintain a place on the nation's front pages. Many call for students to learn "the difference between right and wrong," so that they will know when they are tempted to err, and have it on their conscience. The nature of conscience itself, however, remains little examined within the debate of moral education.

In this essay, I will review the dominant views of conscience and explore another understanding of it for educators. I believe we need to examine other ways of understanding this crucial part of moral life if we are to engage fully in the task of educating students to meet moral challenges. I will describe weaknesses in current models and then go on to suggest another model of conscience — one that grows from the work of Emmanuel Levinas. I shall argue that this understanding of conscience resonates strongly with the experience of teaching and thus leaves us with interesting ideas for the teaching of conscience in schools.

THE PROBLEM OF CONSCIENCE

Every so often, as we know, the public's short attention span becomes focused on moral education. We enter a realm of familiar phrases and questions: How could kids do such things? Something must be done! We must teach them right from wrong! Such cries for comprehension find resonance with a public in search of easy answers to difficult problems and, of course, with the politicians who serve them. The theme of "teaching kids right from wrong" — a call for the education of conscience — has been a popular theme in the recent presidential politics.

The issue of conscience is never far from the surface when attention turns to moral education, but the word itself is too seldom mentioned even if it sits implicitly within. Generally, perspectives on conscience fall into one of two camps.² In one are the traditionalists who see conscience as our access to "what is right and what is wrong" — as known, for example, by religious teaching ("Judeo-Christian values") or rational calculus. Sometimes the moral code is already implanted within us by the divine, at other times it is for us to construct in accordance with social norms. Either way, this group sees conscience as a good and necessary thing for healthy moral development. In the other camp are the modern heirs of Freud who claim that conscience is merely an extrapolation of the admonitions given by parents. Seeing the superego or conscience as growing out of nothing more eternal and fallible than parental disapproval, these authors see conscience as an impediment to the development of the child.

Of course, each of these camps has a lot of internal diversity. Traditionalists can range from religious fundamentalists to Kantians. Meanwhile, modernists of a

Marxist hue argue for the vital role of cultural values and norms in the development of conscience, while others argue that the models of conscience we have are too closely tied with patriarchal notions of family structure.³

The latter criticism is the first of two that I want to examine in more detail. If conscience is seen as an internalization of hierarchical commands, either from God or a parent, then surely our changing familial structures make the old patriarchal model less valid for children today. It is not just a matter of mothers coming to play an equal role in setting moral guidelines for children but of the very nature of the family undergoing hugely complex changes. In light of divorce, single-parenting, adoption and non-traditional family structures, the question of parental influence is now a great deal more complex. Children with good conscience emerge out of all these family structures while unbelievable terror can be planned and enacted by children from the most stable of “normal” homes.

The second criticism is another that problematizes the issue of influence on children’s moral development. Psychologists (most controversially Judith Rich Harris) have been vocal recently in their dismantling of the notion that parental influence is dominant in the development of school age children.⁴ Rather, they argue, peer-groups are the dominant factor. I will not take sides on the issue of parental versus peer influence — for surely parents, peers, teachers and even (for some) gods all play a role in shaping our moral codes. However, none of the models of conscience outlined seem broad enough to account for such a complexity of influences.

Given weaknesses in these received notions, I want to share another understanding of conscience that, I hope, will enrich our debate. Stemming from the writing of Levinas, this account portrays conscience developing out of the complexity of influences and interactions that constitute students’ lives — interactions with parents, peers, teachers, and even from the understood notions (if any) of divinity. It suggests that conscience might be a complex factor of all such interactions. This account will not replace the earlier articulations — it does not deny the validity of either side in the debate on conscience. Rather, it offers a model of conscience that is open to both sides by describing a central origin of conscience in the social interactions that the other theorists all assume.⁵

Before I continue, I must briefly discuss Levinas within a context of critiques by Jacques Derrida and John Caputo (among others). I agree with these critiques to the extent that I am not claiming that the account below is an exclusive or total account of conscience. For example, what Caputo says of obligation seems as valid for conscience when he writes,

When one says “obligation happens,” that means it just happens, that it happens along with a lot of other things that also happen, that it does not have the deep status of an archioriginal, preoriginal founding event, that it never has, never had, the depth structure...that Levinas attributes to ethical substitution.⁶

So, the description given by Levinas of substitution (that I will relate to conscience) happens. However, it is not the only dimension of conscience, nor does it constitute the deepest aspect of responsibility. It must be noted, though, that this qualification does not discount the importance of Levinas’s account — only his

claims to its preoriginality. There is a danger that, as our interest is captured by the writings of his critics, we lose sight of the radical nature of Levinas's work to which his critics testify.⁷ In an effort to ensure the consideration of Levinas's radical re-description of human interaction, I will start with an account of his radical rethinking of conscience and then go on to explore its implications for our teaching.

EXTRICATING EUCLID

Levinas's work opens the door to a radically different understanding of conscience. In order to articulate the significance of this difference, I argue that his understanding of conscience builds upon efforts to undo the deep Euclidean understanding of social space that underlies our ethics.

While the debt of Western social thought to Plato is well-known, we have not been as good at examining the influence of his follower Euclid on *social* space. Possibly, due to the fact that ours is a written academic tradition — and that the white sheet of paper (like the blackboard) lends itself to geometric diagrams — it seems hard to see how a diagrammatic rendition of social space pervades our social and ethical discourse. Indeed, how could it be otherwise? In order to explore conscience in a Levinasian frame, I refer to his attempt to extricate human experience from this Euclidean grid. Levinas realizes, however, that such an extrication at the roots of a tradition changes everything above it right up to the heights of conscience.

To achieve this aim, let us reflect on an academic conference through both a traditional lens and Levinas's alternative. People are sitting together in a room. Some of them are familiar to each other and some of them are not. To the social scientist working in Euclidean space, each person might be represented by an "X" sitting within a box which contains other Xs. This X is, like a player in a military campaign, a familiar conceptualization of the self. We are used to the notion that the self can be represented as an entity — indeed the notion runs to the bottom of Western individualism and political science.

The ethical implications of this view trouble Levinas, for the self in Euclidean space is presented as a complete entity, sealed at the edges with the ethical question framed as the interaction between one known quantity (the self) and another (the other). Ethics, then, becomes a type of formal dance in which one must move to interact with others. The world is made up of conscious intentional actions with others.

Usually, Levinas writes, we think of space as "an initial geometrical and physical impassiveness" that is then overlaid from "the presence of man [sic], from his desires and passions, [with] a cultural layer."⁸ Thus, Western thought thinks of humans as acting in a world already charted out in Euclidean coordinates that take on human signification through a layering over of social context. Before we act or interact we are seen as resting in an already demarcated space that we shape to be our own. Further, the self, then, traditionally starts from a position of occupation — the seat of a metaphorical country estate. Space is neutral and given. Social space is like the comfortable domain of the custom designed bathroom or kitchen — with everything tailored to the needs of the user. The Western self is always at home in his or her "place in the sun."⁹

Thus, the room in which one sits is only conceivable to the traditional self as a space that is already ours. Levinas argues, in contrast, that we encounter each other not in the planned out space of geometry, but in *proximity* — a word he uses to refer to the experience of the Other's nearness before one can classify or represent this relation. Rather than a comfortable self who chooses to interact in order to reach certain goals in life, Levinas describes the self in terms of the discomfort one feels in one's sense of place due to the inextricably inter-human nature of life. Just as you sit in a complex social setting, surrounded by people familiar and unfamiliar, proximity is the unease of the setting in which interaction places us. If you are sitting close to someone you know, you might be sitting comfortably, otherwise, you might be sitting askew, perhaps wondering how those around you will react to a question that you are hoping to ask at the end. There are all sorts of other concerns, very real but mostly unconscious, that already shape your situation right now with respect to those around you.

"Proximity is not a state, a repose, but a restlessness, null site, outside of the place of rest," Levinas writes.¹⁰ The significance of this breaking from the Euclidean mold is the way in which proximity disturbs the traditional temporal and spatial understandings of social interactions. In other words, in proximity I am not in a strategic Euclidean understanding of myself *vis-à-vis* others. Rather, I am brought to a point where I am unsure how to proceed. Social space is awkward for Levinas because proximity makes us uncertain how to respond or proceed, or indeed what to expect. Our own definition is taken from our own comfortable "X"-ness and this in turn problematizes the "X"-ness of others. Proximity, then, is the far more complex and fluid positioning one assumes in response to the other — a positioning in which one realizes that anything is possible.

In sum, the Euclidean self sits in comfortable situation. The Levinasian self acknowledges that you are all each, subtly, responding to the social closeness of each other. To Levinas, communication is not an act that sends packages of information across the void of space. We are interacting because there is no sense to a human outside of interaction.

Let me be clear: I am not trying to describe how Levinas feels one *should* feel. Rather, he is trying to retrieve a mutual co-implication in which we find ourselves.¹¹ We find ourselves interacting — responding — to each other before we ever enter the plane of Euclidean self-location. Of course, if asked one can explain one's position using good Euclidean answers. That is to be expected. However, is that all that is going on?

Before we are separable, then, we are connected. This is not an ideological statement so much as a statement of the fact of many (unacknowledged) interactions. Levinas writes that this is before Euclidean space, before we can decide whether our interactivity makes us free or unfree. This may seem remarkable at first, so think how you feel when you pass a person panhandling on the street. No matter how you respond to his or her pleas, you do so against the very strong sensation of unease in your position. Do you give money, or look away, or apologize and keep walking? No matter, the discomfort of place is tremendous. Without so much as a word being said, we are in proximity.

In the next section I explicate how this concept of proximity leads to a new understanding of what Levinas calls “substitution,” and that I describe as the origin of conscience.¹²

THE THREADS OF CONSCIENCE

I caught him, with an unseen hook and an invisible line which is long enough to let him wander to the ends of the world, and still to bring him back with a twitch upon the thread.

G.K. Chesterton, *The Innocence of Father Brown*¹³

I note here that this essay was first presented at a humanities colloquium with colleagues and students and, as often happens, I was asked to give the title before I had worked out exactly what I wanted to say. I gave the title “A Twitch upon the Thread” with reference to the above quote by Chesterton that has been oft cited — most notably by Evelyn Waugh.¹⁴ The words are those of the detective Father Brown who has foiled an attempted theft. Although the thief escaped physically, he did so only after having confessed his guilt — a guilt that will sit on his conscience and follow him like an invisible line. To me, this quote captures the pull of conscience, but I had not realized when I chose it how perfectly it fits with Levinas’s work. So there I was, struggling to find a way to explain Levinas’s view of conscience until I realized that it was there in the title — thread. Not Euclidean thread — not a Euclidean straight line with only one dimension, but real thread that sticks to one’s clothing.

To Levinas, our lives are like threads. We might imagine that we each start our lives at the bottom of the thread and move up a trajectory of our own devising, moving up our own thread. In every interaction, however, we lose the comfort of that situation and come to somewhere new through interacting with others. To interact, Levinas claims, is to become wrapped up with the fate of people. Interaction changes our trajectory and theirs. It takes us from our own linear trajectory to a place that was outside of our initial projection, since it is an encounter with an other, and we are uncertain of what will happen in our interaction. Interaction, Levinas claims, is always a risk because it takes us outside of that which we can control. It is a vulnerability.

Levinas uses this insight to make what might appear to be, at first, a remarkable claim: that we are responsible for the future of the Other with whom we interact and we know this in a deep sense. If I have interacted with someone else in the past, our threads were entwined long ago and they remain connected now. The implication of this is that I implicitly and unavoidably assumed responsibility for an other’s future given that earlier interaction. This is what Levinas calls substitution that is, I believe, an important origin of responsibility.

To give an example, let us return to our interaction with the panhandler. Imagine, however, that one returns the following day or the following year to the corner where he panhandles and finds an ambulance carrying away his body. When you inquire, you hear that he has died of hypothermia sleeping out on the street. Do you feel implicated? After passing him, no matter how we responded to his pleas? What could I have done in our interaction that would have averted his death?

Levinas claims that we do feel implicated. Even though we might deny any responsibility to ourselves or to others, we do so because we feel a deep sense of implication against which we have to defend ourselves. This, he claims, is an often unconscious legacy of our deeply interactive and connected lives. We have, through interaction alone, assumed responsibility for his future. We have substituted for him, and were even doing it when, yesterday or a year ago, we burned with unease as we walked past him, or felt the inadequacy of our donation. This substitution is the source of our conscience. *It is our conscience.*

Conscience grows out of the very nature of interaction, then. To Levinas, it is a by-product of human interconnectivity and not a question of preexistent moral laws. The imperative is to respond to the other. Levinas writes that the face of the Other is the source of moral command. It grows out of every interaction — one does not even have to converse to feel this implication, this responsibility. Levinas voices conscience thus: “I am a hostage, a responsibility and a substitution supporting the world in the passivity of assignation, even in an accusing assignation, which is undeclinable. Humanism has to be denounced only because it is not sufficiently human.”¹⁵ What Levinas believes the humanistic tradition fails to acknowledge is the ways in which we come upon the scene as tied by threads from every interaction, threads that constitute our conscience — acknowledged or not. Elsewhere, Levinas quotes Dostoyevsky: “Each of us is guilty before everyone for everyone, and I more than the others.”¹⁶ This responsibility is felt asymmetrically. As it exists beyond Euclidean space, it cannot be reduced to a quality assigned to every X in the room. It is something we feel as it grows out of the non-transferable entwinings of our own unique interactions.

In the next sections I will ask questions that I hope will clarify this understanding of conscience and its unique relation to education. For, as we shall see, the conscience of teaching is closely related to the teaching of conscience.

THE CONSCIENCE OF TEACHING

I hope the following questions addressed to educators will explain the crucial connection between this sense of conscience and education. Imagine that a teacher hears that an ex-student has become a Nobel laureate. Would he feel...responsible? Perhaps that is too conceited. However, would he feel implicated? Would she glow after hearing the news, walking with a certain spring in her step?

Or, what if the same teacher heard that an ex-student had become a mass murderer? Now, does he feel responsible or implicated? I am afraid the answer to both may be yes.

The salience that I hope you feel from these examples highlights the crucial factor about conscience — that in teaching we are made most aware of the threads of conscience that bind us. In teaching, these threads are clearest and perhaps most difficult to ignore. This is not to say that teachers bear the most responsibility. One of my colleagues remembers one of *her* fellow middle-school teachers who told her whenever she worried about her students, “you did not give birth to them!” That is one way to confront the threads of conscience.

Teaching has that extra visibility of conscience, in part, because teaching exists in the paradox of substitution. To teach is to say “I will prepare you for the future” even as one acknowledges that one cannot be too sure what that future will bring. To teach, then, is to substitute oneself for the Other. That is the conscience of teaching. It is more visible, perhaps, than any other occasion of conscience, but it is no different in the nature of its origins.

I have shown how interactions — with parents and peers and, indeed, everybody — sit at the heart of conscience. Again, one might rationalize one’s feelings of responsibility by thinking that “I should not have lied” or “I should have acted differently” and thus one might refer to right and wrong. Yet, Levinas argues, that sense of right and wrong is not the source of conscience.

Before I go on to address the teaching of conscience, I should address the final type of relationship that I mentioned at the beginning of this essay as a possible source of conscience. The relationship in question is that with a divinity. The important thing to note here is the difference between the experience of religious belief and the ways we describe it. Arguments about the existence of God or the reality of a religious faith are often meaningless to believers. To the believer, God is often a reality in every moment of her or his life. Everything, perhaps, shows the trace of divinity and thus a denial of divine existence seems nonsensical.

To Levinas, this sense of the proximity of the divine is present in every interaction. “God is not involved as an alleged interlocutor,” he writes, but “in the trace of transcendence.”¹⁷ The irreducibility and excess in interaction is infinite — beyond our comprehension. It is from this trace, Levinas claims, that the experience of the divine stems. Since this trace is there in every interaction we have, one’s sense of the divine is a witness to and a component of conscience.

THE TEACHING OF CONSCIENCE

What, then, can we learn from this discussion about the teaching of conscience? As I hope is now clear, this reading of Levinas suggests that the development of conscience in a student is little connected with the teaching of right and wrong. The development of conscience can stem, however, from the ways we structure our classrooms to maximize the mutual co-implication of our students. Peer teaching, and other relationships of responsibility — particularly over time — are ways for students to develop a sensitivity to the threads of conscience like that which haunts teachers. Of course, no matter what the lesson, the passive treatment of students in the classroom does nothing to help them develop their consciences.

To be sure, I am not saying that if students are engaged teaching each other we will solve all the moral problems in schools. Such a claim would be preposterous. This essay only seeks to present an understanding of *conscience*. While conscience is an important part of moral education, it is only a part. Conscience does not govern all our actions, nor could it. We cannot answer every twitch of the thread. We cannot respond to each and every other with whom our lives have intertwined. That would be impossible. That does not stop the threads twitching, but it does mean that we can and do try to still them, or deaden ourselves to their pull.

It might be interesting to extend this essay's analysis to explore why girls seem to be raised to acknowledge all the threads of conscience whereas boys are taught to ignore most of them.¹⁸ If the account of conscience I have given today rings true — if it pulls on threads of conscience within you — then there is something to Levinas's rewriting of ethical space. If we were to accept this rewrite, the focus of our concern would change from the construction of responsibility. We would then have to ask why it is denied through circumstance, socialization, and even education.

I hope I have presented an understanding of conscience that rings truer than the belief in an internal moral law. If so, then we need to explore how we can implicate students in each other's lives and futures by the way we structure our classes in order to build and strengthen their sense of conscience. Everyone is entwined in education. We must also ensure that everyone learns to accept and acknowledge the twitching of their threads.

1. David Von Drehle, "Bush Passes on GOP Event That Draws 8 Hopefuls," *The Washington Post*, 3 May 1999, A12.

2. Guyton Hammond, *Conscience and its Recovery: From the Frankfurt School to Feminism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1993), 2-4.

3. Hammond, *Conscience and its Recovery*, 6-8.

4. Judith Rich Harris, *The Nurture Assumption* (New York: Free Press, 1998).

5. For an example of Levinas's work as a complement to other ethical writing, see, for example, Helmut Peukert's discussion of Levinas and Habermas in "Basic Problems of a Critical Theory of Education," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 27, no.2 (1993): 159-70.

6. John Caputo, *Against Ethics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 274.

7. I believe this is less true of Caputo than of Derrida (from whose early reading of early Levinas Caputo derived his critique), whose writing over the past decade has continually returned to Levinas's work. See, for example, Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law" *Cardozo Law Review* 11, no. 919 (1990): 920-1045, and Derrida, "A Word of Welcome," in *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

8. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. A. Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1991), 81.

9. Levinas borrows this phrase from Pascal's *Pensees* with the explanation "this is how the usurpation of the whole world began"; *Otherwise than Being*, frontispiece.

10. *Ibid.*, 82.

11. That is not to say that Levinas is solely naturalistic. His more prescriptive side is beyond the scope of this essay, such as when he calls for an "open-eyed ignorance" *Ibid.*, 177.

12. Levinas does not write about "conscience" since, in his adoptive tongue of French, the word *conscience* means both "conscience" and "consciousness" — the latter being far from his understanding of conscience. I have used the word "conscience" to refer to the effects of what he calls "substitution" — the notion that, in proximity, we substitute ourselves for the Other and assume the weight of her/his future.

13. G.K. Chesterton, *The Innocence of Father Brown* (Leipzig: B. Tauchnitz, 1923).

14. Evelyn Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited* (London: Penguin, 1954), 212.

15. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 128.

16. *Ibid.*, 146. Also Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Book VI, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Macmillan, 1951), IIa.

17. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 158.

18. See Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982) and Daniel Kindlon and Michael Thomson, *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys* (New York: Ballantine, 1999).