

GERT BIESTA

LEARNING FROM LEVINAS: A RESPONSE

ABSTRACT. In this paper I explore the question of how to approach the writings of Emmanuel Levinas from the point of view of education. I argue that Levinas has challenged the modern conception of subjectivity which underpins modern education. Instead of providing a new conception of subjectivity, his work should be understood as an attempt to account for the awakening of the uniqueness of the subject in ethical terms. The central idea is that we come into presence through responding, through taking up – or not denying – the undeniable responsibility which precedes our subjectivity. Levinas not only provides us with a new way to ‘understand’ subjectivity. ‘Responding’ also suggests a way to approach Levinas’s writings that goes beyond the simple application of his ‘truths’ to educational practice. Levinas’s writings challenge their reader to articulate a unique, unprecedented response. It is argued that the papers to which this paper is a response all display this approach to Levinas’s writings. It is further argued that ‘responding’ is not only a way to read Levinas, but ultimately a way to think about education itself. To learn (from Levinas) is to respond (to Levinas).

KEY WORDS: education, justice, Levinas, responding, singularity, subjectivity

In responding to the articles in this special issue I will not try to summarize their content, nor will I simply try to repeat what they say. These papers speak for themselves. What I rather want to do, is to highlight a theme that, although it is present in all these papers, is not so much present at the level of what is said and what is argued for, but rather is present in a more implicit and indirect manner. Although this theme is not explicitly present, I believe that it is crucial for any exploration of the relationship(s) between Levinas and education.

BEYOND APPLICATION

The point of departure for what I want to say is stated very clearly by Roger Simon when he argues that he views it as impossible “to simply ‘broker’ the writings of Levinas through the translation of his . . . thought into either a moral agenda for education or the programmatic regularities of pedagogical methodology.” I agree. To explore the relationship between Levinas and education is *not* a question of the application of his ideas to education. Yet the reason for this is *not* that the translation of philosophy



into education is a more complex task than is expressed in the idea of ‘application’ – something which philosophers of education know all too well. It is primarily – and in this respect I claim that Levinas constitutes a special case – because Levinas’s writings have questioned the very framework in which the modern Western world has conceived of the process of education over the last two centuries. We cannot simply apply Levinas to education, therefore, because ‘after’ Levinas education can no longer be what it was ‘before’ Levinas. What, then, was education before Levinas?

According to Usher and Edwards (1994, pp. 24–25) the rationale of the educational process was founded “on the humanist idea of a certain kind of subject who has the inherent potential to become selfmotivated and selfdirecting.” On this account the task of education has been understood as one of “bringing out” this potential, “so that subjects become fully autonomous and capable of exercising their individual and intentional agency.” Education has been conceived, to put it simply, as a process in which a child is ‘brought to reason’ – or to be more precise (and for the details I refer to Carl Anders Säfström’s paper) as a process in which a child is brought to a common, pre-established and pre-existent reason.

The conception of subjectivity that informs this modern approach to education is one where the subject is conceived as a *cogito*, as a being whose first relationship with the world (including other human beings) is a *knowledge* relationship, and where it is only on the basis of this knowledge that the subject comes to act – and hopefully, according to this line of thought, to act reasonably and morally. It is precisely this conception of subjectivity that has been challenged most radically in Levinas’s writings.

AN ETHICAL UNDERSTANDING OF SUBJECTIVITY

Levinas has challenged the “wisdom of the Western tradition” in which it is assumed that human individuals “are human through consciousness” (Levinas, 1998, p. 190). He has challenged the idea of the subject as a substantial center of meaning, as a *cogito* who is first of all concerned with itself, and only then, perhaps, if it decides to do so, with the other. Levinas has argued, instead, that the subject is engaged in a relationship – or to be more precise: is constituted by a relationship – that is “older than the ego, prior to principles” (Levinas, 1981, p. 117). This relationship is neither a knowledge relationship nor a willful act of an ego. It is a relationship of infinite responsibility for the otherness of the other, which, for that reason, can be called an *ethical* relationship (provided that we keep in mind that the meaning of the word ‘ethical’ is itself changed through Levinas’s writings).

One of the crucial and most intriguing dimensions of Levinas's thought lies in the fact that this new 'account' of subjectivity should *not* be understood as a new *conception* of subjectivity. It should *not* be understood as an attempt to bring the 'phenomenon' of subjectivity under a concept. What Levinas is doing should *not* be read as an attempt to outline the nature of human subjectivity, but as an attempt to express that the subject has no nature (for this see also Biesta, 1998a, 1999a). Or, to be more precise: it should be read as an attempt to express that the *singularity* or *uniqueness* of the subject cannot be conceived in ontological terms.

The problem with ontology, according to Levinas, is that it can only think of the individual as a particular instance of something more general. But precisely in doing so, the subject's *uniqueness* is obliterated (see Levinas, 1998, pp. 190–196). If, therefore, one wants to safeguard the *uniqueness* of the subject – which I take to be one of the principal concerns of Levinas's writings (cf. Llewelyn, 1995) – we must do what is literally inconceivable, which is to go 'beyond essence' to a 'mode' that is 'otherwise than being' (see Levinas, 1981).

Going beyond essence brings one to a 'place' where the first and ultimate question is *not* that of the *being* of the subject but of "my *right* to be" (Levinas, 1989, p. 86, *emph. added*). Levinas's point is that it is only in "the very crisis of the being of a being" (*ibid.*, p. 85), in the *interruption* of its being, that the uniqueness of the subject "first acquires a meaning" (Levinas, 1981, p. 13). This interruption constitutes the relationship of responsibility, which is a "responsibility of being-in-question" (*ibid.*, p. 111). And it is this being-in-question "which assigns the self to be a self" (*ibid.*, p. 106) and ultimately constitutes me as this unique, singular individual. What constitutes us as unique individuals – or rather: what constitutes *me* as this unique individual, as this singular being – is the point in time (which according to Levinas is actually the very beginning of time, of temporality) at which I 'take up' this responsibility. It is the point in time when I no longer deny the undeniable responsibility in which I find myself. It is the point in time when I say 'yes' to the other, keeping in mind that this 'yes' is always already a *response* to a question and not an act of recognition that would bring the other into existence. I come into the world, I come 'into presence' (Biesta, 1999b), therefore, when I respond.

Rather than offering a new conception of subjectivity, a new truth about the human subject, which would keep Levinas firmly inside the tradition of humanism, Levinas attempts to account for the awakening of the *singularity* of the subject. The predicament here, however, is that although Levinas wants to speak about what is 'otherwise than being' he can only do so in the language of being, in the language of ontology. Levinas artic-

ulates this predicament with the help of the distinction between the saying (*Dire*, literally “to-say”) and the said (*Dit*) (Levinas, 1981, pp. 5–7, 37–38). Although the saying always precedes the said, his point is that it can only be thematized, can only be conveyed before us in “language qua said” – which means that it can only be expressed “at the price of a betrayal” (ibid., p. 6).

This in turn means that we cannot simply approach Levinas’s own writings on the level of the said, that we cannot simply approach them as expressing a new ‘theory’ or a new ‘truth,’ but that we must find a different way to relate to his writings, a way that attempts to respond to the saying that is beyond what is said in his writings, and that does so in a responsible manner.

LEARNING FROM LEVINAS

This, so I want to argue, is not so much a question about how to read philosophy (although it is also that). It is first and foremost a *pedagogical* question, and perhaps it is even the ultimate pedagogical question. The point is expressed extremely well in the distinction Sharon Todd introduces between learning *about* Levinas and learning *from* Levinas. While learning *about* Levinas assumes that Levinas has a truth to tell and that it is our task to ‘take’ this truth and apply it to the domain of education, the idea of learning *from* Levinas precisely opens up a dialogical space where pedagogy becomes – or can remain – an event rather than being a pre-programmed process. Learning, in this view, is not about the acquisition of knowledge or truth. It is about response and responding. Similarly, pedagogy is not about handing down truths to the next generation, but about creating opportunities for children, students, newcomers to respond and, as a result, come ‘into presence’.

Seen from this perspective we can say that the very issue of reading Levinas already brings us to the question of pedagogy. We can put this question as the question “What kind of a teacher is Levinas?” We can also state it as the question “What can we learn from Levinas?” But the more important question is not to be found at the level of content (the ‘what’, the ‘said’) but at the level of performance (the ‘how’, the ‘saying’). The question is “How can we learn from Levinas?” And more concretely: “How do the four authors of the papers in this special issue learn from Levinas?” – and what, in turn, can we learn from their learning?

If we first look at Sharon Todd’s paper we can already see something very interesting, because Todd doesn’t learn from Levinas’s *answers* – as a matter of fact when she asks which Levinas we should listen to, Levinas

'1', '2' or '3', her answer is: "none of them." She rather learns from his questions and his questioning. It is by exploring, following, and listening to Levinas's "own ambiguity with respect to eros" that she comes to her own conclusions – conclusions that precisely underscore the necessary uncertainty of entering into a relationship, and more specifically of engaging in a pedagogical relationship.

Roger Simon's paper displays a similar attitude. Again, Levinas is not approached as the teacher who provides us with the answers, but rather as the teacher who asks questions, and who opens up new possibilities for questioning. His approach, as he puts it, is "to discuss certain aspects of Levinas's writing that have opened new questions and concerns for myself in regard to my thinking on education." For Simon, the experience of following Levinas in his own questioning has resulted in a learning "with, about, and from others" that could not have been specified in advance. Simon refers to the openings offered by Levinas as a gift, that is, so I want to suggest, as something that cannot be anticipated; this therefore once more expresses the necessary uncertainty, the necessary risk at stake in all pedagogy (on the gift and education see Wimmer, 2001).

This, I believe, is also what Carl Anders Säfström actually *does* in and through his paper. For him too, Levinas doesn't provide the answers but introduces a questioning which suggests that there are problems where many of us may, at first sight, not have expected them to be, a questioning that brings us beyond the obvious. This not only allows Säfström to rethink teaching. He observes, correctly I would say, that there isn't a huge gap between the highly abstract theoretical writings of Levinas and the concerns of teachers. Rather the questions Levinas raises are often at the very center of what teachers care about and are concerned about. It is almost as if through reading Levinas it becomes possible to recognize and acknowledge the legitimacy of those questions in an era in which many people – especially politicians – would only like to hear questions about teaching as a technique, as an instrument to put knowledge and values into the heads of (obedient) students.

Ann Chinnery's paper 'performs' a similar approach in that she takes up a challenge coming from reading Levinas, the challenge to completely rethink moral agency. Again, her maneuver is not one in which she seeks to apply Levinas to education, but one in which she actively seeks situations that can help us to understand why passivity, heteronomy and inescapability – surrender, in short – make sense to understand the non-agentic agency that is relevant for moral education and being moral. What her response to (reading) Levinas highlights is that the "capacity for surrender" doesn't come automatically and doesn't come easy. To 'live' with passivity,

heteronomy and inescapability is, to put it differently, hard work, not in the least because it is so much more easy to fall back upon “well-learned stock phrases and responses” – not only in jazz but, so I want to add, in (other domains of) life as well.

RESPONDING

The way in which these four authors learn from Levinas reveals that – at least for them – Levinas is not conceived as somebody who provides a new truth that we can simply apply to education. The pedagogical ‘style’ that emerges from the way in which these authors learn from Levinas is *not* one where the teacher is the one who knows, and the student is the one who doesn’t know yet – or to be more precise: the one who doesn’t know yet what the teacher knows, and where the purpose of the educational process is to get the student to know what the teacher already knows (see Biesta, 1998b; Rancière, 1991).

Levinas is a teacher who asks questions and in doing so invites, summons and perhaps even forces the student, the learner to respond (see on the violent dimension of this process Biesta, 1999a,b). What is crucial here, is that Levinas is *not* a Socratic teacher. He is not a teacher for whom questioning is only a pedagogical technique to bring the student to the *right* response. Socrates, so it seems to me, is not really interested in what his partners have to say; he only needs their answers to go, step by step, towards his own inevitable conclusions. While for Socrates questioning is, in that sense, a dialectical process, Levinasian questioning can – indeed – be called a truly dialogical process.

What is characteristic of this form of questioning is, as Simon makes so very clear, that it is a questioning that unsettles the obvious, that puts into question “the necessities of the present.” Yet in doing so this questioning also puts my relationship to these “necessities of the present” into question. What a learner can learn from this questioning is, to quote Roger once more, “that I can be challenged, awakened to an attending to my attending.” This is the ‘sobering up’ of the ego, which Säfström highlights in his contribution. It is the possibility that, as Todd claims, can be found in eros, i.e., as that it may constitute “an unintentional reaching out to another that is the very marker of responsibility.” And what is required for this, as Chinnery suggests, is a ‘suspension’ of pragmatic questions, a passive willingness to unlearn.

This questioning, so I want to suggest, is a questioning that singularizes me as this unique individual, and that therefore offers an opportunity for

me to come ‘into presence’ – *not* as the modern rational *cogito*, but as the Levinasian responsible and ‘response-able’ subject.

While I agree with Simon that this response-ability is *not* a pregiven capacity, that it is not something ontologically guaranteed by human nature, it is also important to acknowledge that some of the traces of a “teaching otherwise” that can be found in the way in which these authors have learned from Levinas and have responded to his writings, is not and cannot be a new technique, because as a technique it would always already have to assume its own success. We are rather operating in the sphere of necessary risk, in the sphere of a genuine questioning that doesn’t presuppose its own answers.

If teachers and educators can do anything at all in this sphere, it is definitely *not* the creation or production of responsible subjects. What education might do is to keep open the possibility for a genuine questioning and, even more importantly, to keep open the possibility for students to really respond. This, I think, suggests a pedagogy that is no longer primarily informed by knowledge, but by something which we may want to refer to as ‘justice.’ There is definitely a risk to be run here, both for learners and for those who dare to teach. Yet it may be a worthwhile – and perhaps even a fine risk to be run.

REFERENCES

- Biesta, G.J.J. (1998a). Pedagogy without humanism. Foucault and the subject of education. *Interchange*, 29(1), 1–16.
- Biesta, G.J.J. (1998b). Say you want a revolution . . .’ suggestions for the impossible future of critical pedagogy’, *Educational Theory*, 48, 499–510. See also
- Biesta, G.J.J. (1999a). Radical intersubjectivity. Reflections on the ‘different’ foundation of education. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 18, 203–220.
- Biesta, G.J.J. (1999b). Where are you? Where am I? Education, identity and the question of education. In Carl Anders Säfström (Ed), *Identity: Questioning the logic of identity within educational theory* (pp. 21–46). Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Levinas, E. (1981). *Otherwise than being or beyond essence* (trans. A. Lingis). The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Levinas, E. (1989). Ethics as first philosophy. In S. Hand (Ed), *The Levinas reader* (pp. 75–87). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Levinas, E. (1998). *Entre-nous: On thinking of the other*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Llewelyn, J. (1995). *Emmanuel Levinas. The genealogy of ethics*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Rancière, J. (1991). *The ignorant schoolmaster. Five lessons in intellectual emancipation*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

- Usher, R. & Edwards, R. (1994). *Postmodernism and education*. New York/London: Routledge.
- Wimmer, M. (2001). The gift of *bildung*. Reflections on the relationship between singularity and justice in the concept of *bildung*. In G.J.J. Biesta & D. Egéa-Kuehne (Eds), *Derrida & Education* (pp. 150–175). London/New York: Routledge.

School of Education
University of Exeter
Heavitree Road
Exeter EX1 2LU
UK