'Bringing me more than I contain . . .': Discourse, Subjectivity and the Scene of Teaching in *Totality and Infinity*

This paper explores the relationship between language, subjectivity and teaching in Emmanuel Levinas's Totality and Infinity. *It aims to elucidate Levinas's presentation of language as always already predicated on a relationship of responsibility towards that which is beyond the self and the idea that it is only in this condition of being responsible that we are subjects. Levinas suggests that the relation with the Other through which I am a subject as one uniquely responsible is also the scene of teaching. Through examining these ethical conditions of subjectivity, I suggest that this notion of the self as oriented towards the Other in a relation of passivity presents a challenge to many of the standard* topoi *of teaching and learning and invite us to consider the nature of teaching in a provocative new manner.*

INTRODUCTION

> My being is produced in producing itself before the others in discourse; it is what it reveals of itself to the others, but while participating in, attending its revelation (Levinas, [1969] 2004, p. 253; hereafter *TI*).

If this statement is a true presentation of how I am, what does it mean for our understanding of education? That discourse is fundamental to the trajectory of the individual's 'becoming', and that this is in some sense what education is appears uncontroversial. Dewey, for example, writes: 'all communication (and hence all genuine social life) is educative. To be a recipient of a communication is to have an enlarged and changed experience' (Dewey, [1916] 1930, p. 6). Martin Buber also suggests such an idea, stating: 'The relation in education is one of pure dialogue' (Buber, [1947] 2002, p. 116). In this paper, I explore how Emmanuel Levinas presents discourse as teaching, examining how subjectivity is produced through the revealing of myself to others in discourse. The focus of this paper is *Totality and Infinity,* the first of Levinas's two most central philosophical works[1], because it is here that we find Levinas's clearest and most distinctive discussion of the nature of teaching. To say that the discussion is 'clear' is misleading, however. The language of *Totality and Infinity*, both in English and in the original French, is strange, enigmatic, attempting to draw attention to the impossibility of capturing the relation with the Other[2] in language. As Colin Davis writes:

> Levinas's acute awareness of the pitfalls involved in overcoming ontology, in becoming Abraham boldly stepping out into the unknown rather than Ulysses seeking only what he had left behind, helps to explain the extraordinary difficulty of his writing. His texts are assertive and propositional, but also enigmatic, fragmented, paradoxical or perhaps just plain inconsistent (Davis, [1996] 2004, p. 35).

However, despite the difficulty of reading and writing about Levinas, the challenge he presents to preconceptions of the nature of language and knowledge have significant implications for how we think about education. I will here, therefore, attempt to delineate how Levinas presents teaching as the other's offering of the world to me through speech, in contrast with more maieutic understandings of teaching. I will thereby demonstrate how Levinas's philosophy presents a unique challenge to other conceptions of the function of language. For Levinas, teaching is the space of encounter in which subjectivity is revealed as ethical, constituted through both Desire and goodness, both of which are encountered in language.[3] Through examining how this is presented in *Totality and Infinity*, I will consider what is unique in Levinas's presentation of subjectivity, and how this encourages us to reconsider what 'teaching' means.

DISCOURSE AS TEACHING IN *TOTALITY AND INFINITY*

Before examining Levinas's presentation of language in *Totality and Infinity*, it is necessary to address briefly the question of Levinas's philosophical methodology. The somewhat oedipal relationship between Levinas's phenomenology and that of Husserl and Heidegger is well documented. Levinas describes his writing as 'in the spirit of Husserlian philosophy' (Levinas, [1981] 2004, p. 183), and in the preface of *Totality and Infinity* he states:

> But the development of the notions employed owe everything to the phenomenological method. Intentional analysis is the search for the concrete. Notions held under the direct gaze of the thought that defines them are nevertheless, unbeknown to this naïve thought, revealed to be implanted in horizons unsuspected by this thought; these horizons endow them with a meaning—such is the essential teaching of Husserl (*TI*, p. 98).

Nevertheless, although the account of ethical subjectivity and the relation to the Other is presented in terms of transcendental phenomenology, scholars have suggested different ways of reading Levinas. Robert Bernasconi, for example, has suggested that it is possible to read Levinas both transcendentally and empirically, but that neither reading is sufficient (Bernasconi, 1989). Levinas describes his own philosophy, in his 1965 essay 'Énigme et phénomène' as a philosophy of darkness (darkness being an allusion to the idea of light in phenomenology), and this is the most useful description of his 'method'. While adopting the Husserlian phenomenological method in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas at the same time departs from Husserlian intentional analysis by drawing attention to what lies beyond the phenomenon, opaque to consciousness itself. Levinas is operating outside of either descriptive or normative ethics, and his statement that 'ethics is not an optics' (*TI*, p. 23) also indicates the disturbance of the field of consciousness and bringing to light associated with phenomenology. It points to an ethical phenomenology that demonstrates an obsession with the ethical beyond and yet revealed by the phenomenon. This, then, is the philosophical 'framework' within which I propose to analyse Levinas's presentation of language and the scene of teaching in *Totality and Infinity*.

In *Totality and Infinity*, the linguistic order is the site of totality and the site of infinity, or ethics. Levinas states that 'the essence of language is goodness . . . the essence of language is friendship and hospitality' (*TI*, p. 205). The use of language, however, may be totalising, attempting to bring the Other within the totality of the Same: 'Thematization and conceptualization, which moreover are inseparable, are not peace with the other but suppression or possession of the other' (p. 46). In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas seeks to show that the essence of language is interpellation, the Other's address to me, through which I as a subject am situated.

For Levinas, language presupposes a relation to the Other, which remains transcendent to the same, and one of the aims of *Totality and Infinity* is to demonstrate that the relation with alterity is language itself:

> We shall try to show that the *relation* between the same and the other—upon which we seem to impose such extraordinary conditions—is language. For language accomplishes a relation such that the terms are not limited within this relation, such that the other, despite the relationship with the same, remains transcendent to the same. The relation between the same and the other, metaphysics, is primordially enacted as conversation. . . (Levinas, [1969] 2004, p. 39).

'Conversation' and 'discourse' are used by Levinas synonymously to describe the relation between self and Other, which maintains a separation between the two terms. Through the approach of the Other, my spontaneity is limited: 'The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics' (*TI*, p. 43).

This other has been suppressed, Levinas argues, by the history of Western philosophy, as exemplified by the teaching of Socrates as maieutics.[4] This, Levinas suggests, means: 'to receive nothing of the Other but what is in me' (ibid.). We can see this in the *Theaetetus*, in which Socrates claims that he is a midwife (*Theaetetus*, 184b), who delivers thoughts through his maieutic art, the method of delivery being the *elenchos*. The Socratic dialogue is not an insemination, for Socrates presents himself as a barren midwife in the process of his student's coming to understanding, insisting: 'You ask me if I teach you when I say there is no teaching but recollection' (*Meno*, 82). For Socrates, knowledge and understanding are not imparted from without, but are seen as 'in' the soul of the individual.[5]

Levinas is radically opposed to this notion of teaching, suggesting instead that to be taught means to encounter that which is wholly other, which 'brings me more than I contain':

> To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression, in which at each instant he overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it. It is therefore to *receive* from the Other beyond the Capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity. But this also means: to be taught. The relation with the Other, or conversation, is a non-allergic relation; but inasmuch as it is welcomed this conversation is a teaching [*enseignement*]. Teaching is not reducible to maieutics; it comes from the exterior and brings me more than I contain.[6] In its non-violent transitivity the very epiphany of the face is produced[7] (*TI*, p. 51).

For Levinas, I am taught what I could not have discovered within myself. In the approach of the Other, meaning and truth are produced from beyond myself, and a common world is created between self and Other: 'To speak is to make the world common, to create commonplaces. Language does not refer to the generality of concepts, but lays the foundation for a possession in common' (*TI,* p. 76). Speech itself is therefore a teaching in its founding of the world and community:

> As an attendance of being at its own presence, speech is a teaching. Teaching does not simply transmit an abstract and general content already common to me and the Other. It does not merely assume an after all subsidiary function of being midwife to a mind already pregnant with its fruit. Speech first founds community by *giving*, by presenting the phenomenon as given; and it gives by thematizing (*TI*, p. 98).

The etymology of 'thematizing', from *tithēmi*, implies placing / setting, here placing what is offered in speech before me, *giving* me the phenomenon, or to use Levinas's phrase, 'presenting the phenomenon as given'. 'Given' here has the force of 'gift' rather than a flat geometric 'given.' This should not be taken as in any way foundational in a developmental sense, as the development of consciousness; it is rather a description of the *conditions* of consciousness and subjectivity. However, thinking about how the child might develop language can help us to think further about what this notion of the phenomenon as a gift means. Let us imagine, for example, a small child being given a bowlful of raspberries by her mother. The child's consciousness of the bowl of fruit and its meaning are invested through the actions and address of her mother who looks for the child's response to her action. Thus it is the mother who 'gives' the child 'raspberries', in the sense that the fruit is thematised, set in place in the world for the child by the mother, *given* a meaning and a context. What is significant is not the idea that the child learns the word 'raspberry', or the concept 'raspberry' through the mother's actions, but rather that through the 'giving', through the mother's actions that address the child and look for her response, the phenomenon of raspberries comes to the child. The child may be only at an early stage in the development of language at this stage, but as the mother is vulnerable to the way in which the child reacts to her offering, the child's subjectivity is already being produced, prior to its being known by the child. We can easily see why this kind of interaction might be termed 'teaching', and why it is opposed to Socratic maieutics, since the phenomenon comes to the child from beyond herself, and it is this offering of phenomena to me and my receiving them that is for Levinas the condition of subjectivity.

In this scene of teaching, the teacher remains outside of my knowing. 'The master, the coinciding of the teaching and the teacher, is not in turn a fact among others. The presence of the manifestation of the master who teaches overcomes the anarchy of facts' (*TI*, p. 70). For Levinas this is prior to objectivity, which arises as the result of putting things in question between self and Other, the offering of the world. This is also therefore prior to reason, so that difference and separation must be seen as necessary conditions for reason, rather than reason overcoming difference. The transcendental condition for language then is a relation with what is beyond language. Levinas appears opposed to the view of language as primarily communication, as in common usage[8] and in some contemporary conceptions of English teaching:

> The 'communication' of ideas, the reciprocity of language, already hides the profound essence of language. It resides in the irreversibility of the relation between me and the other, in the Mastery of the Master coinciding with his position as other and as exterior. For language can be spoken only if the interlocutor is the commencement of his discourse, if, consequently, he remains beyond the system, if he is not *on the same plane* as myself (*TI*, p. 101).

This should not be understood as a kind of authoritarianism; it tries rather to convey the idea that language comes from outside myself, from an alterity that is rooted in the vulnerability of other persons and is refractory to my intentionality. The idea here that the relation between I and Other is not reciprocal is fundamental, since if I posit the Other as another I, for example, I minimise their alterity and presume to know them as one like me.[9] The speaking of language depends on its commencement by one who is outside language, for whom I have responsibility, and thus he is, in this sense my Master, as he calls me to responsibility from his position of vulnerability. This alterity that is situated at the commencement of my discourse lies beyond my understanding and cannot be communicated. In relation to teaching, Levinas's emphasis that language is the site of my ethical subjectivity, and that to receive language is to be taught, is very different from the common emphasis on the communicative function of language in teaching. For Levinas, if we are to talk about communication at all, what is communicated must be seen as inextricably bound up with what lies beyond communication.

As well as opposing the view that language is communication, Levinas might also be critical of other conceptions of language for likewise clouding the ethical conditions of language in other ways, for example structuralist interpretations. Levinas takes many ideas from structuralist linguistics but diverges at significant points. A significant idea within structuralism was its challenge to the modernist emphasis on human autonomy, with, as John Llewelyn describes, its emphasis that 'there is only one unit, the system as a whole'. In the human sciences, the 'the idea that "it" (*es, ça*) thinks in me' turned into the idea of 'the death of man' (Llewelyn, 2002, p. 120-1). The relationship between language and autonomy for Levinas is distinct from the Saussurian model in which the free human is subsumed within the system of language. Conversely, it is also distinct from the emphasis on autonomy in our use of language that we find in such thinkers as Locke, with his nomenclaturist philosophy of language. In his 1957 essay 'Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity', Levinas phrases this in terms of a distinction between autonomy and heteronomy. Autonomy is 'the philosophy which aims to ensure the freedom, or the identity, of beings' and this 'presupposes that freedom itself is sure of its right, is justified without recourse to anything further, is complacent in itself, like Narcissus' (Levinas, 1998, p. 49). Heteronomy is 'concerned with the absolutely other' (p. 47). For Levinas, the relation with the Other is prior to all experience and cognition, therefore I cannot have autonomy in the Lockean sense of a freedom of voluntary attribution of words to ideas in mental privacy. Yet neither am I subsumed by the system of language as I am in the structuralist opposition to autonomy. Levinas's view that we are heteronomous subjects implies a singularity of the I, since although language and understanding are brought to me by the Other who is beyond the I, my responses to the Other are an integral aspect of the appearance of my world within my horizons. There is thus a confirmation of the self as unique in the way it alone can respond to

the appeal of the Other's address, but this is neither the autonomy of the Lockean subject, nor its antithesis in structuralism.

Levinas's use of the words *signifiant* and *signifié* stems from structuralism, however, as Llewelyn points out, the term *signifiant* no longer refers to the phonetic or graphic signifier, but to the speaker of the sign.[10] The signifier is the Other, not signified by the sign.[11] In speaking, the speaker is revealed as Other while the world appears to the self: 'The Other, the signifer, manifests himself in speech by speaking of the world and not of himself; he manifests himself by proposing the world, by *thematizing* it.' (*TI*, p. 96). In this way, meaning depends on the interpellation of the Other who signifies, who calls me to responsibility. The address of the Other, for Levinas, is the absolute upon which all meaning depends and the site of meaning is also the site of teaching, for to receive a meaning is to be taught: 'To have meaning is to be situated relative to an absolute, that is, to come from that alterity that is not absorbed in its being perceived. . . To have meaning is to teach or to be taught, to speak or to be able to be stated' (p. 97). A further parallel between Levinas and structuralism is that like the structuralists, Levinas also views all thought and our very notion of reality as always already structured by language. Thus: 'Everything remains in a language or in a world, for the structure of the world resembles the order of language, with possibilities no dictionary can arrest' (Levinas, 1996, p. 38).

Although language is presented as profoundly ethical by Levinas in a way absent from its presentation in structuralism, Levinas emphasises that we do not always relate to the Other in discourse: what he calls rhetoric is presented as a corruption of discourse. What we most often approach in conversation is not the Other, 'but an object or an infant, or a man of the multitude' (*TI*, p. 70). Rhetoric stills the approach of the Other, but it is a corruption of discourse, for example as 'propaganda, flattery, diplomacy' (ibid.), and is a violence in its corruption of freedom, even though it is still founded on the approach to the Other, albeit obliquely. The tendency of rhetoric is totalising, whereas discourse as teaching is a manifestation of infinity and the infinity of responsibility. In conversation, I am summoned to a position of infinite responsibility, and this is what 'Good' means for Levinas—a site of ethical possibility and responsibility, ever deepening. This notion of infinite responsibility does not imply that we are always aware of such responsibility, but this is nevertheless the reality of what it means to be a subject:

> *The infinity of responsibility denotes not its actual immensity, but a responsibility increasing in the measure that it is assumed*; duties become greater in the measure that they are accomplished. The better I accomplish my duty the fewer rights I have; the more I am just the more guilty I am (*TI*, p. 244).

This responsibility is asymmetrical: 'what I permit myself to demand of myself is not comparable with what I have the right to demand of the Other. This moral experience, so commonplace, indicates a metaphysical asymmetry' (*TI*, p. 53). I cannot demand responsibility from the other, and I cannot appeal to the neutral third term to demand that the Other take responsibility for me. Peace is my responsibility alone: 'Peace must be my peace, in a relation that starts from an I and goes to the other, in desire and Goodness, where the I both maintains itself and exists without egoism' (p. 306). This does not mean that the other will not take responsibility for me, but rather that when this does happen, this is an experience of grace.

As we have seen, the opening of language in *Totality and Infinity* is the Other's address to me. Language and objectivity are made possible by the Other's teaching, which manifests infinity, bringing me more than I contain. The interpellation of the Other and my response mark the beginning of commonality and community. Thus Levinas's philosophy demonstrates the primacy of the ethical preconditions of language before its communicative function. What does this mean, however, for our understanding of what it is to be a subject?

SUBJECTIVITY AS ETHICAL

> It is only in approaching the Other that I attend to myself. This does not mean that my existence is constituted in the thought of the others. . . The face I welcome makes me pass from phenomenon to being in another sense: in discourse I expose myself to the questioning of the Other, and this urgency of the response—acuteness of the present—engenders me for responsibility; as responsible I am brought to my final reality (*TI,* p. 178).

In this passage, we can see clearly articulated the idea that my subjectivity, my final reality, is only brought to being as one responsible for the Other. I am thus, and contrary to Heidegger, not fundamentally a being-towards-death so much as I am a being-towards-the-other, or rather a being-for-the-Other. Being oneself in this way means to express oneself, which is already to serve the Other in a relation of obligation. I cannot escape the call singularly placed upon me:

> The I is a privilege and an election. The sole possibility in being of going beyond the straight line of the law, that is, of finding a place lying beyond the universal, is to be I. . . The call to infinite responsibility confirms the subjectivity in its apologetic position. . . To utter 'I,' to affirm the irreducible singularity in which the apology is pursued, means to possess a privileged place with regard to responsibilities for which no one can replace me and from which no one can release me (*TI*, p. 245).

Subjectivity is thus constituted in receptivity and passivity: it is in turning towards the Other that I am. This means both calling into question my spontaneity[12], which was and is always an illusion, and realising that the world is common between I and Other. Subjectivity is Desire for the absolutely Other, and it is Goodness as hospitality towards the Other. Levinas's writing on the phenomenology of *eros* in *Totality and Infinity* suggests a view of subjectivity in which the encounter between the self and the Other is an encounter in which the desire for the Other is always beyond satiation. This is beautifully captured in Levinas's description of the caress:

> The caress, like contact, is sensibility. But the caress transcends the sensible… The caress consists in seizing upon nothing, in soliciting what ceaselessly escapes its form toward a future never future enough, in soliciting what slips away as though it *were not yet*. It *searches*, it forages. It is not an intentionality of disclosure but of search: a movement unto the invisible (*TI*, p. 258).

This image of the caress can be distinguished from the embrace, which would imply reciprocity. The caress, in its searching and soliciting what slips away,

suggests the nature of subjectivity as opening out onto the true ethical realm of discontinuity, disdaining possession and becoming a form of moral contact only when it passes beyond contact. Thus to be taught in the encounter with the Other whom I desire is a perpetual movement of search, never satisfied and beyond the order of labour and economic exchange.

This relationship of Desire between the I and Other should not be seen, however, as a party of two. The relation with the Other means entering into a relation with others, the third parties who are also brought to me in the Other: 'Language as the presence of the face does not invite complicity with the preferred being, the self-sufficient 'I-Thou' forgetful of the universe; in its frankness it refuses the clandestinity of love, where it loses its frankness and meaning and turns into laughter or cooing' (*TI,* p. 213). Levinas's target here, with his use of the phrase 'I-Thou', may be Buber's presentation of the relation between self and Other, a relation of intimacy and reciprocity, in which all my awareness is drawn towards the living reality of a specific other person. The language of 'laughter' and 'cooing' suggests that Levinas rejects the sentimentality of such a relationship, or of what the popularisation of such an idea quickly becomes. Levinas's conception is far from self-sufficient and clandestine. Through the Other I am also drawn into a relation with others, so that there never exists a self-sufficient I-Thou: 'The third party looks at me in the eyes of the Other—language is justice' (*TI*, p. 213).

The relationship to the Other is fundamental, but what the Other means is always conditioned by the others. To be a subject means to be subject to the Other, which is always is to be subject to the others, a subjection I cannot escape. This is one of the most distinctive and challenging features of Levinas's presentation of subjectivity: to be a subject means that my spontaneity is always already limited through my responsibility to the Other, and I am 'elected' to my unique subjectivity through the unique way in which I am addressed and made responsible by the Other. Thus, '[t]he uniqueness of the I is the fact that no one can answer for me' (Levinas, 1996, p. 55). My singularity is confirmed as irreducible: only in my singularity can I answer to the address of the Other.

The way in which subjectivity is discovered is not within the self, but rather through expressing and revealing itself to others in discourse:

> To produce oneself as I—is to apprehend oneself with the same gesture that already turns toward the exterior to extra-vert and to manifest—to respond for what it apprehends—to express; it is to affirm that the becoming-conscious is already language, that the essence of language is goodness, or again, that the essence of language is friendship and hospitality (*TI*, p. 205).

The passivity of the self in receptivity here suggests that the event of subjectivity could be taken as a gift: I do not solicit the Other's approach, which is prior to language and offers me the world. The responsibility to the Other takes place without my choice: I am always already and uniquely obligated. This uniqueness of my responsibility is termed 'election' by Levinas, and this obligation deepens as I begin to recognise the infinite demand of my responsibility. The relation between my unique election, subjectivity and infinite responsibility is elucidated by Levinas in his later text *Of God Who Comes to Mind*:

This is the subject, irreplaceable for the responsibility there assigned to him, and who therein discovers a new identity. But insofar as it tears me from the concept of the Ego [*Moi*], the fission of the subject is a growth of obligation in proportion to my obedience to it; it is the augmentation of culpability with the augmentation of holiness, an increase of distance in proportion to my approach (Levinas, [1986] 1998, p. 73).

This view is radically different from most conceptions of responsibility in moral philosophy. To love and assume responsibility for the Other because he is Other rather than one like me is what it means to be a subject, rather than to be responsible for the Other because they are one like me, or because we are implicated in reciprocal bonds of responsibility.[13] And to assume responsibility through the approach of the Other is to be taught.

What then does this view of the condition of subjectivity as the turning outwards towards the Other, always already obligated to them in a relation of infinite responsibility, mean for how we understand education?

ELECTION TO SUBJECTIVITY – A TEACHING

As subjectivity is infinite responsibility, and as responsibility always 'increases in the measure that it is assumed', I am, therefore, both already a subject and at the same time not yet a subject. But this movement of subjectivity is not a development or progression in any linear or developmental sense. Nevertheless, we could say that my election to ethical subjectivity is a teaching, the Other 'bringing me more than I contain'. Having come back to the title phrase, let us turn to consider some ways in which this notion of ethical subjectivity as a teaching relates to different ways in which education has been theorised. There is not scope within this paper to explore fully the significant challenges that Levinas presents to educational theory. Therefore, I will draw attention to only a few themes, each of which could be considered further than I do here. These themes are: the Ulysses / Abraham comparison, *Bildung* as an educational ideal, Martin's Buber's dialogical educational philosophy and Michael Oakeshott's presentation of education as 'the conversation of mankind'.

Ulysses and Abraham

A motif that resonates throughout Levinas's writing[14] is the Ulysses / Abraham comparison. Against Ulysses, who after his wanderings returns to Ithaca, Levinas prefers Abraham, who departs from his homeland never to return, in search of an unknown land. Levinas describes the history of Western philosophy—and, that is to say, in Western thought—as following Ulysses: it is characterised by its failure to recognise the Other, always to return to the same. *Totality and Infinity* attempts to take philosophy elsewhere, to highlight the engagement with the Other that is prior to knowledge itself. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas describes labour and economic exchange as following Ulysses's path: 'Labor remains economic; it comes from the home and returns to it, a movement of Odyssey where the adventure pursued in the world is but the accident of a return' (*TI*, p. 176-7). This motif has significant implications for how we think about education. Paul Standish, in 'Data Return: The Sense of the Given in Educational Research', has explored how this sense of a movement towards the Other is at odds with ways of thinking about educational

research in terms of targets, goals and productivity, and challenges us to think about work as a giving up of oneself to the Other:

> Work . . . is not the labour of exchange which remains within the circle of the natural. It does not arise from need or open onto a world that is *for me*. While data are situated within an economy of returns, of profit and loss, work aims at a possibility of the good that is not datable, that is impervious to targeting and audits. Work, an orientation that goes *freely* away from the Same, is tied to ethics itself. . . I expend myself, give myself up. My work goes beyond me in ways I cannot foresee, and with effects I cannot know. Without this all is limited (Standish, 2001, p. 513).

This notion also has implications for how we think about the aims of education. The aims of autonomy and democracy within liberal education, classically advocated as a venturing forth for the sake of an ultimate return, confront in the thinking of Levinas a vision of the ethical that interrupts self-consciousness and rationality and proposes a venturing forth with no return to self. While the conversations, the writing, the performances that arise within formal education may be seen as belonging within the totality of economic exchange, the challenge Levinas poses is to view them as an offering up of the self to the Other prior to this, an offering made in vulnerability to the Other, from which there is no return. Yet this possibility of my vulnerability in the face of the infinite otherness and the infinite obligation I have towards the Other have been, on this account, suppressed by education, in order to confine what we can think within the realms of categorisation, exchange and possessive rationality. Although Levinas would not oppose the idea that formal education should promote rationality and autonomy (indeed, in *Otherwise Than Being*, we see that justice cannot be accomplished purely within the relation between self and neighbour and must move beyond this to the third person and society), his writing nevertheless challenges the *priority* that has in liberal education been accorded to autonomy, rationality and cognitive communication.

Bildung as an educational ideal

This potential provocation of Levinas's writing for the ideal of the return to the same in the rationality of liberal education is similar to the challenge these ideas pose to the concept of *Bildung* in educational theory. The notion of *Bildung* has been used with the sense of the 'upbringing' of someone to a model image, ideal ambition or *telos* (Nordenbo, 2003, p. 27). There is not scope here to explore the various ways in which this ideal has been conceived within education, and the relation between self and society that is implied within the concept. However, the concept of *Bildung* can be seen to differ from Levinas's presentation of the scene of teaching in its idea of edification, a remaking of the self. For Levinas, the movement towards the Other takes place in radical passivity: I am approached by the Other prior to any choice or thought, so that the priority of the self in the notion of *Bildung* is challenged by the priority of the Other, towards whom I move and through whose address I am called into being as one responsible. While Levinas might not have wanted in practical terms to challenge the idea of character development implicit in *Bildung* (something that might be seen as a useful aim within formal education), his writing on the scene of

teaching provides a way of thinking about teaching that demonstrates the troubling inadequacy of viewing the self as prior to the Other.

Martin Buber's Dialogical Philosophy of Education

Martin Buber's philosophy of the dialogical relation between self and other in the *I-Thou* is both praised and criticised by Levinas.[15] With his emphasis of the phenomenological irreducibility of the Thou in his *I*-Thou formulation, Buber stands close to Levinas. But it is interesting to consider the relationship between Buber's philosophy of education and Levinas's presentation of teaching. Buber summarises education and the role of the educator thus:

> The world, that is the whole environment, nature and society, 'educates' the human being: it draws out his powers, and makes him grasp and penetrate its objections. What we term education, conscious and willed, means *a selection by man of the effective world:* it means to give effective power to a selection of the world which is concentrated and manifested in the educator. The relation in education is lifted out of the purposelessly streaming education by all things, and is marked off as purpose. In this way, through the educator, the world for the first time becomes the true subject of its effect (Buber, [1947] 2002, p 106).

We can see that although Buber's account of teaching, like Levinas's, involves an encounter with alterity, there is a significant difference in that Buber implies a drawing out from the learner of 'his powers', as in the traditional conception of education derived from the Latin 'to draw out'. For Levinas, in contrast, teaching is the experience within the self of what could not have come from myself—of the idea of infinity, of the site of the opening of language. Furthermore, for Buber the teacher is in a relation of power, rather than magisterial vulnerability over the student. What for Buber might be described as teaching's exposure of the world from a position of power might, for Levinas, be seen as its offering of the world from a position of vulnerability. Buber states: 'The relation in education is one of pure dialogue.' (*TI*, p. 116). But for Levinas such dialogue is not reciprocal: it exposes the vulnerability of the Other and my obligation towards them. Dialogue tends to imply understanding, a meeting with the Other, but for Levinas, in the dialogical relation, the teacher remains beyond my knowing.

The 'Conversation of Mankind'

Another model of education that appears at one level similar to the notion of education as dialogue is Michael Oakeshott's view of education as 'the conversation of mankind', 'conversation' being an idea Levinas uses to illustrate the relation with the Other. What is implied in this phrase if we examine it through the lens of Levinas's teaching? If I consider my own education as part of 'the conversation of mankind', and I reflect on the way in which the Other has been and is addressed to me in various traditions and disciplines, and in various forms (through texts, conversations, images, music, gestures and art), I can appreciate that the not-I that is addressed to me is vulnerable to my response. In one way, we might suggest that, in a very real sense, traditions survive in the receptivity of each successive generation and are, therefore, vulnerable to those to whom they are passed on. But this is perhaps to

extend the implication of the vulnerability of the Other too far. The way that each individual receives aspects of different traditions in unique ways and, therefore, offers them to others in ways that are again different reveals this as simplistic. One way to interpret Levinas's view of teaching, if seen as part of the 'conversation of mankind', would be to recognise the inherent risk that the learner will react with hostility towards what is brought to them from outside. Thus the position of magisterial height is precisely a position of vulnerability, and the 'conversation of mankind' contains ethical possibilities inherent within every word that is uttered.

These ideas could be linked to Standish's view that we might view the content of the curriculum as a form of the relation to the Other. This, he suggests is significant for our thinking about education, since formal education has often been responsible for violence towards the Other in models of learning that emphasise mastery of the subject under study:

> The curriculum—say, the triangle of teaching, learning, and content—is one way in which the relation to the Other can be realised. By the same token, but accenting the negative correlate of this, the curriculum is a site in which the underlying relation to the Other—this obligation and responsibility—is commonly, causally, systematically denied (Standish, 2007, p. 61).

From this, Standish suggests that it is important to recognise the dominance of totalising forms of education and instead to move towards a kind of thinking that goes beyond the self, towards the stranger. He also suggests that this might practically challenge 'the assumption that there must be a tidy matching of learning outcomes and learning outcomes, or . . . the exhaustive specification of criteria' (p. 64). Rather 'teaching and learning should open ways beyond what is directly planned' (ibid.). I would agree that this is a useful way of responding to the challenge of how to think about education after Levinas. The Other is not straightforwardly the other person for Levinas, as is sometimes suggested, and as Levinas himself sometimes seems to emphasise. Indeed, it is not really possible to say what the Other is, because to do so would be already to bring the Other into the categories of the same (see note 2). All we can do then is to speak of ways in which the Other addresses me.

SOME POSSIBLE OBJECTIONS

Before attempting to draw this paper to a close, it is worth pausing to consider some of the challenges that might be raised against Levinas's presentation of subjectivity.
        The first challenge is whether someone might take Levinas's message to be a bit like Jesus's, calling us to live in a new way, to turn from our former selfish ways. This would, however, be to misinterpret what Levinas is saying: he is not offering an ethical option among others. He is rather describing the transcendental conditions of subjectivity as ethical, conditions of which we are commonly in denial. It is perhaps difficult to read *Totality and Infinity* without being challenged to think about what infinite ethical responsibility might mean in practice. But Levinas does not, in this book at least, focus on the question of how the transcendental conditions of subjectivity as infinitely responsible relate to the practical experience of responsibility in which we find ourselves every day. This is not to say that this cannot be done.

Another objection might then be that Levinas does not relate his account to specific situations. Elsewhere in his writing, however, he elaborates the relation between the transcendental conditions for ethical subjectivity and practical action. He speaks of the *possibility* of 'saintliness', the conditions necessary for the *possibility* of a just, liberal society, in the light of which, he suggests, it is possible to recognise political regimes, for example, that lead to ethical violence:

> I maintain that this ideal of saintliness is presupposed in all our value judgments. There is no politics for accomplishing the moral, but there are certainly some politics which are further from it or closer to it. For example, I've mentioned Stalinism to you. I've told you that justice is always a justice which desires a better justice. This is the way that I will characterize the liberal state. The liberal state is a state which holds justice as the absolutely desirable end and hence as a perfection. Concretely, the liberal state has always admitted—alongside the written law—human rights as a parallel institution. It continues to preach that within its justice there are always improvements to be made in human rights. Human rights are the reminder that there is no justice yet. And consequently, I believe that it is absolutely obvious that the liberal state is more moral than the fascist state, and closer to the morally utopian state (Levinas, 1988, pp. 177-178).

Thus we can see that although Levinas does not spell out the link between the transcendental conditions of subjectivity and the practical demand of ethics itself, he nevertheless does envision an essential link between the transcendental condition of non-violence towards the Other and how we should live in practice. This is, as already stated, not presented as a formulaic ethical imperative, but as a possibility yet to be realised in practice.

A further objection that might be raised is whether the notion of the Other as the teacher —especially the Other as Master and their address founding objectivity— is just an apologia for a kind of authoritarianism. However, the authority of the Other does not come from a concrete relationship of power. The mastery of the Other stems from his very vulnerability: his vulnerability gives his interpellation an urgency and places his need before my own. This is the sense in which he has authority over me: it is not an authority to compel me or demand from me: it is the authority of vulnerability. Does the infant then have 'mastery' over its mother? The mother will put the infant's needs before her own, where mastery might reside in the power of this vulnerability's appeal. Obviously for Levinas, the Other who has mastery is not a specific person, as in this illustration, but their vulnerability is as potent as that of an infant. In terms of the Other's address being the foundation of objectivity, the point that Levinas is making is perhaps simpler than it might appear. All my language comes to me from the Other (which is human), and it is by living in a world that is shared with others that objective truth is founded. The naming of things puts them in the space between the I and the Other and brings their possession into question, and this is not a relation of truth between the I and one other person, but between the I and all the others, such that the truth of what is thematised is established for me in the address of many others and in my response to them.

Related to this notion of the mastery of the Other, someone might question whether Levinas is offering a prescription for self-effacement. This is also a misunderstanding. As already stated, Levinas is not prescribing a course of action.

But if reading *Totality and Infinity* raises the question of how to relate this transcendental condition of responsibility to our relations to others, even then the notion of infinite responsibility for the Other and welcoming the Other does not mean that we must necessarily agree with or acquiesce in everything others say or do to me. The idea of the 'third party' and of community in Levinas, which is developed at greater length in *Otherwise Than Being*, suggests how the condition of responsibility to the Other is worked out in practice against the needs of many others. Thus the interpellation of the Other is not a private imperative: 'Everything that takes place here "between us" concerns everyone, the face that looks at it places itself in the full light of the public order. Even if I draw back from it to seek with the interlocutor the complicity of a private relation and a clandestinity' (*TI*, p. 212). My responsibility towards the Other is enacted within human community and fraternity, and I have a responsibility for myself and for the Other. Although my responsibility is infinite, what that responsibility means then has to be worked out within the bonds of human kinship and against the background of responsibility for myself:

> Society must be a fraternal community to be commensurate with the straightforwardness, the primary proximity, in which the face presents itself to my welcome. Monotheism signifies this human kinship, this idea of a human race that refers back to the approach of the Other in the face, in a dimension of height, in responsibility for oneself and for the Other (*TI,* p. 214).

Thus responsibility for the Other does involve self-sacrifice, but this is not the same as self-debasement.

Having paused to consider these possible objections, let us attempt to draw this paper to a close.

THE (IM)POSSIBILITY OF ETHICAL SUBJECTIVITY

In contrast to the conceptualisations of the subject as a social construction, or more specifically as an effect of various power relations, in theorists such as Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu and Louis Althusser, what does it mean to think in terms of ethical subjectivity and being taught after Levinas? In such constructions, there is also, as in Levinas, the notion of interpellation as fundamental in our understanding of subjectivity, but here it is ideologies and social structures that interpellate, calling and locating individuals as subjects within systems and giving them identities necessary to the organisation and functioning of the existing social order, the order of things. Levinas's provocation is unique in drawing attention to the ethical conditions at the heart of the interpellation to subjectivity as infinite responsibility. In coming to see my subjectivity as a continuing responding to the Other's prior address, I, Levinas's reader, am challenged to work out for myself what an ever-extending responsibility means—and this not in some theoretical elaboration but in the practical conditions of life. Perhaps this is similar to Zygmunt Bauman's description of moral responsibility:

> Moral responsibility is the most personal and inalienable of human possessions, and the most precious of human rights. It cannot be taken away, shared, ceded, pawned, or deposited for safe-keeping. Moral responsibility is unconditional and infinite, and it manifests itself in the constant anguish of not manifesting itself enough (Bauman, 1993, p. 250).

As my subjectivity is found in this moral responsibility, it is also shown as always future, deferred, on-the-way-to-being: this extending responsibility towards the infinite and transcendent Other deepens. Perhaps I am then always on the way to subjectivity, called to infinite responsibility as a radical (im)possibility. I use the parenthetic '(im)' here to show that to be a subject in the sense that Levinas suggests is always already implicated as a possibility in the very conditions of language, knowledge and all relationships, as coming to the self from outside, while at the same time, the sense that the responsibility for the Other through which I am elected to subjectivity is, in its very infinity, an impossibility.

As an educational aim, there is a sense in which all teaching is already predicated on my being an ethical subject, already obligated to the Other. There is another sense in which deepening and extending that sense of what subjectivity means could be seen as a challenge to how we tend to conceive of education. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas is not offering me or impelling me towards one way of being ethical, but rather offering me, the reader, a word of invitation to recognise the structure of my subjectivity as responsibility. This is a prophetic discourse that appeals to me to join it and judge it. Reading *Totality and Infinity* draws me to (but could not force me to) question whether I can testify to the possibility of goodness that Levinas testifies to. This prophetic form of discourse could be seen as a kind of (a)theology of education. God is central to Levinas's thinking, but here God means what is otherwise than being, what cannot be comprehended, what is transcendent. This is not the God of theism, but the transcendence of alterity and the infinity of my responsibility that eludes intelligibility and vision. This is similar to Franz Rosenzweig's view of redemption in *The Star of Redemption*, in which the messianic age happens now, the not-yet is in the present moment through the proximity of the neighbour and the act of neighbourly love. Kenneth Reinhard elaborates on what this messianic temporality means for Rosenzweig:

> For Rosenzweig, love of the neighbor is not merely the first step on the path to redemption, the good deed that might help make the world a better place in some hypothetical future, but its realization *now*, the immanent production of its transcendental conditions. The nearness of the neighbor materializes the imminence of redemption, releasing the here and the now from the fetters of teleology in the infinitesimal calculus of proximity (Reinhard, 2005, p. 21).

Although Levinas points out that love is not always for the Other, Rosenzweig's vision of loving the neighbour as the site of eschatology, and by implication transcendence, is perhaps an example of the sort of rupture in which God is manifested in the way that Levinas suggests. Here God is not a being as in classical theism, nor the ground of Being as in existentialist theology, but precisely beyond being, the transcendence of my infinite responsibility for the Other, which is the site of my subjectivity. This notion of God bursts open the 'omnipotence of the *logos*, of the *logos* of system and simultaneity' and instead manifests 'transcendence as signification, and signification as the signification of an order given to subjectivity before any statement: a pure one-for-the-other' (Levinas, [1986] 1998, p. 78). Such notions of transcendence, infinity and God do not, therefore, need to be read as belonging to a conventionally religious framework, but rather are suggestive of the ethical that lies beyond intelligibility and is prior to reason. In this way such concepts

beautifully serve to rupture notions of education that prioritise communicative cognition as foundational, revealing the interruption of the *logos* by ethics.

In reading Levinas I come to understand that who I am is always already the result of a teaching, receiving from the Other what was outside myself. But further exploration (not offered by Levinas) is needed of what these transcendental conditions mean in relation to how we understand society, community, politics and justice, and the relation of education to these. What do such notions of the Other who is always beyond concrete particularities mean in relation to the very concrete particularities of existence? Is this notion of the transcendent Other beyond identity to whom I am bound in a relation of obligation the best way to conceive of alterity in terms of concrete action? Reinhard quotes Adorno's questioning of Kierkegaard on this point: 'the overstraining of the transcendence of love threatens, at any given moment, to become transformed into the darkest hatred of man' (Reinhard, 2005, p. 23). In order to explore further the question of the practical ethical and educational implications of this notion of alterity, it would be worth exploring how Levinas's presentation of alterity has been taken up by other theorists such as Jean-Luc Nancy and Judith Butler, both of whose writings are more focused on practical and political concerns within contemporary society. It would also be worth considering the development of the idea of the third party by Levinas in *Otherwise Than Being*. Furthermore, the development in Levinas's thought of the relation with the Other as the trauma of persecution, and the thematisation of language in the contrast between the *saying* and the *said* (*le dire* and *le dit*)in this work demand further attention in terms of the challenge the ethical sublime presents for educational ideals. It is clear, however, that philosophical questions surrounding what ethical subjectivity and alterity mean within education need greater analysis in the light of the needs of those many concrete others who address us and demand our response. Levinas's presentation of a justice that 'summons me to go beyond the straight line of justice' must challenge educationalists to think anew what it might mean to enact a justice that extends 'behind the straight line of the law' to 'the land of goodness . . . infinite and unexplored' (Levinas, [1969] 2004, p. 235).

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[1] The other being *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence* (Levinas [1981] 2004)

[2] The capitalised of 'Other' is typically used to translate the French *l'autrui* as opposed to *l'autre*, and it indicates an absolute relation to the other person, independent of particular characteristics, of factors that might differentiate this person from that person. The usage is not entirely consistent.

[3] 'Desire' for Levinas means desire for the absolutely other, a metaphysical desire which can never be satisfied, as opposed to the kinds of desires we can satisfy, and thus denotes a movement outwards, towards the absolutely Other, and the capitalisation of this term indicates this particular sense. This notion of metaphysical desire could be distinguished from 'desire' that aims to bring the Other into the field of the same, or aims at the synthesis of self and Other. Desire for Levinas must maintain the alterity of the Other as beyond possession. He outlines this sense of Desire as follows: 'The idea of the Infinite is Desire. It paradoxically consists in thinking more than what is thought and maintaining what is though in this very excess relative to thought—in entering into a relationship with the ungraspable while guaranteeing its status of being ungraspable.' (Levinas 1996, p. 55)

[4] Nigel Tubbs, in 'From the 'Philosophy of the Teacher' to the Suppressed Concept of the Other in Modernity,' a paper delivered at the PESGB conference in March 2007, challenged Levinas on this idea, arguing that the Other is a fundamental concept in the philosophy of modernity. He suggests that to 'know thyself' is to know the Other. While his thesis is provocative and there is much that is useful in the concept of oneself as an Other, his notion that *the Other* is vulnerable for Levinas whereas *I* am not goes against Levinas's emphasis in *Otherwise than Being* that I also am vulnerable, and that it is only as one who is vulnerable that I can myself give.

[5] It would be interesting to explore further the ways in which Plato's *good beyond being*, as acknowledged by Levinas, allows for alterity, or whether the Other is still subsumed in the self in our relation to the Good. Levinas suggests that the notion of desire presented in Diotima's speech in the *Symposium* is a form of incest, while at the same time pointing out that Plato presents discourse as discourse with God in the *Phaedrus* and thus suggesting that 'metaphysics is the essence of language with god; it leads above being.' (*TI*, p. 297). The relationship between self, Other and teaching in Plato is complex and deserves further attention.

[6] Sharon Todd also uses the phrase 'bringing me more than I contain' in *Learning from the Other: Levinas, Psychoanalysis and Ethical Possibilities in Education* (2003), as the title of a chapter in which she explores the relation between ethics and the curriculum.

[7] The 'epiphany of the face', which functions in Levinas as a kind of metonym for the relation to the Other, refers to the way that this relation always goes beyond what is to be understood phenomenologically. To see a face as a human face is not to arrive at a conception of the interiority of the human being *on the evidence of* the appearance of the nose, mouth, eyes. . . ; the relation to interiority is always prior. The face is what you see when you do not see the colour of a person's eyes.

[8] Heidegger, for example, in 'Language' objects, in similar vein, to the way that language is commonly viewed primarily as a means of communication: 'The current view declares that speech is the activation of the organs for sounding and hearing. Speech is the audible expression and communication of human feelings' (Heidegger, [1971] 2001, p. 190).

[9] Although this notion of non-reciprocity in Levinas perhaps does leave open the possibility that Derrida suggests in *Writing and Difference*, that there is a metaphysical symmetry of asymmetries in the relation between self and Other: 'That I am also essentially the other's other, and that I know I am, is the evidence of a strange symmetry whose trace appears nowhere in Levinas's descriptions. Without this evidence, I could not desire [or] respect the other in ethical dissymmetry.' (Derrida [1978] 2003, p. 160)

[10] For example: 'The way the object is posited as a theme offered envelops the instance of signifying—not the referring of the thinker who fixes it to what is signified (and is part of the same system), but *the manifesting of the signifier, the issuer of the sign*, an absolute alterity which nonetheless speaks to him and thereby thematizes, that is, proposes a world' (*TI*, p. 96, emphasis added).

[11] Unless the Other speaks of himself, in which case, as Levinas writes, 'then he would announce himself as signified and consequently as a sign in his turn.' (Ibid.)

[12] In the Kantian sense, where spontaneity, which refers to what comes from within me, contrasts with experience, which comes from outside.

[13] Freud in *Civilisation and Its Discontents* provides an example of an attitude that rejects the notion of responsibility towards that which is Other: 'If I love another person, he must in some way deserve it… He deserves it if, in certain important respects, he so much resembles me that in him I can love myself. He deserves it if he is so much more perfect than myself that I can love in him an ideal image of myself… But if he is a stranger to me and cannot attract by any merit of his own or by any importance he has acquired in my emotional life, it becomes hard for me to love him. Indeed, it would be wrong of me to do so, for my love is prized by my family and friends as a sign of my preference for them; to put a stranger on a par with them would be to do them an injustice. Yet if I am to love him, with this universal love—just because he is a creature of this earth, like an insect, an earthworm or a grass-snake, and certainly not as much as the judgement of my reason entitles me to reserve for myself. What

is the point of such a portentous precept if its fulfilment cannot commend itself as reasonable?' (Freud 2002, pp. 46-7)

[14] This appears in his work as early as 1948 with the publication of *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*.

[15] There is not scope here to explore fully the 'dialogue' between Buber and Levinas. The most helpful treatment of this is Robert Bernasconi's 'Failure of Communication as a Surplus: Dialogue and Lack of Dialogue between Buber and Levinas' (Bernasconi, [1988] 1998).