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What is not Teaching? Levinassian Notes on Maieutics and Contemporary Education

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Cosa insegnamento non è? Note levinassiane sulla maieutica e sull'educazione contemporanea

The paper orbits around Lévinas' idea of teaching as opposite to Socratic maieutic method. According to the phenomenologist, pursuing only the goal of drawing out of the students what is already contained in them relegates teaching to a secondary role and, first and foremost, underlies an anthropology centered on the ego and not on the relationship. The aim of the paper is to show how this anthropology is unable to respond to many "emergencies" of contemporary education.

Tema dell'articolo è l'idea levinassiana di insegnamento come opposta al metodo maieutico di Socrate. Secondo il fenomenologo, proporsi soltanto l'obiettivo di tirar fuori dallo studente ciò che è già presente in lui, significa relegare l'insegnamento in un ruolo secondario e, soprattutto, sottende una antropologia centrata sull'ego e non sulla relazione. Lo scopo del contributo è mostrare come questa antropologia sia incapace di rispondere a molte delle "emergenze" dell'educazione contemporanea.

Keywords: Teaching; Phenomenological pedagogy; Philosophy of education; Relationship; Ethics.

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1. Introduction

The idea of maieutics as the best image of teaching is widely present in common sense as well as in the implicit pedagogy of many educators. The teacher, indeed, should be a kind of spiritual midwife, i.e. a helper who facilitates students' attempts to bring to light the knowledge that is already present although buried deep in them.

In the present paper, I intend to focus on some passages of Lévinas' philosophy of education in which this idea is criticized. According to him, pursuing only the goal of drawing out of the student what is already contained in him/her relegates teaching to a secondary role and, first and foremost, underlies an anthropology centered on the ego and not on the relationship. My aim is to show how this anthropology is unable to respond to many "emergencies" — i.e. *emergent phenomena* — of contemporary education. To that purpose, I will draw from Lévinas possible answers to the question "what is not teaching" and, therefore, possible insight on what teaching essentially is.

2. Teaching *vs* maieutics

In the Levinassian perspective, the perfect image of a true ethical relationship is the student-teacher's one. References to the Other as teacher appear in several places throughout Lévinas writings including his masterpiece *Totality and Infinity*, namely at the end of Section I, where the author depicts the relation between "other" and "myself" not as a dialectical relationship between two opposing concepts but, rather, as a relation between me and one who *speaks to me*.

> 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 (Lévinas, 1961/1969, p. 98).

The radical openness of an educational encounter is described by Lévinas as the opposite of this Socratic pedagogy. The author is well aware that the Socratic legacy was widespread and, from Descartes onward, ever stronger as a taking for granted: this legacy implies that in matters of truth and knowledge we need any external sources and, more fundamentally, we are beholden only to ourselves because we are.

Instead, according to Lévinas, being addressed by another person is the foundation of our personhood. The philosopher diverges from both Edmund Husserl's construction of alter ego and Martin Buber's idea of dialogue as reciprocity, insisting that intersubjectivity is always asymmetrical. Namely, the other is always *above* me, calling me.

The Other's face is the source of original expression mandating a relation that opens the realm of the ethical. And, according to Lévinas, ethics is not a branch of philosophy but *the first philosophy*.

In Lévinas' own words:

> The fundamental experience which objective experience itself presupposes is the experience of the Other. It is experience *par excellence* [...] the disproportion between the Other and the self is precisely moral consciousness. Moral consciousness is not an experience of values but an access to external being: external being is par excellence, the Other. Moral consciousness is thus not a modality of psychological consciousness, but its condition (Lévinas & Peperzak, 1978, p. 293).

> Alterity appears as a nonreciprocal relationship [...] The Other as Other is not only an alter ego: the Other is what I myself am not [...] It can be said that intersubjective space is not symmetrical (Lévinas, 1948/1987, p. 83).

Actually, in Lévinas' perspective, the other person, through exposure of their *face*, is an *interruption* in the ego's certainties. The author highlights in many ways that the Other person is irreducible to my experience of them.

Hence a peculiar idea of "transcendence": i.e., the encounter with the other springs a "givenness" that exceeds my interpretations and representations. In showing itself, indeed, the Other's face presents us with more than what we intended before and can contain. To "intend" this "object" as having such "excessive presence" is, precisely, "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" (Mensch, 2022, p. 3).

In this framework, the radical and irreducible alterity of the Other is described precisely as a real teaching, insofar as a true master addresses each disciple, from his/her *exteriority* and *height*. So, Lévinas discloses a pedagogy encompassing asymmetric relations (Joldersma, 2001).

For Lévinas, not only genuine teaching cannot be reduced to the transmission of knowledge or skills or social habits but, first and foremost, the encounter with a *face*, thus the dialogue between teacher and student allows to introduce — and not merely to extract — something radically new.

So strong was his criticism of the idea of teaching as maieutics, that Derrida, in the famous inaugural speech of the conference in honor of Lévinas one year after his death — held at that *Richelieu Amphitheater* of the Sorbonne that had been so important for him — stated:

> It was right here, in the Richelieu Amphitheater, that this thinker who was not only a great professor at the Sorbonne, but a master, once taught. This master never separated his teaching from a strange and difficult thought of teaching-a magisterial teaching in the figure of welcoming, a welcoming where ethics interrupts the philosophical tradition of giving birth and foils the ruse of the master who feigns to efface himself behind the figure of the midwife. For the study of which we are speaking cannot be reduced to a maieutics, which would reveal to me only what I am already capable of, as Lévinas says. To weave together the themes, I would like to privilege here, and to cross the semantic and etymological resources of a word Lévinas uses so often, the word *meme* ["self, same"], a word whose philology is not his prime concern, we might perhaps say, following *Totality and Infinity*, that maieutics teaches me nothing. It reveals nothing to me. It unveils only what I am already in a position [a *meme*] to know myself [*moi-meme*] (ipse), capable of knowing [*pouvoir savoir*] by myself, in this place where the self, the same [...] gathers in itself capacity and knowing, power and knowledge, and as the same [*meme*], the same being-in-a-position-to [*etre-a meme-de*] , in the property of from...the property of what is proper to it, in its very [*meme*] essentiality. And perhaps — we will return to this — what is thus announced is a certain appropriating interpretation, indeed a politics of hospitality, a politics of capacity, of power [*pouvoir*], with regard to the *hôte*, be he the one welcoming (host) or the one being welcomed (guest). Power of the *hôte* over the *hôte*, of the host over the guest or vice versa (Derrida, 1997/1999, pp. 17-18).

Having deeply inquired Lévinas's thought, Gert Biesta observes that the teacher cannot only be a *learning facilitator* but that teaching should rather promote "subjectification" and not merely "socialization." Biesta stresses that only this account of learning enables us to acknowledge the uniqueness of each individual human being and develop an education that would foster "experiences that have the potential for singularizing our students" (Biesta, 2007, p. 45; see also Biesta, 2000, 2008).

This surely represents a fruitful insight on Lévinas's philosophy of education as well as on phenomenology in its variety, considering that Husserl himself maintains that ethical life is life in first person (D'Addelfio, 2021).

However, we have to specify what "subjectivation" *does* mean, in order not to interpret it as exaltation of the autonomy and absolutization of the authenticity of the subject and thus betray the phenomenological and Levinassian approach. Actually, the first educational emergency that we have to address by asking what teaching is not can be detected in what G. Lipovetsky (2021) calls "authenticity fever." According to him — and Biesta may agree — the principle of authenticity is nowadays translated in a generic "be yourself!," which is often functional to the neo-liberal ideology and free-market logic that reinforces as a rule of life the obedience to individualistic desires.

3. Teaching *vs* authonomy

Not only in *Totality and Infinity*, but already in 1957 essay "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity" — published in the *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* —, Lévinas focuses on the teacher-student relation as model of an ethical relationship and, precisely, in terms of the difference between autonomy and heteronomy.

By "autonomy," he means "the confident relation I have with the world such that I can appropriate and integrate it in terms conformable and comfortable to myself" (Wyzyrba, 1995, p. 130). In the autonomous view there are actually no teachers, insofar as there are no genuine occasions for the radical questioning of my knowledge and cognitive appropriation of the world. What is decisive for Lévinas about this Socratic idea of learning is the absence of teaching: he quotes Plato as saying, "there is no teaching but recollection" (*Meno*, 82a). The phenomenologist therefore argues against the idea that in knowledge the soul converses mainly with itself.

> This is Socrates' teaching when he leaves to the master only the exercise of maieutics: every lesson introduced into the soul was already in it. The I's identification, its marvelous autarchy, is the natural crucible of this transmutation of the Other into the Same (Lévinas, 1957/1993, p. 96).

In this account, the alterity of the Other is eliminated Instead, "heteronomy" coincides with the opening of an ethical relation with the "absolutely Other," that leads us beyond the boundaries of our ego. In this experience, a teacher is precisely "the condition for the possibility of my being opened beyond myself" (Wyzyrba, 1995, p. 130). So, this irreducible heteronomy goes deeper than the subject and is already present and active therein even before the subject tries to come to itself.

Because the heteronomy of the Other is irreducible and, in later writing, Lévinas considers *the self older than itself*, marked as it is by the alterity in its *ground before its ground*. Actually, it is through the encounter with the Other that I am called into question; therefore, my subjectivity is only possible through the condition of being taught.

4. Teaching, exteriority, and freedom

Lévinas argues that Socratic education deletes the exteriority of the teacher, finding in Socrates's account of learning an instance of the totalizing tendency of traditional philosophy, which precisely reduces the Other to the Same. The author pinpoints that a true teacher, on the other hand, is the one who appeals to the attention of the disciple and adds: "Attention is attention to something, because attention to someone. The exteriority of its point of departure is essential to it: it is the very tension of the I" (Lévinas, 1961/1969, p. 69).

The exteriority of the teacher allows us to conceive a thought possible only through the specific human relationship that the teaching establishes. In this relationship neither the master nor the disciple finds what they already owned.

> Teaching signifies the whole infinity of exteriority. And the whole infinity of exteriority is not first produced to then teach: teaching is its very production. The first teaching teaches this very height, tantamount to its exteriority, the ethical (Lévinas, 1961/1969, p. 171).

So, the author can argue that the first teaching of the teacher is constituted by his/her *presence* as a teacher: "The presence of the Other, a privileged heteronomy, does not clash with freedom but invests it" (Lévinas, 1961/1969, p. 88).

Lévinas claims that genuine human freedom presupposes moral responsibility for the other and insists that each of us receives the world in being taught by the Other. Actually, the very possibility of a meaningful world is thus presented as something that is offered in speech, properly meant as an educational dialogue. Therefore, we may stress that, at school and in the further educational context, thanks to the dialogue springing from the "face to face" relation, the student does not meet ideas but a person.

Analogous emphasis can be detected in the essay *Dialogue: Self-Consciousness and the Proximity of the Neighbor*, in which Lévinas specifically addresses the way in which an *absolute distance* between I and You is hollowed out in dialogue, and at the same time, "there unfolds — or intervenes, disposing the I as I and the you as you — the extraordinary and immediate relation of dialogue, transcending this distance without suppressing it or recuperating it" (Lévinas, 1961/1998, p. 144).

Therefore, speech itself becomes a teaching in its founding of the world and community, insofar as to be taught means to encounter what is wholly other, which is precisely opposite to maieutics as described in *Totality and Infinity*:

> 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. Teaching is not reducible to maieutics; it comes from the exterior and brings me more than I contain. In its non-violent transitivity the very epiphany of the face is produced [...] The transitivity of teaching, and not the interiority of reminiscence, manifests being; the locus of truth is society. The moral relation with the Master who judges me subtends the freedom of my adherence to the true (Lévinas, 1961/1969, p. 51, p. 101).

To sum up: to be taught is to have been welcomed into a relation with the Other, who is always in a position of magisterial height and calls for my responsibility.

> The height from which language comes we designate with the term teaching. Socratic maieutics prevailed over a pedagogy that introduced ideas into a mind by violating or seducing (which amounts to the same thing) that mind (Lévinas, 1961/1969, p. 171).

It is worth noticing here — also with regard to the gaze of contemporary education — that such a height does not generate authoritarianism.

5. Teaching as openness to infinity

Lévinas points out that the Other is my master but that he "does not conquer," precisely because a genuine teaching "is not a species of a genus called domination, a hegemony at work within a totality, but is the presence of infinity breaking the closed circle of totality" (Lévinas, 1969, p. 171). Indeed, as it is well known, the title of his masterpiece includes an irreducible opposition between "infinity" and "totality." For our purposes, let us focus on the relevant description of teaching:

> Teaching coincides with the openness of the very dimension of infinity, which is height, in the face of the Master. This voice coming from another shore teaches transcendence itself. Teaching signifies the whole infinity of exteriority. And the whole infinity of exteriority is not first produced then to teach: teaching is its very production. The first teaching teaches this very height, tantamount to its exteriority, the ethical (Lévinas, 1961/1969, p. 171).

Although, among the main accounts to be deconstructed, the self-certainty and autonomy of the *cogito* have a crucial role, when Lévinas wonders how teaching is conceivable, he finds a model in Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* and, more specifically, in the third one. Namely, in this writing Descartes comes upon the idea of God meant as the idea of the infinite, arguing that such an idea could not have sprung from the subject himself. Lévinas is not interested in this argument as proving the existence of God — like Descartes was — but, rather, with regard to "the structure of thought it reveals" (Wirzba, 1995, p. 136). Actually, in thinking the idea of the infinite thought each of us can think an excess and recognize a failure of a mere self-referential attitude: an irreducible distance remains and separates *idea* and *ideatum*.

This distance is precisely the infinity that cannot be envisaged as an object but, rather, as a relation of disproportionality and transcendence. Moreover, the way to inhabit this distance is desire: a desire beyond needs and individualistic attitudes, that respects and increases this distance. In later works, Lévinas calls this mode of thinking "transcendence" (Bernasconi, 2005).

Therefore, desire and not need or power can be the framework to understand what teaching may really mean.

6. Levinassian master and contemporary education

Having recalled the development of the Levinassian account of teaching we have progressively stressed the self-referential nature of maieutic idea of teaching and learning. It is worth noticing here that, in the Socratic-Cartesian anthropological model — that also the frame of an Enlightenment ethos and the neoliberalism further strengthened — not only learning but each and every kind of dialogue depends on the possibility of returning to a pre-established frame of reference.

This has at least two pedagogical consequences that should not be overlooked. The first one: whatever is stranger and/or foreign always runs the risk to be assimilated or rejected (first of all, in a violently physical way). It is not by chance that the foreignness of the Other is a crucial category in Lévinas' philosophy and that Derrida in his above-mentioned speech recalls the importance of hospitality at the ground of subjectivity. Teaching today should mean above all approaching the Other, but also letting oneself be approached by the Other.

The second pedagogical consequence: we may argue that the students engaged in Socratic maieutic method are finally alone. Such students are not alone in a physical sense, but a Socratic teacher would say: "they have never learned anything from me" and "the many admirable truths they bring to birth have been discovered by themselves from within" (*Theaetetus,* 150b-d). The defense of individual freedom jeopardizes the possibility of a true growth.

Maieutics also has its own "usefulness" — even if the utilitarian lexicon does not fit the phenomenological paradigm — because certainly there is the idea of valuing and preserving what disciples have to say, i.e. a certain idea of anti-authoritarianism, but reading Lévinas and following phenomenology one understands that it is too unambitious as an answer to the question "what does it mean to teach," especially in front of educational emergencies that can be linked not only to the "fever of authenticity" but, also, to the relevant withdrawal into oneself and to the forms of exclusion and marginalization of the some of the "others" by many young people, as well as to the difficult dialogue between generations.

The most prevalent pedagogical exhortation from today's teachers seems to be "become what you *really and authentically are*." From Lévinas' philosophy of education, however, one cannot draw this kind of exhortation; if anything, one could draw from it the following: *become what you can be thanks to the Other, trying to respond to his/her call*.

With regard to this, we might stress that many of today's teachers are inspired by an idea of "being authentic and autonomous" in a way derived from Heidegger but, actually, the meaning of Heideggerian "authenticity" is trivialized, as sketched above. So, the Levinassian perspective on heteronomy is for our time counterintuitive.

Because Lévinas considers maieutics a crucial example of what he calls the philosophy of the "Same," alterity, asymmetry, and heteronomy represent Lévinas' efforts to move beyond any philosophical consideration of the Other which begins with or is located in the subject.

Counterintuitive is for our time also the Levinassian idea of a freedom that does not end and is not limited but *established* precisely by the appeal of the Other. Lévinas' critique of maieutics not only indicates that teaching does not consist in inculcating ideas in the listener — and the criticism of the transmissive model must not be trivialized — but also that teaching can be nor identified with allowing it to take shape and manifest itself to what is within each one, whatever that might be — as is precisely the case of Socratic maieutics.

If so, teaching would only be a revelatory event and not a generative one and, therefore, the relationship would no longer be at the heart of identity but, rather, an accessory (a conviction that, ultimately, is at the base of many educational "emergencies" of our "age of measurement," for example in all contractualism and neoliberalism positions: Biesta, 2009; Hyslop-Margison & Sear, 2010).

Moreover, if the teacher's task were only to bring out what is already present, in the mind or heart, of the student, *whatever that might be,* how can we avoid forms of selfishness, violence of the strongest on the weakest, and injustices? Socratic maieutics easily turns into the pedagogical model of skeptical relativism according to which *everything is equally fine* and, therefore, it becomes impossible to say what is good for the person (for each person precisely *as a person*) and what is not (D'Addelfio, 2022). Basically, no one is responsible for the asymmetry essential in a teaching relationship.

Phenomenology encompasses pedagogical attitudes against the different forms of positivistic reductionism, such as scepticism, psychologism and utilitarianism. What in particular Lévinas brings to the fore, by indicating what for him is the meaning of teaching, is then the very vision of subjectivity — even today, in late modernity, markedly modern and self-centered — to be rethought in the space of a new "ethics of subjectivity," as a condition of the very possibility of teaching and, mainly, of a real personal growth.

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