# Levinas on Teaching

**James Mensch**

**Abstract**
The teaching relation has always been a puzzle. Some take education as the passing on and acquisition of information. They regard the lecture format as crucial. Others see it in terms of developing the reasoning ability of students. In seminars and conversations, they strive to have their students reflect and learn to "think for themselves". Their goal is a rational individual capable of insight. Levinas, the French Philosopher, who famously positioned ethics as first philosophy, i.e., as determinative of how we think of ourselves and our world, advances a novel view, one springing from the "face to face" relation. In this article, we explore how his understanding of this relation leads to his situating education in an ethical context.

**Keywords**
Levinas; education; alterity; the face to face relation; embodiment

The teaching relation is crucial to society, and has assumed various forms throughout history—both formal and informal. Without it, a society cannot pass on its acquired knowledge, still less can it add to what it preserves. Given its importance, how are we to understand it? What form should it ideally take? Theories of education abound. Some take education as the passing on and acquisition of information. They regard the lecture format as crucial. Others see it in terms of developing the reasoning ability of students. In seminars and conversations, they strive to have their students reflect and learn to "think for themselves". Their goal is a rational individual capable of insight. Levinas, as we shall see, takes a novel position, one based on his criticism of the tradition in which these approaches arise. As a philosopher who takes ethics as "first philosophy",[1] his approach situates education within an ethical context.

## The Classical Models of Educational Practice

Levinas's position can be approached by contrasting it with two classical views of education. The first, which stems from Plato's *Meno*, emphasizes the autonomy of the learner. It contains the well-known passage where Socrates shows a slave boy how to produce a square with an area double the size of an original one. As Socrates emphasizes, he does not impart information to the boy, but only asks him questions (*Meno* 84d). Such questions make him "recollect" the answer. From the diagrams drawn, the boy sees that the required square must be one

[1] In Levinas's words: "Morality is not a branch of philosophy, but first philosophy" (Levinas 1969, 304).

constructed on the diagonal of the original square. Socrates claims that, since the boy has received no information from him, this demonstration shows that the soul is immortal and "has seen all things" and "there is nothing which it has not learned." Consequently, "it can recollect the things it knew before." (*Meno* 81d) This, he asserts, is what the slave boy does in coming to the right answer. Implicit here is the contention that there is a certain identity between the knower and the known in recollection. As Plato puts this, when the soul grasps the ideas or the forms of things, "it passes into the realm of what is pure, ever existing, immortal and unchanging, and, being akin to this, it always stays with it …; it ceases to stray and remains in the same state as it is in touch with things of the same kind." (*Phaedo* 79d) This realm of "the pure, ever existing, immortal and unchanging" is that of the self-identical forms or ideas. The soul, in knowing these, becomes like them. In other words, I am, at the moment of knowing, simply the insight that I am presently having. Thus, as the knower of the relation of square and its double in size, I am just like everyone else who knows this relation. In the moment of that insight, I am timeless; I have an ideal being just like the relation that I am knowing. This identity of the knower and the known is such that all I have to do is look within myself, i.e., recollect, to grasp the known. In Levinas's terms, both knower and known are ultimately the "same". He writes, "Western philosophy has most often been an ontology: a reduction of the other [the known] to the same … This primacy of the same was Socrates' teaching: to receive nothing of the Other but what is in me." (1969, 43)

Aristotle's view of education differs sharply from this. Yet, it too embraces the "primacy of the same". While for Plato teaching is the questioning that prompts the student to look within himself, for Aristotle teaching is informing. Our modern view, which sees teaching as imparting information, is a reflection of this view.[2] Aristotle bases his position on a very different account of the forms or ideas. Rather than existing in a separate, timeless realm, the forms are "at work" in the material world. They inform matter, making it into a specific something. Thus, the form of humanity, at work within the womb of the mother, informs the matter she provides to produce a human being. Humans, when mature, repeat this process when they mate. Doing so, they pass on the form that they received from their parents.[3] This process occurs not just throughout the natural world, it is also present in most human activities. Thus, in carpentry, the form, which is present in the mind of the carpenter as his conception of what he wants to build, informs his actions of shaping the wood to produce the final product. The same paradigm occurs in the relation of the teacher to the learner as she imparts her ideas to the latter. Here, the teacher is the informing agent and the student is the material she works on. This does not mean that the teacher is independent of the student. She cannot function as a teacher without him. Similarly, he cannot function as learner without her. As Aristotle writes, "there is a single functioning (*energeia*—ἐνέργεια) of both alike."[4] This means that the teacher

[2] The modern version of Plato's position is the seminar that begins with an opening question.
[3] Readers will recognize this as a distant version of the modern view of DNA, where the strands of the DNA inform or guide the process of the development of the embryo.
[4] *Physics* 202a, lines 16-20, my translation.

and the student must "work" together. Their "being at work", their actuality or functioning, is, in this instance, one. Crucial to this position is Aristotle's conception of being as functioning or "at workness"—the literal meaning of *energeia*. This signifies that *being exists where it is at work*. In other words, a being, as functioning, exists where it functions. Thus, Aristotle asserts that "the functioning of the sensible object" is "in the sensing subject".[5] Functioning, it exists as sensible in the seeing subject. Similarly, the teacher *qua* teacher is "in the one taught".[6] Her actuality is one with the learner's. Once again, we encounter the "primacy of the same". For Plato, "the same" was the knower's identity with the ideal forms. For him, these forms represent, in their unchanging conceptual identity, the very being of "to be".[7] They are the forms that impose stability on our changing world. For Aristotle, "the same" is the functioning of such forms. Since being qua being is not differentiated, being as functioning or actualization is ultimately one.

## The Plurality of Embodiment

Levinas's goal is to overturn this paradigm. It is, as he writes in *Totality and Infinity*, to "oppose the ancient privilege of unity which is affirmed from Parmenides to Spinoza and Hegel." (1969, 102) The privilege of unity is that of "the same". It expresses itself in the attempt to grasp what is common in different things, thus gaining a "total", comprehensive view of them. Levinas's work, by contrast, emphasizes plurality over unity and, as part of this, difference over identity. What he wants, he writes, is a relation with the Other "that does not result in a divine or human totality", a relation that, in fact, breaks up all totalizations (1969, 52). The insight here is close to that of Hannah Arendt, whose work is shaped by the fact that it is not man [the universal], "but men that inhabit the earth" (1958, 234). For both philosophers, the plurality of humanity points to the interiority that makes each of us something more than an instance of a species. Both emphasize the miracle of "natality"—i.e., the fact that the world is born anew in each child in the sense that a child's birth is the recommencement of the world's presence.[8]

[5] *De Anima* 426a, line 10, my translation.

[6] *Physics* 202b, line 8, my translation.

[7] According to Plato, "the very being of to be [αὑτὴ ἡ οὑσία … τοῦ εἶναι] … is to be always the same with itself" [ἀεὶ ἔχει κατὰ ταὑτὰ]." As Plato explains, this is to be "unchanging" and, thus, to remain self-identical. The ideas "beauty itself, equality itself, and every itself" are called "being"—τὸ ὄν—because they "do not admit of any change whatsoever" (*Phaedo* 78d, my translation). Plato's position follows from an analysis of what change means. Its fundamental intuition is that change is always a change of something. This something is an underlying self-identity. The consequence is that real loss of self-identity is not change. It is rather annihilation pure and simple of the individual.

[8] For Arendt, the genuinely new is made possible by natality. In her words: "It is in the nature of beginning that something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before." This newness "is possible only because each man is unique so that with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world" (1958, 177-78). Levinas expresses a similar position in his discussion of fecundity. See *Totality and Infinity*, p. 284.

Levinas finds the basis for this plurality in our embodiment. In a certain sense, his position is an extension of Heidegger's stress on the fact that no one can die for you, i.e., that each person must die his own death. For Heidegger this implies that death "individualizes Dasein down to itself" (1968, 263). It points to our existential solitude. For Levinas, however, such individualization has a broader basis than death. It is grounded in the privacy of our organic functioning. Thus, just as no one can die for you, so no one can eat for you, sleep for you, breathe for you or perform for you any of a host of functions. The functioning of our bodies is non-substitutable, irreplaceable. While someone else can go to the bank for you, no one else can go to the bathroom for you. The uniqueness of a person in his or her interiority comes from the uniqueness of our embodied functioning. When we bite into a fresh peach, we have an interior experience that is not public, not disclosable as there for everyone. The result is an inwardness that "refuses the concept" since there is no plurality of directly experienceable public examples to draw the concept from. As Levinas emphasizes, without this non-conceptual interiority of the I, we cannot have a human plurality. Thus, "when the I is identified with reason … it loses its very ipseity … Reason makes human society possible; but a society whose members would merely be reasons would vanish as a society … Reason has no plural; how could numerous reasons be distinguished?" (1969, 119) Rather than reason, embodiment distinguishes us, which means that "[f]or the I to be means to enjoy something" (1969, 120).

## Intending the Embodied Other: The Face to Face

This emphasis on embodiment does not mean that human beings are totally different. We are, after all, members of the same species and have similar bodies with similar senses. Yet, the embodied Other still contains something more than what I can grasp from my own case. As embodied, he necessarily views the world from a different physical standpoint. As a result, his perceptions and memories, which form his "interiority", remain distinct from mine. The interpretations and actions based on such interiority are correspondingly different. While I, given my past experience, may interpret a given situation one way, I cannot assume that the Other's grasp of the situation matches my own. To be certain of it, I would have to have access to his past and present experience. His perceptions, memories and the ongoing interpretations that he has formed from these would lie within my purview. But this would mean that his consciousness and my own would merge. The result would be that I would not be grasping another person, but rather myself.[9]

The above can be put in terms of the special way we intend another person. There are, broadly speaking, four possible relations that intentions have to fulfilments. The givenness of what we intend can exactly match our intentions. We can intend to see an object—say, a book

[9] As Sartre puts this: "What I must attain is the Other, not as I obtain knowledge of him, but as he obtains knowledge of himself - which is impossible. This would in fact suppose the internal identification of myself with the Other" (Sartre 1966, 317).

 DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.7431727 

on the table—and our perception fulfils our interpretative intentions. Alternately, such givenness can be other than what we intend—as is the case when we are mistaken. Thus, I thought I was seeing a cat crouching under a bush, but on closer inspection, I found it was only a collection of flickering shadows. Another possibility is that such givenness can be less than what we intend. It can, for example, not offer the detail that was part of our intentions. This happens when we mistake a mannequin for a person. Regarding it at a distance, we take it as a salesperson, and expect it to respond to us, but on approaching it, we see that it is only a lifelike representation. Finally, givenness can exceed our intentions. In showing itself, the object presents us with more than what we intended. To intend the object as having such excessive presence is, paradoxically, to intend it as exceeding our intentions. Such presence has a peculiar quality. It makes us aware that more is being offered than we can formulate in our intentions. The interpretations based on our previous experience are not sufficient to grasp the sense it embodies. We have to adjust our interpretation and return to it again. In such a return, however, we face the same situation. Yet another return is called for. The "object" that continually demands such a return is, of course, not an inanimate object, but rather a person.

Such insights are behind Levinas's account of the face to face relation. The face, he writes, at "each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves on me". Thus, regarding the face of the Other, I can see her eyes, but I cannot see the seeing that occurs through them. Neither can I see the thoughts that prompt her when she faces me. What vision gives me is the "plastic image" of the Other; but, facing her, I never repeat my mistake with the mannequin and confuse this image with reality. The same holds for the conception I have of her. It, too, is never completely adequate. Such thoughts animate Levinas's definition of a face: "The way in which the Other presents himself, exceeding the idea of the Other in me, we here name [the] face." (1969, 51) Inattentive readers of Levinas often object that the same holds for the face of an animal. Why, they ask, cannot Levinas's argument apply, say, to the face of a bat?[10] Such readers miss Levinas's repeated assertion that the face of the Other is a speaking face. The surpassing of the Other, Levinas writes, "is primordially enacted as conversation." (1969, 39) Thus, the face does not manifest itself by the "plastic image" it shows to me, rather, it exhibits its surpassing because "it expresses itself" by speaking to me. (1969, 51) There is here a special relation of the saying to the said. The saying—i.e., the actual vocal expression—expresses itself in what is said. But with the expression of the said, the conversation does not necessarily stop. Rather the Other can amend or add to it by a new saying. Thus, as Levinas writes, "To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression, in which at each instant he overflows the idea [that] a thought would carry away from it." (1969, 51) This overflowing is a new saying. It is the Other's excessive presence as manifested by his exceeding the thought that he has just verbally presented by adding to it.

The root of the Other's ability to continually surpass what he presents to me involves his embodiment. Because of the uniqueness of our embodiment, each of us brings the world

[10] See, for example, Todd 1997, 143.

to presence in a unique way. The same holds for the actions that respond to this presence, actions by which we alter or shape what we presently experience. Now, when we express what we experience, we necessarily employ the common concepts of our language. Were such concepts sufficient, the alterity of the Other could be overcome. The reasoning that joins concepts would be sufficient. But, as we cited Levinas, “a society whose members would merely be reasons would vanish as a society.” It would not be a plurality, but a conceptual unity. Our embodiment, however, prevents this. What we face here is, in fact, an inescapable duality. The face is a *speaking face* and, thus, expresses itself in the common concepts of our language. But it is also an *embodied face*, the face of a person with his unique interiority. The latter inevitably surpasses—involves a surplus with regard to— such common concepts. In Levinas’s terms, the “said” that the Other expresses is always “too late”. Her interiority has already moved on requiring a new “saying”. Such “saying” transcends the said. It represents the new, which I must appropriate.

**Teaching and Ethics**

The student-teacher relationship that is based on this view of human interaction necessarily differs from the classical models presented by Plato and Aristotle. The student for Levinas is not an autonomous learner who needs only to be questioned to recollect what is within him. Neither is he matter—i.e., a passive material—waiting to be informed by the teacher. Both these positions, we emphasised, privilege unity or “the same”. For Levinas, however, the student’s relation to the teacher involves alterity. Their relation is one of conversation. Levinas writes, in this regard, to “approach the Other in conversation” is “to receive from the Other beyond the capacity of the I.”[11] To be taught involves just such reception from the Other of what one cannot get on one’s own. As Levinas continues: “But this also means: to be taught … inasmuch as it is welcomed, this conversation is a teaching. Teaching … comes from the exterior and brings me more than I contain.” (1969, 50)

It is in this context that Levinas claims: “The relation with the Other, or Conversation, is … an ethical relation.” (1969, 50) It is ethical insofar as the Other, in teaching us, calls us into question. She offers a perspective, a view, that is different from our own. When we welcome this, we are prompted to question our own views. We ask why we should maintain our previous conceptions rather than the ones the teacher offers us. There is here, according to Levinas, an interruption of our egotism, a break in our viewing things only from our private standpoint. Experiencing this, we stand out from ourselves. We reflect on ourselves and our beliefs.[12] Called into question, we are called to judge our opinions and the conduct that springs

[11]Such reception, Levinas continues, “means exactly: to have the idea of infinity.” “Infinity”, as Levinas uses the term, does not signify an infinite totality. It rather indicates an inability to be limited or bounded. Thus, the Other is infinite in the sense that there is always an excess, an addition that, like a new *saying*, adds to our conception of him. No total understanding of the person is, therefore, possible.

[12] This ability to stand out from ourselves gives us the distancing that Sartre sees as essential to freedom. Sartre writes in this regard, “For man to put a particular existent out of circuit is to put himself out of circuit in relation

from them. As for our relation to the teacher, it involves both waiting and patience. Aware that the teacher offers us what we cannot get on our own, we have to wait for her and the text she guides us through to speak to us.

This patience involves our not thrusting our views forward, but rather attending to what her teaching offers us. As the French philosopher, Simone Weil, writes of school studies: "All wrong translations, all absurdities in geometry problems, all clumsiness of style, and all faulty connection of ideas in compositions and essays, all such things are due to the fact that thought has seized upon some idea too hastily, and being thus prematurely blocked, is not open to the truth." (1979, 35) The cure for this is attention. "Attention", she writes, "consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object." (1979, 35) The ethical import of such attention to the Other is our openness to the suffering and vulnerability of Others. Weil puts this in terms of a medieval legend. She writes, "In the first legend of the Grail, it is said that the Grail (the miraculous vessel that satisfies all hunger by virtue of the consecrated Host) belongs to the first comer who asks the guardian of the vessel, a king three-quarters paralyzed by the most painful wound, 'What are you going through?'" (1979, 36) The Grail belongs to the person who has the patience to attend to the answer. For Levinas, as for Weil, ethics begins with such openness, such attending to the Other. For both, there is an intimate connection between education and ethics.

**Note**

Research for this article was supported by the Faculty of Humanities, Charles University, Prague.

**References**

Arendt, Hannah. 1958. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Aristotle. *Physics*. https://archive.org/details/aristotle_physics.

Aristotle. *De Anima*. https://www.gutenberg.org/files/27816/27816-h/27816-h.htm.

Heidegger, Martin. 1968. *Sein und Zeit*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer.

Levinas, Emmanuel. 1969. *Totality and Infinity, An Essay on Exteriority*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.

Plato. 1981. *Plato, Five Dialogues, Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Meno, Phaedo*. Translated by G.M.A. Grube Indianapolis: Hackett.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1966. *Being and Nothingness*. Translated by Hazel Barnes. New York: Washington Square Press.

to the existent. In this case he is not subject to it; he is out of reach; it cannot act on him, for he has retired *beyond a nothingness*. Descartes, following the Stoics, has given a name to this possibility, which human reality has, to secrete a nothingness which isolates it—it is *freedom* (Sartre 1966, 60). What secretes this nothingness, for Levinas, is the Other that we welcome in conversation.

Todd, May. 1997. *Reconsidering Difference*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Weil, Simone. 1979. "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God," in *Waiting on God*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

**James Mensch**
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5644-0580
Charles University, Prague
Professor Emeritus, Faculty of Humanities
U Kříže 661/8, CZ-158 00, Praha 5
http://cuni.academia.edu/JamesMensch
james.mensch@gmail.com

 DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.7431727 