

## Ready When You Are

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# Ready When You Are

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## A Correspondence On Claire Elise Katz's *Levinas And The Crisis Of Humanism*

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Dear Claire,

Thanks to you, and to the editors at the *Journal of French And Francophone Philosophy*, for your willingness to engage in this dialogue about your wonderful book. It is certainly, within the context of a journal, an unconventional approach; I believe, however, that it may allow for a discussion that does justice to the full range of topics in your work.

For me, one of the most impressive aspects of *Levinas And The Crisis Of Humanism* is its ability to move simultaneously along two distinct vectors: (1) from close and rigorous textual exegesis of Levinas's work, through historical discussions concerning the philosophy of education, to concrete discussions having to do with the pedagogy of childhood education, and (2) from Levinas's essays on education, through his readings of the Talmud, to his philosophical works (i.e., *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*). I am not aware of any other text about Levinas that exhibits both the depth and breadth that *Levinas* does. For this, Levinas studies, Jewish philosophy, and the philosophy of education owe you a debt of gratitude.

In order to best give readers a sense of your book, I thought I might proceed with a long initial letter—this (I hope) will allow for a horizon to open up in which a number of themes and topics related to your book can be explored.

That your book is not primarily, or solely, a book on Levinas can be seen from your suspicion that the tradition of philosophy which views

education towards ethics along the lines of a rational process of developing inter-subjectivity and relationality (towards one's society, culture, and world) is radically inadequate:

In spite of claims to the contrary, it is not clear to me that reason will deliver the one correct answer. Through an appeal to economics, pragmatics, or familial obligations, reason could easily offer a justification for either claim: self-interest or care for the Other. The answer at which we arrive and the one we choose for ourselves is already conditioned by the things we value and how we understand ourselves as subjects who are rational and free. From a Levinasian standpoint, an individual will only part with her money in the service of others (without benefit to herself, e.g., a tax break) if she has first turned toward the Other—and reason does not necessarily motivate this turn to occur. (6)

To the extent that your claim indicates the limits of rationality from the standpoint of the ethical, it inhabits a respectable modern European philosophical lineage including Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Horkheimer, Adorno, Benjamin, Arendt, Foucault, and Derrida. You, however, proceed further. You are satisfied neither with a merely descriptive account of the limits of reason for ethics nor with a purely critical (or negative) account detailing reason's failures to deal with violence. Description and critique not only cannot bring us to ethics, but they can (in fact) be co-opted by the same impulses towards isolation, alienation, and indifference towards suffering that you see as pandemic in modern life. This is true even for discourses that attempt to provide positive, rights-based accounts of ethics: "The discussion of rights is already at a level of discourse that has [on Levinasian terms] forgotten the ethical, the face-to-face responsibility that I have for another" (6). Put simply, if one doesn't start with the ethical, there is no guarantee that one will reach it: "I disagree with the view that this intersubjectivity automatically yields the normative claim of responsibility. Levinas wants an ethical relation that is prior to my even having a world" (7).

This view places your work in the solid tradition of the best Levinas scholarship. Where (in my view) your work's originality shines through, however, is in the dialogue you set up between Levinas's educational writings, his Jewish texts, and his phenomenological studies. In fact, you go further: Levinas's writings resist (at least to a great extent) attempts to compartmentalize them into 'Jewish' and 'philosophical':

I maintain that not only is there a productive conversation to be had when these bodies of writings are engaged, but also that the Jewish writings are misnamed as a body of

writing. Many of the ideas Levinas expresses in these essays are written in a secular register—and that would make sense since many in his audience are non-religious Jews . . . I take the Jewish writings seriously. I do not think they are simply ancillary to his philosophical project; I believe instead that they lie at the center of and disclose what he believes most firmly. (17)

By juxtaposing the different aspects of Levinas's corpus, you bring to life a normative ethical theory (stemming from Jewish sources) that serves as a pedagogical model for the creation of ethical subjectivity. This, in no way, means that one has to be Jewish in order to undergo this educational experience—far from it. But that its sources come from the tradition of Hebraic humanism is also not inconsequential to your Levinasian project:

This book demonstrates that the function of Levinas's philosophical project is in part to persuade his readers, to persuade those outside the community of Israel that this subjectivity, this new humanism, is for everyone. [Levinas] believes that this humanism is Jewish in origin, that it is the unique gift to humanity for which Judaism was created, and he believes that Jewish education is the means by which this humanism is cultivated . . . Insofar as one adopts this view of subjectivity, that person participates in the universal dimension of Judaism. (16)

Here, then, are the two questions that kept arising for me as I read your book: (1) How is Levinas's conception of education *Jewish*? and (2) How is Levinas's conception of education *normative* (or how can sacrifice be taught)?

In asking the first question, I intend neither to essentialize Judaism nor to simply protect it from 'outside influences.' But, if the normative character of Levinasian subjectivity lies in its imperative to put the other before oneself—that the other is always already prior to one's own egoity—and that this should be the basis for a humanist education of children, my question is: how or why is this conception of education Jewish and not rather Christian? Put more baldly: it would seem that the priority of sacrifice defines the character of Christianity more than Judaism. Please notice what I am *not* saying: I do not believe that Judaism has no conception of ethics, of responsibility, of helping the poor, infirmed and needy. But I would hold that, for Judaism, these do not presuppose the priority of the other as the condition for one's selfhood. I also do not believe that Christianity, with its emphasis on sacrifice, emerged *ex nihilo*. Levinas is correct when (in "Being Jewish" [1947]) he claims that Christianity is, in large measure, also Judaism. However, there is a major difference between the conception of charity (or better, righteousness) in Judaism and its analogue in Christianity.

The Christian conception of charity comes from the Latin *caritas*, itself a translation (in the Vulgate) of the Greek *agape*, love of God. This love is to be understood in both the objective and subjective senses—i.e., it is the love that is appropriately given to God as well as the love that God gives to God’s creatures. Charity, thus understood, is not a virtue or state that arises in or from human nature. As fallen, humans depend on God’s grace through which they receive this virtue as a (in the words of Thomas) divine infusion. It is through God’s self-emptying movement in the form of Jesus’s life and sacrifice that humans come to learn (see? hear?) the sacrifice that properly characterizes charity. That sacrifice shows humans both that they are not autonomous agents (that they cannot achieve this virtue on their own) and that they ought to attempt an approximation of it in their own lives. Thus, the concept of *caritas* carries within itself a normative element that shows humans their natural limits as well as that which they ought to strive for (i.e., their ultimate Good).

By contrast, the Jewish conception of charity/righteousness is expressed in the Hebrew word, *tzedakah*. This is the feminine of the word *tzedek*, which means justice. But what, then, is *tzedakah*? Charity, in this sense, means helping the suffering of the other in the sense of *setting things right* (thus, righteousness). One helps the other because one’s own claim on life is no greater than the other’s—but also no less. And while (for Maimonides) one ought, within the context of charity, give the best one has, one ought not jeopardize one’s own situation in the act of giving. One thinks here of Hillel’s statement in *Pirke Avot* (which I here paraphrase): in a world bereft of humans, strive to be a human. And it is in this sense that Jews are called to “mend the world (*tikkun olam*).” This, however, also means that humans relate to each other as “another self” (this is as much a general Talmudic principle as it is a staple of Aristotle’s ethics—in this respect, Jerusalem and Athens are quite close). One helps the other because the other is like oneself. One sets a place for the stranger at the Passover *Seder* because Jews were strangers in Egypt. The examples flow—but you know all this.

To reiterate, my point is not that Levinas’s conception is deficient because it resonates with what I take to be a more Christian emphasis on sacrifice. Rather, I find the question of Judaism in Levinas to be so compelling (and maddening) that I want to provoke this discussion in you.

My question, in other words, is: how is the Levinasian conception of substitution (insofar as it appears, to me, to bear a kinship to sacrifice) Jewish rather than Christian? If egoity (and the laws regulating it) is precisely the problem which both inundates Western (Greco-philosophical) education and prevents ethical subjectivity from arising, wouldn’t the resources found in Christianity (and *its* interpretation of the Hebrew Bible) provide better materials for constructing a theory of oneself-for-the-other? At the institution where I work (College of the Holy Cross), one of the primary slogans used to express our mission is “Men and women for

others.” Would “Men and women mending the world” work as well? Doesn’t “mending” suggest restoring something back to its original state of health?

While I do not, as a Jew, feel at ease in raising this suggestion, my question compels me to do so: *Why isn't the exemplary image for Levinasian ethics the Crucifixion without the Resurrection?*

My second question is less “religious” insofar as it asks about the impulses of ethical action in *both* Judaism and Christianity. Whether one understands charity/righteousness in a Thomistic or a Maimonidean framework, it is characterized by a certain kind of excess. In the *Summa Theologica*, Thomas’ argues that infused virtue is precisely extra-normative insofar as it does not simply derive from God’s eternal law as it manifests itself to any rational being in nature—it remains solely in the province of God’s grace. At the very end of Maimonides’s *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides holds that the scriptural virtue-terms righteousness (*tzedakah*), judgment (*mishpat*) and lovingkindness (*hesed*) are to be understood as excessive insofar as they are not evaluated—as are other virtues—according to an Aristotelian conception of the mean of an action. If we, for the moment, take Thomas and Maimonides as representatives of their respective religions, we can say that the exemplary manifestation of ethical behavior – charity – involves excess. Put differently, ethics finds its culmination in behavior that isn’t simply rule-based or law-driven. If this is true, then how can it form the basis of a normative theory?

You are very clear and admirably honest on this issue (and for this, I will need to skip to a later section of your book): “My point here is not to say that I think Levinas is wrong in his promotion of a new subjectivity; in fact, I think he is right. Rather, my point is that Levinasian ethics is indeed difficult, maybe even impossible. My concern is that many commentators have made Levinas’s ethics seem easy or natural” (148). I very much share your concern over the “naturalization” (and, thus, banalization) of Levinasian ethics. My concern here is whether one can institutionalize—and thus normalize—something like sacrifice.

Beyond my concern over whether something like sacrifice can in fact be universalized, *I wonder whether it even makes sense to speak of sacrifice or substitution as a norm at all.*

To say that Judaism is a religion of law is not to say that it is a literal, carnal, religion; it is to acknowledge that (apart from its 19<sup>th</sup> century German re-invention as a “faith-tradition”) it is (in the words of Yeshayahu Leibowitz) a “prosaic” religion. It would be difficult to illustrate this in a way that did not romanticize the 613 commandments and prohibitions (many of which, in any case, were rendered historically obsolete, and many of which are not observed by non-Orthodox Jews like myself). Suffice it to say that, for me, Judaism’s strength is to provide a framework for daily life;

this is done through legal structure, interpretive commentary, and teaching on nearly every aspect of one's life. Even the "excessive virtues" mentioned by Maimonides are indexed to the more conventional moral virtues (and the Aristotelian mean which serves as their context of acquisition).

How does one institutionally learn how to place the other before oneself? If education is a process of inculcating norms, Levinasian ethics would call for the normalizing or universalizing of the substitutive/sacrificial impulse. Can sacrifice even be *thought* in normative terms? At stake is not so much whether a child holds the door for another child (that, in any case, is a practice long accepted and for reasons that are disturbingly compatible with status quo conventional perceptions about gender, etc.). Rather, what makes someone take their life into their own hands for reasons of saving others? Again, the appropriate image for this kind of sacrifice is one that, as I mentioned above, seems to me neither normal nor Jewish.

I hope that my all too broad characterizations of your Introduction, Levinas, Judaism, and Christianity have not missed the essential thrust of your project (one with which, I hope you see, I am very sympathetic). If interpretation weren't in any sense violent, it would be simple recognition of the same. That said, I hope the violence I may have done here is not of the ir-responsible kind.

I await your thoughts.

Jeff

Dear Jeff,

Thank you for these very detailed, thoughtful, and provocative comments. I fear that my response will not be as long or detailed as you might hope, simply because there might be an answer that is not as complex as one might imagine. Both questions are connected by a view that what Levinas is proposing might actually be more Christian than Jewish. So in the first question you ask why Jewish education is Jewish and then in the case of the second question you ask why not the Crucifixion (without the resurrection of course). I will try to answer them separately, but I can see how addressing them might blur my response between the two.

We have to remember that Levinas uses the term Jewish to refer to a particular ethical spirit, not necessarily the particular mode of religious practice that would include following the 613 commandments. Thus, by expanding the definition—or if you will, secularizing it—he opens this particular question—why is it Jewish?

I believe it is Jewish—on multiple levels—for several reasons. First, and foremost, his model of education is in fact specifically tied to the education

one receives in a Jewish day school. So on a basic level—the students are learning through the Jewish sacred texts; they are learning Hebrew; they are learning Jewish law, they are learning to read Jewishly, meaning Midrashically. But on a different level, Levinas believes that this education also orients them Jewishly by raising them to be responsible for the other. He argues that this is the fundamental and sustained message of the stories in the Hebrew Bible. It is the one non-negotiable, if you will. The one message that Midrash does not undo. Can other religions, including and maybe even especially Christianity, teach in this way or emphasize this message? Sure, but then one might say they are simply teaching Judaism or teaching a message that is fundamentally, or originally Jewish. It is not that it is only Jewish that makes it Jewish—it is that it was Jewish first.

The problem I encountered in writing this book was precisely the way in which Levinas outlines this Jewish education such that I had great difficulty thinking about how a comparable non-religious, non-Jewish education would look. There is a “warrant” within the Jewish community, assuming one has agreed to send his/her child to Jewish day school, that allows the school to teach in a particular kind of way—to use religious language, for example. What would warrant that in the public schools? How would one talk about responsibility for the other? How would we teach reading in a way that emphasizes Midrash? And could we teach in such a way that the material had a direct bearing on the community in which those learners belong—as we might see within the Jewish day school and the Jewish community?

With regard to the second question—why not the Crucifixion? Why the Crucifixion? A sacrifice for no one in particular? For the sins of man? This seems so far from Judaism—except for maybe the horrible jokes told about Jewish mothers! I don’t believe that Levinas is advocating for sacrifice. I do however believe he is advocating for the development of a self that will be open to the interruption by the other. I also believe that he believes that being interrupted should entail doing something—otherwise he is simply describing the world we already inhabit—a world where we encounter the suffering of the other and repeatedly do nothing about it. It is not clear why he would spill so much ink describing the obvious failure of Enlightenment ethics and humanism that has become increasingly narcissistic and less about a responsibility for others. The Crucifixion is about self-sacrifice for individual salvation. This is not Levinas’s, nor would I say Judaism’s, concern. He is not interested in advocating martyrdom. Rather, he sees sacrifice—not the sacrifice of the Other but rather a self-sacrifice as the *possibility* of ethics. It is the extreme—it is held out as a liminal case that simply exposes that ethics is real.

Dear Claire,

As I promised, I will keep this response far shorter than my initial one. There's a wonderful irony about two Jews discussing and debating the meaning of the Crucifixion that I can't let go without comment. Perhaps this has something to do with the secularized form of Rabbinic/Midrashic exegesis about which you write. Perhaps this also is an example of how this mode of exegesis can occur even in an "other" context aside from Jewish day school. Given his essays dealing with Christianity, Levinas (I imagine) could only have welcomed this.

Nonetheless, I do want to persist: I think that the main feature of the image of the Crucifixion *sans* resurrection is precisely its illustration of sacrifice for the other. The resurrection is the image *par excellence* of the rewards of individual salvation (a concept foreign to traditional Judaism as well as to Levinas). This is, clearly, a religious image—but one that seems to provide the normative thrust which you seek in your own construal of Levinasian ethical subjectivity. Would such sacrifice be "for the sins of man"? A lot depends upon what we mean by "sin" and "man."

The former couldn't simply be understood in a doctrinal context; but I wonder if the problem of individualism (in modernity) isn't itself a secularized version of the egoism that comes to sight in (and, I would argue, dominates) the traditional Christian discourse of Original Sin. What I would like to draw attention to is that such a condition (doctrinally or secularly construed) is impervious to even the best meaning critical resources. I think you give a very interesting example of the *difference between* (1) the simple critique of blind, indifferent individualism (and its potentially horrific consequences) and (2) what it means to go further than (or anterior to?) such critique:

Although the critical thinking that Adorno advocates may help someone resist authoritarian thinking, critical thinking alone will not help someone become a better person who resists authoritarian rule. Levinas focuses his attention on cultivating a subjectivity that will not only prevent the conditions that create a murderous self in the first place but who will also respond accordingly if such conditions are created. Adorno's prescription, though it is necessary, is not sufficient. (105)

Adorno understands the critical moment to be a secularized version of the Jewish ban on divine representation as it gets applied to the realm of ethics and politics. It cannot, in principle, cultivate a different subjectivity because (paraphrasing his argument in *Negative Dialectics*) it was precisely the attempt to do so that led to the horrors of Auschwitz. Put differently, the 20<sup>th</sup> century was filled with sacrifice—of the *idolatrous* kind. If Levinas is calling for an understanding of selfhood in which one's subjectivity comes to

light as always already standing accused before the other, I can't think of a better image than the Crucifixion. I am, however, open to suggestions.

As for "man," it would certainly be a mistake to hold that Levinas understands ethics as either an empirical-historical or Kantian-style transcendental structure of human being. But is it false to claim that his ethical project has universal scope (albeit emerging from a particular set of texts and approaches)? I think that the entire problematic of alterity hangs on this question. On the one hand, it becomes difficult to even articulate a discourse of the other "that isn't co-opted by the same" if the answer is 'yes'. If the answer is 'no', what are we to make of Levinas's dedication of *Otherwise Than Being*: "To the memory of those who were closest among the six million assassinated by the National Socialists, and of the millions on millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man, the same anti-semitism"? Levinas may be rejecting modern Western humanism but, as you show in your last chapter "Humanism Found", he doesn't reject humanism *tout court*. (In fact, such humanism couldn't rest content with the gender-bias in the word "man") I may be reading it too literally, but the constellation of terms used in the dedication—"confession," "same," "all nations"—suggests a determinate image (rather than a ban on images).

In fact, there can't be a simple 'yes' or 'no' to the question of alterity with respect to universality. I take it that, for Levinas, 'universality' means something like 'universal substitution,'— we, all of us, are already responsible for the other (as others are responsible for "other" others). In this way, Levinas is able to fuse (or, mediate?) universality and singularity without disturbing either. We, all of us, are singular and—as singular—are concretely and determinately responsible for the other (in the other's singularity). I *promise* that this will be the last time I harp on this, but what image does justice to the example of the single individual sacrificing *for all* the others?

The Crucifixion is not without its own origins in the Hebrew Bible—one thinks, first off of Abraham and Isaac. I mention this only to turn to your second point—that the ethical stance constitutive of Levinas "was Jewish first." So my next question has to do with the claim of "firstness" and whether (or how) it fits with Levinas' project.

As you describe it, Levinas's ethical project is not concerned simply with intersubjectivity. This is because the origin of subjectivity (in the relation to the other) is irreducible to subjective consciousness (what Adorno calls "identity thinking"). For this reason, one never gets "behind" subjectivity by remaining with subjectivity. Another way to say this might be that Levinas's ethical project cannot be *grounded in* empirical psychology, politics, sociology, or history. But there's the rub: if history cannot be the grounds for a Levinasian ethics of substitution, how could it (or why ought

it) matter to Levinas that the ethical project is/was Jewish first? Differently put, substitution is not grounded in a positive principle—it is *an-archic*. How can the *firstness* of Judaism be reconciled with the *an-archy* of substitution? If (1) Judaism is not significant as the historical origin of ethics, and if (2) substitution can be described in any number of manners, then what is the import and status of Judaism for Levinas's ethics?

Your responses to these will help me better inquire into the rich discussions of Midrash and childhood education that form such a large part of your book.

Hi, Jeff (forgive the informality...)

You pose an interesting and difficult question. But, I think the difficulty might lie in the way that you frame this question: "what image does justice to the example of the single individual sacrificing *for* all the others?" Levinas is not concerned with an individual sacrificing his or her life in the abstract. Nor is he concerned with an individual sacrificing his/her life for all others, as we see in the Crucifixion. Rather, staying with the ethical relation, the face to face is about the self's responsibility to an individual other. My point in talking about subjectivity in the way that I do is to emphasize that he could not have spilt this much ink simply to say, yes, I was interrupted by the other but basically "fuck you, I don't feel like responding to you." That has been the ugly history that led to the Shoah. Rather, I argue that his view of subjectivity, the one that describes the face of the other as an interruption, includes a response to that face—a positive response. That is, it is not simply a negative ethics—one shalt not harm the other, one shalt not murder, but not murdering entails feeding the other. He has a more robust view of what it means to respond, and yes, it might mean resisting the Nazi.

I think Levinas's ethics reveals that this is not "natural." We are not born able to do this. This is why he turns to Jewish education. Levinas is working against the *conatus essendi*, the drive to persevere or survive as the most dominant force in our lives. He believes that the possibility that one might sacrifice one's life for another works against the *conatus essendi*. While it is the case that many argue that the sacrifice of one's life for a child might simply be another evolutionary trait, that it's the survival of one's genes, not necessarily one's own body that is at work, this will not explain why one would sacrifice one's life for an unrelated person. Moreover, that there might be an originary evolutionary explanation at work does not undermine the possibility of a moral or ethical motivation also. The need for education then goes against the view that we are beings who are only driven by a need to survive and would do anything to persist.

So, I understand why you move to the Crucifixion as the image. But neither Levinas nor I are advocating that people sacrifice their lives for the Other. Indeed, he is clear about this point when he discusses the issue of maternity and women dying in childbirth. He does not advocate that women sacrifice their lives, but there is the reality that women do take this risk each time they are pregnant. So he is not suggesting that women should die in childbirth. Nor is he suggesting that anyone should sacrifice his/her life for another. Rather, that this is possible, that we take these risks, that people on occasion do indeed sacrifice their lives for another, makes possible the ethical and thus provides a normative basis for being ethical—putting another before ourselves, though, circling back around, he does not prescribe this kind of sacrifice. It is worth noting that the command to be fruitful and multiply is a commandment only for men. The rabbis did not believe it was ethical to command women to become pregnant knowing that pregnancy and childbirth carries with it a risk of life.

It is an extreme; it betrays the nihilist position. But he does not advocate this as a normative view. But insofar as he describes the ethical relation as one of interruption and insofar as that interruption entails a response, then something positive—a positive action—must be part of this.

Dear Claire,

For your Levinas, the question of education in a Jewish mode seems (to me) to operate between two poles. First, there is the attitudinal pole (as exemplified in Jewish prayer): “one of the most interesting parts of Jewish prayer is the emphasis on ‘being ready’ or readying oneself. That is, there are prayers or blessings that are said simply to ready oneself for saying the central prayers. It is impossible to ignore the repeated use of *hineni*, ‘Here I am,’ in the Hebrew Bible—most notably uttered by Noah and Abraham in order to signal their readiness to serve. Jewish prayer reflects an instruction in readiness.” (155) Insofar as this readiness is to be thought as an openness to the other, to a placing the other before oneself, to the “after you” about which Levinas speaks in *Otherwise Than Being*, one might employ the phrase “ready when you are” to express this thought. The sense of this phrase would be the exact opposite of its conventional meaning (i.e., I’ll be ready after you’ve already acted). Instead, it suggests my readiness as a response to the prior occurrence of others.

Second, there is the practical pole (as exemplified in Midrashic/\exegesis): “The great books of Judaism do not cleanse human life of the complexities that comprise human relations. The stories and the commentaries demand rigor and attentiveness to them. They will not dispense answers easily or simply. But they will offer us guidance if we pay close attention, and indeed our job is to figure out how these stories of the past can teach us something about our present-day situation . . . We must,

therefore, return to Rabbinic exegesis, which made the texts speak . . . In this return, the text becomes a teacher, or at the very least, a source of teaching rather than a mere object of study. To see the text in this way is to practice Judaism in its original spirit" (113). Put differently, along with readiness, the openness to the differences in meaning and connotation that characterize Rabbinic exegesis—the openness to the “saying” of the text—can help instruct us as to the difference of (and respect owed to) the “saying” of others.

In adopting a position within these two poles (as I understand you) we are better able to both teach and learn in a manner that—heeding Levinas’s warnings about the status quo of Enlightenment individualism—amounts to an actualization of the possibility for a different manner of living. Education, therefore, “does not simply make the new possible, but is itself the emergence of the new” (167).

Again, I want to acknowledge the bold honesty of your text (faithful, let it be said in passing, to the prohibition on predicting the messianic age) in noting your uncertainty about the possibility of whether Levinas’s conception of education could serve as the opening for a new kind of subjectivity. That said, it seems to me that Levinas’s conception of subjectivity—as based on readiness for service and openness to the saying of others—presupposes either (1) an *already constituted* Enlightenment subjectivity which would be need to be interrupted or (2) a ‘neutral’ self that could, at an appropriately young age, be impressed and informed by attitudes and practices.

I wonder, however, whether there are additional complications. It may be that contemporary diagnostic models dealing with the challenges endured through childhood (e.g., Asperger’s, ADD) are themselves a product of the Enlightenment individualist subjectivity that you and Levinas wish to call into question. That said, does Levinas’s conception of Jewish education—as it deals with the teaching of empathy, or, *hinenei*—take into account children who experience large deficits, or large influxes, of affect? This is by no means to suggest that such children are unable to learn empathy; it is simply to wonder how, more precisely, Levinasian education can accommodate wide variation in the strengths (and challenges) of children. Perhaps my phrasing just now is errant insofar as Levinas does not intend his conception to be a ‘plan’—perhaps, the idea of a plan is itself also a product of Enlightenment individualism. If, then, every child is a singular other, how does teaching and learning occur?

At stake in this is nothing less than how Levinasian education might occur. That my formulation of the question is lacking ought not (I hope) take away from the exigency of the issue.

Hi Jeff,

First thanks again for these thoughtful questions. I do not know if I can answer them adequately—or if I have answered adequately the others you have posed previously. But let me see what I can do to move the conversation forward. The question you pose about the Enlightenment subject reminds me of a general problem in philosophy: the problem—or paradox—of origins. We see this problem in Plato's *Republic* when the children are rounded up and the educational process is to begin—Who are the teachers? Who has the wisdom to identify the would-be future guardians? It appears again in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*—Who is the *phronemos*? Who can habituate the children? And again in Rousseau's *Emile* with the magical tutor.

Levinas is arguing for an interrupted Enlightenment subject. But I do not think that precludes the possibility that he is also arguing to return to, or reclaim, a model of education that might precede the Enlightenment both temporally (literally with regard to years) and “ontologically.” That is, he cannot dispense with the Enlightenment subject—it is the subjectivity he needs to make political decisions, to deliberate. Nor does he want a subjectivity that is merely interrupted. Otherwise, even the Enlightenment subject can act in his/her own self-interest—with justification—or simply say, “you are not of my concern.” Interruption does not guarantee a response to the other. His phrase that one should not go before God—or the other—with empty hands in his essay on Buber is telling. If being interrupted can still allow us to go on our way and not pay any mind to the other, have we advanced? Is his ethical project strictly phenomenological in the sense of describing the interruption and then merely hoping that we might do something for the other rather than not? That seems like a lot of ink to spill for mere hope. So I do not think he is suggesting that we return to a *time* before the Enlightenment. But I do think he believes that what might have given the Enlightenment subject more moral force has been erased and it requires a new way of educating, a new way of subjectivity developing for this response to the other to take shape.

The second point you raise is complicated, and I do not know whether I can answer it. I tried to address something similar—a subjectivity that might fall outside of Levinas's ethical project—in my essay “East of Eden.” I do not know whether this educational project can accommodate all children—or if it should. I do think though that an educational process that assumes egoism at the center will not help us prevent, resolve, or address the violence that concerns him.

So finally—just to circle back to one of the central themes of the book, I maintain that learning is best done socially, not individually. And this has implications forwards and backwards. That is to say that our view of subjectivity—as autonomous, self-sufficient, having “sprung up from the

ground like mushrooms” (to quote Hobbes)—has implications for how we organize schools and emphasize the best way to learn. In turn, this kind of educational model perpetuates the mythology that we are autonomous, self-sufficient, and so forth. Adorno’s radio broadcast, “Education After Auschwitz,” claims that the premier demand upon all education is that Auschwitz never happen again. I agree with that statement, though I do not think that the model Adorno sketches will arrive at the place he wants. However, in a commentary on another of Adorno’s radio broadcasts—one that is more explicitly a dialogue between Adorno and his friend Hellmut Becker—Robert French and Jem Thomas offer an interesting perspective on what Adorno might have had in mind. They argue that philosophy itself has a history of emphasizing the significant role of friendship, explicitly and implicitly, in the activity of philosophy. The authors indicate that this particular point is evident not only in Adorno’s conversation with Becker, which allows them both to be playful, spontaneous, and honest, but also in the Frankfurt School which was founded not only on friendship but also a shared experience, traumatic as that experience was. My discussion of the Talmudic approach to learning, which models the hermeneutic dimension of reading, complements this point. It takes this point further by claiming that this very mode of learning cultivates not only the resistance to authoritarian thinking that occupies much of Adorno’s own thought but also the cultivation of a responsible subject who *will* respond to the injustice—not simply be able to identify it as such. It is this kind of subjectivity that I believe Levinas describes—not the one who is only interrupted but also the one who responds.