
THE ETHICS OF THE "REAL" IN LEVINAS, LACAN, AND BUDDHISM:
PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

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SETTING THE SCENE FOR ETHICS IN EDUCATION

The question of ethics has increasingly become more and more important when it comes to educational practices. How do we act toward our students? How do we come to their calling? What is it in the pedagogical relation that compels us, as teachers, to continue to "reach out" despite not liking a particular student or being frustrated with a class's continual failures or rejections? As teachers, it seems we do not have the luxury of "giving up" on our students no matter how difficult the circumstances may be. This is often used against us both politically and rhetorically so that we should do "more with less" despite the difficult conditions we find ourselves in. There is a "truth" in teacher responsibility that unfortunately can be turned into deterministic accountability. It is this "truth" of teacher responsibility that enables state authorities to hold teachers "hostage" to policies that may be detrimental to progressive educational advancement. If we fail our student(s), there is a reciprocal deep sense of our own personal failure of not "caring" and not "holding" the student long enough to allow for the difficulty to pass, for an insight to emerge. It is the *contingent* moment of unexpected surprise of a student changing "for the better," most often suddenly and dramatically, and at other times imperceptibly because of our own blindness, that needs to be continually honored in our classrooms.

There seems to be, therefore, an unstated ethics that exists in the silent space between teacher and student, and it is this space and its temporization which I want to explore in this essay by calling upon three somewhat strange companions to think through this unspeakable silence of ethics: two proper names (Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Lacan) and a "way of life," some would say religion (Buddhism) which is much more heterogeneous than the representation I provide here.¹ The juxtaposition of West and East, I hope, adds to the illumination of ethical pedagogy, or at least its implications for further thought. However, as we shall see, this grouping is also chosen because of an utter distrust by all three positions of the ego's perception of reality and the structures that define it. In short, there is something "beyond" the ego or "within" the ego itself, a certain but necessary "unknowability" which calls out to the Other ethically because it points to a dimension which *cannot* be thought for

1. Its two major divisions are Theravadin and Bodhisattva. I will be discussing the salient features that apply to them both.

it exists as an "impossible outside." I shall argue that it is precisely this unknowable dimension which raises the question of ethics in human relations that educators need to think out.

In the last decade, educational theory has greatly benefited from continental philosophies, especially phenomenology and the radical rethinking of Being by Martin Heidegger.² Heidegger's existentialist shift to *Dasein*, the "being-there" of existence prior to reflective theoretical thought, opened the door for qualitative studies that placed an emphasis on teacher practice; that is to say, emphasis on *Vorhandenheit* — what is "present-at-hand" — rather than *Zuhandenheit* — what is "readiness-to-hand." This development caused a major paradigm shift in educational research during and after the 1980s, toward phenomenological and qualitative analyses of classroom life. However, Heidegger's questioning of Being examined the period prior to the time when philosophy became divided into its traditional categories of logic, ethics, and metaphysics. Consequently, Heidegger had no real need to develop an ethics. His development of *Mitsein* (being-with) in *Being and Time* in this sense is an underdeveloped and under-theorized concept. It may well be that its very underdevelopment is precisely where Heidegger's philosophy is flawed and leads to a possible "archi-fascism."³

Perhaps more important for educational theory has been the climate change philosophically which has put Heideggerian philosophy (and Gadamerian hermeneutic developments) in jeopardy as the ground for educational thought. Here I am referring to a number of developments that call for a post-Heideggerian era in rethinking the primary questions of educational research along ethical lines. First, and most seriously, has been the recognition that Heidegger's *Dasein* itself does not escape the distinction it was supposed to make: the one between the metaphysical ontological subject of theoretical and contemplative consciousness and the human being as fundamentally "thrown" into the world. For Levinas there exists a prior ethical relation to the Other which grounds *Dasein* — "being-with" already precedes "being there."⁴ Levinas wants to make ethics, not ontology, the first philosophy which recognizes the alterity of Otherness. Second, Derridean deconstruction has recognized that there is no escape from the confines of the Western logocentric metaphysical tradition in which we find ourselves. The so-called "closure" (*clôture*) of philosophy means that critique is always turned in on itself requiring new

2. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Marquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962).

3. Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe, "Transcendence Ends in Politics," in *The Subject of Philosophy: Typographies*, ed. with foreword Thomas Trezise, trans. Peter Caws (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

4. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alfonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).

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strategies of "writing." Third, postmodernism's doing away with the bourgeois subject has led to a loss of authority that decentering the humanist subject has brought in its structuralist and poststructuralist guises. The decentering of the subject into so many subject-positions that are governed by the interplay of discourses has led to a sovereign subject who, paradoxically, no longer seems responsible, shaped by structures beyond any one individual's control.⁵ The power/knowledge complement as developed by Michel Foucault, for instance, has been one way for educators to further a progressive understanding of how dominant educational discourses maintain their hegemony.⁶ Yet such a development has simply shown that *any* regime of truth can potentially become totalitarian — Marxist, feminist, capitalist alike — along with their normalizing and disciplinary systems of morality.⁷ Finally, globalization and the diasporic movements of people have made the question of "difference" a crucial issue. Our classrooms are pluri-cultural in their make-up, heterogeneous, and hyper-complex. How do we as educators address this "difference"?

THE "VIOLENCE" OF FUNDAMENTAL RECOGNITION

Given this situation of decentering the subject, ethics (and the political praxis which follows in due course) has come to the fore as an issue for the postmodern turn toward a new millennium. Let me begin by problematizing an ethical direction that all three positions as I read them, have, if not outright rejected, certainly modified — and that is the question of recognition "as such" (*an sich*) of the Other based on the Hegelian question of the master/bondsman dialectic. Hegel's characterization continues to represent a paradigm case for thinking about difference and equality interpreted in all its possible hybridic variations (an existentialist Marxist account, a republican neo-Aristotelian communitarian account of Charles Taylor, and Jürgen Habermas's dialogical consensual account, to name a few⁸). What is significant about Hegel's account of intersubjectivity is the conceptual shift he made from an ontological distinction between Sameness and Otherness. Otherness (*das Andere*) as

5. Poststructuralists and Lacanians hold quite different assumptions about the "subject of discourse." Poststructuralists assert that the subject is created by, derived from, and essentially equivalent to discourse. Discourse contains, causes, manipulates, and composes the subject. Discourse operates the subject as it operates upon the subject. In contrast, the three positions (Lacan, Levinas, and Buddhism) emphasize the "subject" in relation *prior* to discourse. Attention is on the "singularity" of the person in the way he manipulates discourse because of his or her own "subject-driven" predispositions. Such subject-specific discourse alters, manipulates, resists, and transforms systems of discourse that impinge. Foucault, for instance, has often been criticized for his failure to acknowledge adequately this will-driven unconscious subject because he dismissed Freud's repression hypothesis. See Marshall Alcorn, Jr., "The Subject of Discourse: Reading Lacan through (and beyond) Poststructuralists Contexts," in *Lacanian Theory of Discourse: Subject, Structure, and Society*, ed. Mark Bracher, Marshall W. Alcorn, Jr., Ronald J. Corthell, and Françoise Massardier-Kenney (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 19-45.

6. See especially Thomas S. Popkewitz and Marie Brennan, eds., *Foucault's Challenge: Discourse, Knowledge, and Power in Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1998).

7. This thesis is developed by Jennifer Gore who argues that Foucault's claim that "any knowledge can be dangerous" leads simply to new regimes of truth. Jennifer Gore, *The Struggle For Pedagogies: Critical and Feminist Discourses as Regimes of Truth* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

8. For a representational spectrum see Amy Gutmann, ed., *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994).

an oppositional category in an either/or logical game became a "personalized" Other (*der Andere*) where the encounter becomes existential and reflexive, thereby "personalizing" the experience. Ethics at this existential personal level is of interest to all three positions to be discussed here. Standard practice in Western moral philosophy has been to distinguish questions of "justice" from questions of the "good life"; that is, Kantian moral theory (*Moralität*) that attempts to ground a universal "moral law" from a Hegelian *Sittlichkeit*, that is, moral conduct understood intersubjectively, dialogically and within a community setting. Although this division is not so easily separated, pedagogical ethics as a phenomenologically "lived experience" is certainly the focus of this exploration and not a search for a developmental moral hierarchy (as presented for instance by Lawrence Kohlberg and the substantive critiques which followed).⁹

In Hegel's account this mutual recognition of equals is tainted by violence and ruled over by death, for it is a mortal combat where the bottom line of freedom can only end in the Other's death. However, how "death" is to be interpreted here opens up ethical possibilities. Certainly, physical death is the most dramatic possible scenario on either side. However, the encounter might also be read in relation to twins who test each other out, eventually settling their differences of power into one not necessarily based on dominance and subordination, but a deep appreciation of their differences. There is also the possibility of a "symbolic death," where one of the two antagonists walks away from the struggle to develop new ground. Or, within the struggle for recognition, one side may lose "fairly" to the other and not lose dignity. Perhaps complete freedom has not been claimed but a step toward it has been managed. Just this possibility suggests that there is something called "justice" — an exit door that exists prior to the death scenario. For Hegel, however, this moment of mutually recognizing one another is short-lived, simply a lull in the settling of matters. Round two is about to begin. This fundamental antagonism only seemingly disappears when the bondsman acquiesces, avoids the fear of death, and paradoxically gains freedom by sublimating his self-consciousness through (alienated) labor which the Master then appropriates in order to satiate his desires. Anti-Hegelian critics like Levinas have pointed out that the bottom line of Hegel's philosophy was to appropriate the alterity (the difference) of the Other into the self-same. *Geist* (spirit) continually usurps difference for its own seemingly "progressive" gains.

It is difficult to deny that Western education as it is practiced today escapes this crude account of the struggle for recognition, although "escape attempts" by teachers are enacted every day based on another ethic of recognition. The institution of schooling conditionally places the pedagogue in an authorial position with the student protected by a system of rights, especially against sexual and physical abuse

9. Lawrence Kohlberg, *The Philosophy of Moral Development: Moral Stages and the Idea of Justice* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981). On its criticism see Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982) and Seyla Benhabib, "The Generalized and the Concrete Other: The Kohlberg-Gilligan Controversy and Moral Theory," in *Situating the Self: Gender, Community, and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).

by the teacher. The very existence of such rights, or laws, already presupposes that violence exists in the heart of the teacher-student relation. From the start, this relation is unequal. Depending on the geographical location, the institutions of education, as so many critical theorists have argued and clearly demonstrated, always already discursively identifies the ideal good student in terms of scholarship potential, sex/gender, ethnicity, race, and so on. As educational theorists drawing from the Frankfurt critical school have made evident, the institution of education is essentially a battleground of competing discourses which are currently dominated hegemonically by conservative neoliberal agendas that support global capitalist expansion with an emphasis on technological efficiency and innovation. But should this dialectic of violence be justified along anthropological grounds as part of eternal nature, or belonging to an implacable phallogocentric masculine order of mutual recognition that cannot be changed? The difficulty facing the task of an educator, within the Derridean *clôture* of Hegelian and Heideggerian legacies, is to think through ethics along a different axis, one about which Levinas, Lacan, and Buddhism have something to say.

ETHICS AS RADICAL ALTERITY

The thesis that I attempt to maintain here is that despite the persistent dominance of a dialectics of recognition in our schools governed by a logic of "totality," which according to Taylor plays out as either an identity politics where absolute difference is asserted, or as a "color-blind" sameness falling into universal generalizability, there is a recognition of "difference" which is addressed through a *non-dialectical account of intersubjectivity*.¹⁰ This is a picture of the relation between humans which is not a struggle for recognition, and which all three positions theorize somewhat differently. They acknowledge and retain the unknowability of "difference" as constituting the very possibility of ethics in the first place. I would like to suggest further that it is this nondialectical relation between teacher and student which educators are bound by, and because of it they often come into conflict with the politics that surrounds and protects their profession. Teachers are torn, for instance, when it comes to striking for better pay or teaching conditions, requiring them to "suspend" their pedagogical responsibility to their students. Commitment and obligations to the Other are always present.

LEVINAS

It may sound rather odd to posit the unknowability of "difference" — difference as something that is always "beyond," or "surplus" to a formed totality rather than difference already collapsed into an identifiable category in order to justify an ethics. But *not* to do so immediately sets up a certain symmetry — a division, a dualism — whereas it is precisely an *asymmetry* in the human relation that needs to be recognized. And this asymmetry only becomes possible when a point of ineffability is posited. For Levinas, the ethical is the location of a point of alterity — or exteriority — which cannot be reduced to the Same. In other words, something exists inside a

10. Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in Gutmann, *Multiculturalism*.

person, or inside a system, which cannot possibly be known, but is strange and inexplicable. Moral consciousness, for Levinas, is not an experience of values but an access to this exterior being, and this exterior being he names *visage* — the face. The “face” is defined as “the way in which the other [*l'autrui*] presents himself [sic], exceeding the *idea of the other in me*.”¹¹ In other words, the Other presents a demand on me, interferes with my sense of liberty and freedom, and calls on a responsibility that I cannot refuse. Levinas characterizes the space of this “visage” as simply *il ya* (there is). It is the “backdrop” of his philosophy.

Given that the ethics of *l'autrui* precedes the Heideggerian *Dasein*, teachers are faced with a fundamental double bind. On the one hand the educational system expects a ranking, grading, and accountability on how well students have mastered the material, so that a certain autarchic expectation is placed on us to do the institution's bidding; on the other hand, when we begin to know our students, their strength, their frailties, their personalities, and their strivings, we come face-to-face with their “visage.” There is something “in” the student that prevents us from being totally autarchic. To do so leaves us haunted by feelings of having been unjust. We are confronted with an alterity that we are unable to master completely, hence it seems teachers devise all kinds of means to disavow and avoid the possibility of facing this “moment” of alterity, a moment that is fraught with anxiety in the sense that it throws the legitimacy of what we are doing to our students in the name of education into question. During such moments, we struggle with what is “right” and “good” for the student. Do I assign her a higher or lower grade? Do I give a student another chance to improve? Do I put up with a student's disruptions and lateness because I know that he has a difficult home life? Such seemingly trivial decisions are not trivial at all. They make up the very ambience of the class atmosphere. The more we might “objectify” a student, the more likely we are able to eliminate, mask-over, disregard, ignore the very specialness that “faces” us — that core of their identity which we know nothing about and which we will *never* completely know about. Testing, scoring, ranking, numbering, grading, and writing progress reports are all ways we pull back from ethics into an ontology that enables us to shift from *l'autri* to *l'Autre*, to depersonalize the other so that we can get on with the task of teaching as prescribed by the state.

Students can sense if a teacher is just and fair. A rapport with each and every student has to be established, and this is primarily an ethical demand that is made on the teacher and the student. *All* ethical evaluation is based on an inescapable unknowability, on alterity; otherwise we slip into instrumentalism. Within the very heart of evaluation rests a point of impossibility of evaluation. Within that point is the demand provoked in me by the student that calls for my ethical intervention. I must make a decision that may have no precedence. This factor cannot be “taught” when preparing student teachers. When we say a teacher is “experienced” — of course by this we mean she has a command of subject matter, administrative savvy,

11. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 50. *Le visage d'autrui* (the face of the other) refers to the personal other as opposed to the category of “Otherness” (*L'Autre*).

and so on — it also means that the teacher is a good judge and has a “way” with students. There is a remarkable transference between teacher and student at work in such cases. She has the capacity to help students get on with their lives, overcome personal difficulties, and pursue their dreams. Such a teacher has faced many moments of anxiety and worked through them. In so many cases there are no answers to be found in any textbook, and no case study can ever provide the exact same scenario when it comes to the “singularity” of the student face-to-face. In short, ethics is not a “normative” affair. This is Ernesto Laclau’s point when he writes,

If the moment of the ethical is the moment of a radical investment...two important conclusions follow: First, only that aspect of a decision which is not predetermined by an existing framework is, properly speaking, ethical. Second, any normative order is nothing but the sedimented form of an initial ethical event.¹²

Ultimately, ethics is a question of “singularity” and a performative approach, which I discuss below.

LACAN’S SUBJECT

Like Levinas, Lacan sees the identity of the subject being denied to consciousness, or to reflection and its structural intersubjectivity.¹³ And as with Levinas, the subject cannot be grasped essentially in its Being. Lacan’s formulation of the *objet a* [uture] (the unknown element which is the “cause” of desire) is what is in the subject “more than” in himself or herself. *Objet a* (which is not an object per se, but which acts as a lure or cover for the unknown desire) occupies precisely the point of exteriority in oneself that Levinas identifies as alterity. It is because of *objet a* that we hate or abject the Other — desire or need the Other — which asks us to respond ethically. *Objet a* belongs to the Lacanian psychic register of the Real which is beyond signification and the imaginary and is roughly equivalent to Levinas’s concept of *il y a* (there is).¹⁴ This realm, like Levinas’s, is not a question of the unthought, but what *cannot be thought*. For the purposes of my argument, Lacan’s difficult concept of the Real may best be simply characterized here as that part of the “core self” which responds affectively to the Other.¹⁵ It is the psychic register of human sentience and the sensuous aesthetic that occurs below the level of consciousness. A child feels and sees before he “knows.” The phenomenon Lacan (referencing the account of Charlotte Bühler) characterizes as the mimicry of

12. Ernesto Laclau, “Identity and Hegemony: The Role of Universality in the Constitution of Political Logics,” in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, ed. Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek (London and New York: Verso), 82.

13. I am generalizing from Lacanian oeuvre here. For a representative view of his thought see Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977).

14. For this formulation see Donna Brody, “Levinas and Lacan: Facing the Real,” in *Levinas and Lacan: The Missed Encounter*, ed. Sarah Harasym (Albany: State University of New York, 1998).

15. I am greatly oversimplifying the complexity and subtlety with which Lacan’s psychic register of the Real plays in his system of thought. Unfamiliarity with Lacan’s thought, however, need not hamper the gist of the argument being presented. Daniel Stern’s understanding of the core self, for instance, can be roughly equated with Lacan’s Real. The “core self” according to Stern is characterized by RIG’s (Representation of Interactions that have been Generalized) which are essential synesthetic “feeling patterns.” See Daniel Stern, *The Interpersonal World of the Infant: A View from Psychoanalysis and Developmental Psychology* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

"infantile transitivity" is an early manifestation of this.¹⁶ A child, for example, cries when he sees that another child has fallen down and hurt himself. I would maintain that unless a teacher ethically "touches" the student's "core self," encounters the student at the level of the Real, no transference of learning takes place. There has to be a "hold" that the teacher has on the student, a "hold" that is pregnant with trust and confidence much like the "transitional space" described by British psychoanalyst W.D. Winnicott and by Julia Kristeva through her concept of the "semiotic" between mother and child.¹⁷

BUDDHISM'S "NO-SELF"

So what about Buddhism, and why mention it in regard to the respect for alterity? Alterity in the Buddhist sense is a meditation on the "no-self" (*zazen*), on the "other side of self," which has affinities with the Lacanian Real and the Levinasian *il y a*. The goal of meditation is to reach a point of "emptiness." It is meditation on the "core self" so that one begins to recognize how the structure of one's own ego is related to objects and things that give one meaning and desire, as well as suffering (*dukhta*). One might risk a Western appropriation here by calling it a form of "self-psychology," given that in the various stages of progression to nirvana (enlightenment) one analyzes one's relation to the "world" and one's place in it. Through such radical self-meditation, the recognition of human suffering (*dukhta*), which has many affinities to Lacan's notion of transitivity as well as the attachment of *jouissance* (painful pleasure) to *objet a*, leads to a compassionate openness of the "personal other" (Levinas' *l'autrui*).

In Buddhism the self/ego is a construction that meditation practices begin to analyze into sets of impersonal mental and physical phenomena whose interactions create the illusion of self-consciousness — hence the self may be deconstructed, not in the Derridean sense, but as its layers are analyzed and taken apart. This meditation practice is based on five levels of mindfulness or *skandhas* (Sanskrit: literally meaning "heaps," "groups of grasping," or "aggregates") to achieve a stillness of the mind (*samadhi*). So it is not surprising that the first level of meditation is directed at the sentience of the body (as with Levinas and Lacan). Direct physical sensations of breathing and bodily experience are made the subjects of meditation. This is followed by the mindfulness of feeling (*vedana*), the meditation on the pleasant and unpleasant aspects of bodily experience. In the beginning of such meditation the re-experience of terrifying feelings is not uncommon as they are said to be "core states" that were often impossible to process in childhood because of parental abuse or interference. Mindfulness of feelings merges with mindfulness of thought and emotions, which forms the third and fourth levels of meditation. Beginning with the

16. Lacan, "The Mirror-Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in *Écrits*, 1-7.

17. D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Routledge, 1971), 79-85 and Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller, intro. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

body, extending first to feelings and then to complex states of the mind, mindful-meditation allows the exploration of those aspects of experience, like our day-to-day thoughts that are generally taken for granted. Hence meditative mindfulness in these first four levels can serve as a vehicle for desensitizing ourselves to our fears of our feelings, breaking down the self-imposed barriers that keep us at a distance, not only from each other, but also from ourselves.

The last level, nirvana (enlightenment) or complete "emptiness," is rarely reached. Although there are many explanations for such a state, I would deem this as the achievement of a "supra-ethics" which is associated with leaders who have set unprecedented new ways of being-with-others in the world. Besides Buddha (Siddhārtha Gautama), one may think of other "axial" figures such as Krishna, Confucius, Christ, Martin Luther King, and of course Ghandhi's practice of "non-violence" (*ahimsa*). The grounding of a new ethical system is often wedded with direct political intervention as the cosmological order is deconstructed (for example, Buddhism's intervention into the fixed Brahmic cast system, Ghandhi's struggle for Indian independence, the early Catholic development of *civitas* as opposed to Roman *civitas*, and King's struggle for African-American rights). Unfortunately, such a supra-ethics, which at one particular historical moment is progressive and freeing, affecting a large populace, often becomes a hardened orthodoxy of countless moral rules, as neo-Confucianism has become today.

The "awakefulness" of Buddhist ethics is said to bring wisdom (*vijja*) to those who learn to discriminate phenomena through meditative investigation and analysis (intensive contemplation—*jhāna*). The lesson of meditation is to bring awareness to bear on the disturbances of everyday life. In this regard, everything for the individual psyche may change but nothing "in reality" has altered. Only our attitude to life has been changed. A politics does not *necessarily* follow from its ethics. Buddhism is more of an ethics of individual liberation, which in the Tibetan tradition involves avoiding harming others by abandoning ten non-virtues — three non-virtues of the body, four of speech, and three of the mind. From this emerges the Bodhisattva path of compassionate intention for others which is defined by thirty guidelines or vows.¹⁸

THE ETHICS OF AN EDUCATOR

The positing of a radical alterity in the Other and "in" the egoic self, as Buddhism teaches, requires that the educator remain forever open to the call of the student. This task is interminable. There is a danger, however, of easily collapsing this ethical relation into one based on narcissistic recognition between teacher and student, to ground the relation solely on love, especially in its Christian form as *agape* since the practice of such "selfishness" seems to be an obvious condition for an ethical relationship. However, to think of the intersubjective relation between student and

18. The ten include training to avoid killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct (body); lying, senseless talk, divisive speech, and harsh speech (speech); covetousness, harmful intent and wrong view (mind). For an overview of Buddhist ethics in regard to adult education see Sonja MacPherson, "The Adulthood of Buddhahood: Buddhism, Lifelong Learning, and the Education of Desire," *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 15, no. 6 (November-December 1996): 455-70.

teacher as having the student complete the teacher's desire by acting (actively or passively) to be the perfect pupil who mimics and emulates teacher expectations; or for the teacher to complete his or her own desire by appropriating the student's own desires for his or her own satisfaction, is precisely to collapse difference into the Same. In both cases, the teacher and the student are formed by the appropriation of the Other.

To maintain an ethical "difference," the educator as an "authority" figure must continually (and paradoxically) displace the student's love for the teacher, for in such a relation the student misperceives where his or her desire lies. The student's love for the teacher is initiated when she perceives in the teacher something that she doesn't have: namely, in Lacanian terms the *objet a*, the inexplicable "something" in the Real which would make the student complete and whole. The loving student presupposes that this object is in the teacher "more than in him or herself" creating the fantasy of fulfillment. The proper response of the teacher under Lacanian ethical suppositions is to insist there is *nothing* in himself or herself that is worthy of love. *What the student falls in love with is the way that the teacher enjoys* — the way the teacher "gets off" on her *jouissance* which comes through the teacher's bodily comportment, voice, and gaze as performative style. *It is this eroticism which must be displaced elsewhere*, namely to the "love" of the subject (the discipline), the love of literature, the love of art, or the love of teaching itself, but *never* to the bedroom (which, in higher education, is not an infrequent event).¹⁹

Thus the teacher must try to retain an "emptiness" since the student's transference usually emerges *only when she does not want to encounter her own desire*. Instead she offers herself as the object of love to the teacher — as in "teach me," "fill me up with knowledge." In the ethical response of refusing this demand for love the teacher has to maintain the presentment of "emptiness" so that rather than returning love, the teacher might be able to return the student's desire in the form of the enigmatic *objet a* she seeks — in the subject matter, in the question, or in the search. Such a suspension and displacement allows for the student's analytic exploration of the *objet a* of fantasy, the cause of the passion, the question, the inquisition, the search, or the fascination with the teacher in the first place. This enables the student to continue to deal further with his or her own desires, which would be in keeping with the intentionality of a Lacanian ethic. The idea would be to take *ownership* of these fantasies, drives, and desires, for they define the Real "core" of the student's identity.

ETHICAL PERFORMATIVITY: THE SINGULARITY OF THE "REAL"

In his earlier work, *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas attempted to spell out the exteriority of Being, whereas in his later work, *Otherwise than Being*, he attempted to work out an ethical form of language²⁰ — the Saying (*le Dire*), which would be

19. The most notorious case in the academic world is certainly that of Jane Gallop, *Feminist Accused of Sexual Harassment* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997).

20. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alfonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981).

irreducible to the ontological language of the Said (*le Dit*) where all entities are already disclosed and comprehended in the light of Being. *Le Dire* (The Saying) embodies one's personal exposure — corporeal and sensible — to the Other, one's inability to refuse the Other's approach. The Saying is the non-thematizable ethical residue of language that escapes comprehension. It is a performative stating, an expressive positioning of oneself facing the Other. While one is always caught by the Said, the attempt is always to disrupt the Said through the Saying. We can see here that Levinas is playing with the dialectics of a closed and open system, so that the existence (one might say, paradoxically the nonexistence) of the unthought, as the impossible outside (alterity) might be somehow acknowledged, or minimally recognized that such a realm can be posited. This performative Saying, is, again, something that cannot be directly taught. It can be best grasped by examples, obliquely said in rhetorical play. It is the "remainder" or "residue" that transfers in dialogue and certainly has something to do with the "grain" of the voice and the approach to the Other. The Saying, in effect, is "touching" the Real (core) Self of the Other, not necessarily always with tenderness and cherishment but sometimes harshly when needed.

Both Lacan and Buddhism, in their own unique ways, pay attention to this difficult approach of ethical Saying where, in effect, the ontological certainty of the Said is always being undermined, reduced, and deconstructed. In the psychoanalytic paradigm of Lacan, as inherited from the linguist Emile Benveniste, the distinction is made between *énonciation* (the subject's act of speaking) and *énoncé* (the formulation of this act of speech into a statement). This demarcation between the way something is said and what is said roughly corresponds to Levinas's formulation. Dialogically, Lacan wants to arrive eventually at what he called "full speech"; that is, the possibility of simultaneously hearing the unconscious *Je* [I] speak through the conscious *moi* [me]. Lacan's use of the "short session" — that is, cutting the patient off if he felt there was no progress being made, raised all sorts of ethical concerns in this regard. Where was the dialogical Saying in this? But perhaps that *was* the performative Saying? How different is such a practice to that of a Zen Master who, metaphorically, "wounds" the meditating eye of an acolyte by rapping him on the head during meditation because of some obstacle like laziness, forgetfulness, or inattentiveness because of laxity or excitement — all distinct obstacles to achieving a quiet mind? Be it the "short session" or a rap on the head, it must be assumed in both cases that an "inflated ego" is being put to the test by "authority" figures who know their patient/student.

It seems to me that Buddhism presents a fascinating way to get at the Saying through the Said as well, through the constant use of storytelling that never provides a direct answer to the acolyte but illustrates a life lesson in an oblique way — much as the Lacanian analyst attempts to look away at the patient's speech to hear that other voice. The stories are usually singular encounters between a monk and a Zen Master, a student and a Master, the Buddha and a peasant, and so on. The Zen tradition of Buddhist teachings is filled with them. Here is one that presents an interesting ethical act — obliquely to "wound" an ego as well:

There is a story of a smart and eager university professor who comes to an old Zen master for teachings. The Zen Master offers him tea and upon the man's acceptance he pours the tea into the cup until it overflows. As the professor politely expresses his dismay at the overflowing cup, the Zen Master keeps on pouring. "A mind that is already full cannot take in anything new," the master explains. "Like this cup, you are full of opinions and preconceptions." In order to find happiness, he teaches his disciple, he must first empty his cup.²¹

THE DOUBLE BIND OF TEACHING

It seems that Levinasian, Lacanian, and Buddhist teachings address an irreducible particularity — *this* patient, *this* monk, *this* woman — a singular Other. The authority as analyst, teacher, or Master is faced with an obligation. In Levinasian terms, someone who is prepared to expiate (make amends) or "substitute" himself or herself for the Other is a person not immediately subsumable under a universal concept of the ego. Rather, the moment of obligation is "I," a singular self who is obliged to respond to a particular other.

This call of the Other produces a double bind in endeavors such as teaching, therapy, and the relation between a Zen Master and student. In the therapy session the relation of the analyst to the analysand (like that of teacher to student) is one of autonomy, maturity, and independence. The analyst (as teacher) must encourage dependency and regression on the part of the analysand. Therapy is supposed to be voluntary but if a patient misses an appointment or fails to show up, it is a sign of resistance — the real heart of the problem was getting too close. In a therapy session it is encouraged that the analysand take control of the situation, but the analyst makes it appear as though the analysand is not being directed at all, and it is all the patient's initiative. All along the analyst's attempt not to influence the analysand has a profound effect and influence that invariably directs the analyst to the patient's unconscious. Analysts must be both detached and intimate; the path to a cure requires the analysand to express and sometimes exaggerate the symptom. Simultaneously frustrating and gratifying exchanges of communication between the therapist and patient end in feelings that one is losing his mind, or is being destroyed or engulfed by the other. It is a fine balance of living in an "in-between" space/time.

Similarly, the Zen Master, who is an authority in the student's eyes, appears to be demanding "enlightenment," which is like the paradox of the therapist asking the analysand to free associate — to be spontaneous and genuine, or a teacher whose slogan is to say, "think for yourself." Neither of these situations is as "free" as they appear. Like the therapist, the Zen Master refuses to give any answers and throws back the student's questions with a terse dismissal — which, of course, frustrates the student to the point of crisis and self-disintegration (the idea being that you eventually become your own person). Yet the Master is like a mother hen, a reassuring presence, an authority whose very existence acts as a container and a holding environment for the student's psychological and spiritual storms. The staff is the Zen symbol of control and authority — in Lacanian terms, a phallus that works only when it is veiled; that is, when it remains elusive and unnamable. One never knows when it will strike. Hence, only when the student lets go of his illusions about

21. Mark Epstein, *Going to Pieces Without Falling Apart: A Buddhist Perspective on Wholeness* (New York: Broadway Books, 1999), xv.

the self and other — about who controls whom and who gives insight to whom — are spontaneity and genuineness revealed.

The student/analysand is always looking for an answer but in Buddhism and Lacanian psychoanalysis the answer is always turned back onto the student. The Lacanian analyst is to give back the analysand's question as an inverted answer. Asking the question implies that the person already has the answer. Turning back the question reveals its source; that is, within the questioning, and within the one who asks the question. When this insight occurs, the student/analyst/disciple knows it with certainty; the authority/teacher, Master, analyst has then been "used up" — superfluous, ready for the "trash" heap. The relationship has changed to another level. In the Buddhist tradition the student can seize the staff from the Master and ground his own authority on himself, be responsible for himself, his spontaneity and insights. The master is the teacher, but as the maxim says, "Zen has nothing to teach." I wonder, then, if this Buddhist way "escapes" from Hegel's master/bondsman dialectic?

THE EDUCATIONAL IMPORT OF PSYCHIC DEATH AND MOURNING

An unspoken and little theorized aspect of the transference that emerges between teacher and student is the question of the ethics surrounding mourning and "ideological" death when knowledge changes the subject.²² If we take seriously the transformation of a student during an educational program (and similarly in the training ordeals to be a Buddhist monk or through therapy sessions), we should expect that the awakening of feelings toward the "material" presented can bring on dramatic effects in the sense of changes of personal self-esteem and outlook toward life. There is a symbolic "death" of a former subject and a rebirth into new possibilities, but no one can predict just how the student comes out "on the other side," so to speak, of such a transformation. Some may become depressed and remain in a state of melancholia, never being able to let their "old self" go, which is what a mourning process must do. A necessary "forgetting" must take place.

In the Buddhist context the paradoxical practice of *zazen* (no-self) and the pedagogical use of Zen koans (literally, "a matter to be made clear") enable practitioners to enter what appear to be nonrational spaces. Through the use of koans the disciple arrives at circular tautologies, reaching the limit of thinking where the mind is unattainable and the unattainable is mind.²³ The idea is to break the "back" of rationality by the koan becoming an internal deadlock within the student's thought, "a red-hot iron ball stuck in one's throat," in essence, traumatizing the disciple in self-contradiction.²⁴ Since this crisis around a koan's interpretation leads

22. Marshall W. Alcorn, Jr., "Ideological Death and Grief in the Classroom: Mourning as a Prerequisite to Learning," *Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture & Society* 6, no. 2 (2001): 172-80.

23. Some examples would include: What is the sound of one hand clapping? When the many are reduced to the one, to what is the one reduced? Without using your mouth, body, or mind, express yourself. Show me your face before your parents were born.

24. John R. Suler, "Paradox," in *The Couch and the Tree: Dialogues in Psychoanalysis and Buddhism*, ed. Anthony Molino (New York: North Point Press, 1998), 325.

to a stripping away, piece by piece, layers of personality until one experiences a "dropping out of the bottom of one's old ideas and attainments, and letting go of one's identity"²⁵ — unquestionably a mourning process must be involved around such practices. An ethics of "holding" the student is required should a permanent melancholia and depression set in as the lost objects cannot be mourned away. For Buddhists, the intrapsychic tangle of doubt, confusion, and crisis leads to a "Great Doubt" which is said to set up the enlightened conversion experience — the expansion of perception of one's reality where there is a surrender, a relinquishing of control to something beyond the conscious self.

While the rigors of koan interpretation may be a dramatic example of the possible lapses into melancholia, Jeffrey Berman has provided a host of more "common" stories of university students confronting assigned stories in the English curriculum which cause anxiety and fear as they come "face-to-face" (in the Levinasian/Lacanian sense) with their "core" self.²⁶ They face the alterity that rests inside them because they confront knowledge that often brings up painful memories in their own lives. Powerful emotions are released when this happens, and an ensuing crisis can and does happen. By facing this transference squarely, transformative change of the self can happen. But what is a teacher to do in these circumstances? How do we ethically approach the irrational fears and desires of the symptoms students bring into the classroom? In Berman's case he uses diary writing to enable students to work out their inner feelings through storytelling and remains nonjudgmental of them. These stories are shared on a voluntary basis with the class to elicit other strong emotional responses. Such a sharing often helps de-center the storyteller's position, enabling him or her to see other possibilities. But for identity to change, cathected objects have to be given up. Mourned objects are not simply signifiers that can be abandoned but a complex network of experienced memories that are bodily incorporated. Change means experiencing this pain in the body, the suffering of a thousand deaths, so to speak. It should be the teacher's duty to "see them through" such difficult passages which Berman delicately and sensitively attempts to do.

Teachers, unfortunately, do not have the time (nor the training) to deal with the complexities that are required to deal with long-lasting character transformation in the classroom when a student's own alterity of self-identification is threatened. Aggression in the classroom, for instance, is perhaps one of the most common emotions teachers must deal with. Mick Markham describes an incident in high school where Mark, the class bully, became incensed and violent because he thought a classmate had equated his dad's Germanic background with being a Nazi during a social studies lesson. As Markham argues, to work through Mark's aggression would require dismantling, piece-by piece, all the emotional memories that the signifier "Nazi" plays in Mark's unconscious Real that forms his "core" identity — a tall order

25. Masao Abe, "The Self in Jung and Zen," *The Eastern Buddhist* 28, no. 1 (Spring 1985): 69.

26. Jeffrey Berman, *Diaries to an English Professor: Pain and Growth in the Classroom* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994).

which requires time and patience.²⁷ Markham, like Berman, provides ways aggression might be mitigated and approached by gaining a distance from it. He suggests that teachers address issues and topics where ego destabilization occurs because of the existing oppression in society. Teachers can approach sensitive texts that directly address identity formations surrounding sex/gender, race, ethnicity, and homophobia by exploring the range of meanings that emerge from texts that directly speak to such concerns. Besides texts (and other students) which threaten students' own "core" identities, students threaten and destabilize teachers' own Real identities as well. Markham suggests that such moments enable us to reexamine our own institutionalized authority so that we, like analysts, might reflect on our own threatened egos. We need not repeat the cycle of aggression and blame the student; rather we should pause and attempt to recognize and identify the roots of our own aggression.

A CONCLUDING NOTE: THE REPRESSED ETHICS IN EDUCATION

There is a remarkable agreement between all three of these positions in their distrust of the structure of ego consciousness. Levinas continually reminds his readers that this ontological egoic structure is preceded by an intersubjectivity that hold's one "hostage" to the other. The knowing ego (*le moi connaissant*) has a tendency to reduce everything to the Same. For Lacan the ego (*moi*) is distinguished from the unconscious acephalic "I" (*Je*) and is defined as a *méconnaissance* (misperception) since it is formed as an ideal ego in the mirror stage. It is, therefore, a specter — an alien external image. Last, Buddhism teaches that the ego itself is a delusion (*maja*) or deranged (*unmattaka*). All three positions reject the sovereign Western subject of modernism which has already waned. Through this rejection of the trust of the ego all three positions place more value on the bodily sentience of everyday life where the ethical relation is first enacted. Buddhism in particular evolves an ethics of the self through the meditative self-examination of personal addictive desires, an examination which is said to then increase the virtues of compassion toward the Other.

I have tried to present the intertwined ethics of Levinas, Lacan, and Buddhism in their best light since there are many problems and concerns with each of them.²⁸ However, the strong claim here is that all three positions point more to the ethical relation as it develops between mother and child where the ethical demand places an insistence on the primary caregiver to comfort and find the child's needs.²⁹ Despite the "difficulties" any child presents, the primary caregiver should be there to do what can be done to offer the child a future. Fundamentally, it is this ethical dimension which remains repressed in our schools. That is to say, it remains "other" to what

27. Mick Markham, "Everyday Aggressions: Viewing Classroom Conflict through a Lacanian Lens," *Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture & Society* 3, no. 2, 87-98.

28. Buddhism can be accused for being apolitical and patriarchal; Lacan has been accused for his phallogocentric bias; and Levinas for his traditional views on women and his Judaic bias.

29. With Lacan this is particularly the case in his ethics seminar. See Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (London: W.W. Norton, 1992).

the priority demands of schooling are: the transfer of information based on an ethics of recognition. All "experienced" teachers know that in order to teach requires a rapport with students that goes beyond "one recorder talking to another." What transfers between student/teacher is an "oblique" phenomenon, not a direct one. It is precisely this sense of "reaching" out to students, feeling their needs and concerns, helping them come to grips with themselves — their fears, emotions, and concerns — that we are held "hostage" to them ethically. It comes as little surprise why often such "secondary" subjects as drama, art, religion, and music, are places where the emotional life of the "core self," the Lacanian Real, the Levinasian alterity, the Buddhist sense of no-self, is confronted. Our teacher education programs of course do not, normatively speaking, have "therapy" or "meditation" as part of their program of studies, but their importance for a "different" understanding of ethical pedagogy is certainly worth considering.