



# LEVINAS, SUBJECTIVITY, EDUCATION

Towards an Ethics of Radical Responsibility

*Anna Strhan*

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## Levinas, Subjectivity, Education

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# **Levinas, Subjectivity, Education**

*Towards an Ethics of Radical  
Responsibility*

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**Anna Strhan**

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# Contents

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Preface	vi
Acknowledgements	viii
List of Abbreviations	x
Introduction	1
<b>PART I Levinas's Teaching</b>	<b>17</b>
1 Teaching, Subjectivity and Language in <i>Totality and Infinity</i>	19
2 The Infinite Responsibility of the Ethical Subject in <i>Otherwise than Being</i>	44
<b>PART II Towards an Education Otherwise</b>	<b>71</b>
3 Heteronomy, Autonomy and the Aims of Education	73
4 Grace, Truth and Economies of Education	95
<b>PART III 'Concrete Problems with Spiritual Repercussions'</b>	<b>119</b>
5 Towards a Religious Education Otherwise	121
6 Dialogue, Proximity and the Possibility of Community	141
7 Political Disappointment, Hope and the Anarchic Ethical Subject	175
Coda	199
Bibliography	204
Index	212

# Preface

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Over the past two decades the importance of the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas for educational and social research has come to be recognized more widely. His name has become associated with the recent emphasis on intersubjectivity and multiculturalism, and to some extent with the understanding of the teacher-student relationship at the heart of education itself. In all of these there has been a new affirmation of themes of alterity, of the relation to the other. But Levinas is in more than one sense still late on this scene: he is in some degree a late starter, much of his major work not being written until the later decades of a long life; and it is the name of Jacques Derrida, some quarter of a century younger and associated with these same themes, that is the more familiar. There is some irony in this, especially to the extent that Derrida's work is scarcely imaginable without the background influence of Levinas.

Yet, notwithstanding the appearance of such valuable contributions to the field as Sharon Todd's *Learning from the Other Levinas, Psychoanalysis, and Ethical Possibilities in Education* (2003, SUNY) and Denise Egéa-Kuehne's collection *Levinas and Education: At the Intersection of Faith and Reason* (2008, Taylor and Francis), the work of Levinas, as of Derrida also, tends to be referred to rather than read, and there is more than a little distortion of his central ideas. Thus, for example, the idea of the relation to the other has been received in a context where there is often a preoccupation with multiculturalism. The now familiar phrase 'radical alterity' and the (capitalized) 'Other' owe something not exactly to the legacy of Levinas but to English translations of signal terms in his texts, and they connote ideas that have now been appropriated to different concerns – say, to a politics of recognition. Such familiarization, then, has become an obstacle. The absolute difference that, on Levinas's account, structures human relationships, and *a fortiori* everything else, is not to be understood in terms of the registering of the distinctive features or characteristics of the other. The familiar echo of this central Levinasian idea is then a distortion, whose relatively sonorous reverberations themselves obscure his concerns: by turning attention towards differences between cultures, which take the form of particular characteristics, they obscure the absolute and structurally primordial nature of the relation to the other human being. Their adoption and adaptation of this language makes it all the more difficult to understand the nature and profundity of Levinas's insight – which remains late and still to be received.

If, in the present text, *Levinas, Subjectivity, Education: Towards an Ethics of Radical Responsibility*, Anna Strhan had done nothing more than to overcome such obstacles, that would be reason enough to welcome its publication. But in fact she has done so much more. While it is beyond the scope of a brief preface to register adequately the singularity of her achievement, let me highlight for the reader some of the book's most salient features.



Here, then, one finds, in Part I, an exposition, structured around Levinas's two masterworks, of the multiple perspectives through which he reveals the primordial relation to the other as involving a non-reciprocal responsibility. In my relation to the other, I am addressed, and this is the basis for everything else. These are weighty matters, no doubt. But Strhan's writing is sensitive to Levinas's avoidance of the intellectualizing of this as a theme: it is to be revealed instead through attentiveness to everyday language, to the affective interruptions to which the subject is prone, and with intersubjectivity realized not in abstract terms but rather as lived immediacy. In the light of this, and early in the book, the elegant clarity of her writing establishes a style that is at once moving and restrained, and entirely free from that modishness that often hampers exegeses of poststructuralist thought. It does this in part through a phenomenological attentiveness in which the vivid exploration of examples plays an important role.

In Part II, there is a turn more directly to education. This enables Strhan not only to elaborate on the manner in which the very idea of teaching is built into the primordial relation to the other, hence casting light retrospectively on the educational importance of Part I: it also demonstrates the cogency of Levinas's position in relation to more specific ideas that are currently of great prominence in education. In this the extended discussion of autonomy is of particular pertinence. Far from showing Levinas to be simply 'against' the idea, Strhan's account reveals autonomy's internal relation to heteronomy, a visceral exposure to the other on which my autonomy depends. Hence, this more searching examination of the nature of subjectivity lays the way for an affirmation of autonomy that is ultimately more robust.

The focus becomes more precise in Part III, which includes an extended discussion of the specific place of religious education in the curriculum. The discussion is clearly located within an appreciation of the pressures and the possibilities of culturally diverse societies, and, while it details some of the controversies that currently beset religious education in particular policy contexts, especially in the UK, it moves towards a more far-reaching account of the significance of religion in the understanding of education. This is scarcely separable from notions of community, citizenship and the political, and it is indeed in relation to these themes that the argument subsequently unfolds.

The book succeeds not only in explaining but also in demonstrating the extent to which teachers and students are always already ethical and political subjects. It shows how our sense of our subjectivity as beginning in responsibility deepens the more we answer to it. It is through this that education and indeed knowledge and truth themselves are possible. The patent sincerity of the writing, the quality of its address to the reader, should leave no one in doubt that this is much more than a scholarly exercise. Anna Strhan has brought to this study practical experience as a teacher of religious education, scholarship of remarkable depth and breadth, and a commitment to the educative possibilities of Levinas's philosophy that will inspire some and challenge others, but that should provoke all to think more. The series is grateful to her for contributing this outstanding volume.

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The themes of 'grace' and 'teaching' are central ideas in this book. As I reflect on those who have taught me many things in many ways as I wrote this text, I feel extremely grateful for all the encounters and conversations, with colleagues, friends, students and others, that have helped shape the development of this work. The Philosophy of Education section of the Institute of Education provided a welcoming and stimulating environment to pursue this research, in particular, the opportunity for ongoing discussions offered by the weekly departmental research seminar. My supervisor, Paul Standish, contributed incalculably to the completion of this book. I thank him for his intellectual and personal generosity, friendship, and the care and attention he has consistently shown in helping me to articulate and re-articulate my readings of Levinas within education. I am grateful to those who have read and commented on one or more chapters in earlier forms for their careful readings and comments, including Jan Derry, Michael Bonnett, Judith Suissa and Terence McLaughlin. Sharon Todd and Howard Caygill examined my doctoral thesis, and I am especially thankful for the opportunity of engaging with their stimulating questions, comments and interpretations of my reading of Levinas.

Portions of this book have been presented in draft form at various seminars, colloquia and conferences, and I am fortunate to have had the opportunity to share my work in this way. I am particularly grateful for engaging discussions with members of the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain, the University of Kyoto, K. U. Leuven and the Centre for Theology, Religions and Culture at King's College, London. The Religious Studies department of the school where I was teaching for much of the writing of this book was supportive and encouraging throughout, and my students kept my research grounded in the everyday concrete demands I have sought to address. My parents, Petra and Lou Strhan, and my grandmother Lorna Houseman, have, from the very beginning, always been interested in and enthusiastic about my ongoing studies, and I feel very fortunate for that. Martin Block has given me unfailing encouragement, comfort and support throughout: I have more reasons for thanking him for the ways he has contributed to this book than I can possibly enumerate.

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# List of Abbreviations

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## Works by Levinas

BV	Beyond the Verse
BW	Basic Philosophical Writings
CP	Collected Philosophical Papers
DEH	Discovering Existence with Husserl
DF	Difficult Freedom
EE	Existence and Existents
GDT	God, Death, and Time
GM	Of God Who Comes To Mind
LR	The Levinas Reader
OB	Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence
OE	On Escape
OS	Outside the Subject
RB	Is It Righteous To Be?
RPH	Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism
THP	The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology
TI	Totality and Infinity
TN	In the Time of Nations
TR	Nine Talmudic Readings

## Works by Badiou

BE	Being and Event
E	Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil
HI	Handbook of Inaesthetics
M	Metapolitics
SP	Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism

# Introduction

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*Here you have, in administrative and pedagogical problems, invitations to a deepening, to a becoming conscience, that is, to Scripture.*

(RB, p. 39)

On 6 January 2006, the French newspaper *Le Monde*, responding to the centennial celebrations of Emmanuel Levinas's birth, published an article entitled, 'Generation Levinas?' (Lévy, 2006). This question, as Seán Hand notes in his introduction to Levinas's work, together with the astonishing thirty-two conferences honouring his work held in five continents that year, confirms the explosion of interest in Levinas (Hand, 2009, p. 109). Having risen from relative obscurity to being widely seen as a key figure in an important shift in the trajectory of Western philosophy, the influence of the Lithuanian-born philosopher has now extended far beyond professional philosophy to permeate literary, legal and critical theory, theology, religious studies, aesthetics, sociology, anthropology, psychoanalysis and human rights theory. The continuing spread of that influence testifies to the truth of Jacques Derrida's claim, made at Levinas's funeral, that the work of Levinas is 'so large one can no longer glimpse its edges' (Derrida, 1999, p. 3). In that speech, Derrida stated that it was impossible – and he would not even try – 'to measure in a few words the œuvre of Emmanuel Levinas', and he talked of the importance of learning from Levinas in this task:

One would have to begin by learning once again from him and from *Totality and Infinity*, for example, how to think what an 'œuvre' or 'work' – as well as fecundity – might be. One can predict with confidence that centuries of readings will set this as their task. We already see innumerable signs, well beyond France and Europe... that the reverberations of this thought will have changed the course of philosophical reflection in our time, and of our reflection *on* philosophy,

## 2 *Levinas, Subjectivity, Education*

on what orders it according to ethics, according to another thought of ethics, responsibility, justice, the State, etc., according to another thought of the other, a thought that is newer than so many novelties because it is ordered according to the absolute anteriority of the face of the Other.

Yes, ethics before and beyond ontology (Derrida, 1999, pp. 3–4).

As the influence of Levinas's work extends through an increasing variety of disciplines, it is not surprising that over the last decade, we have seen a number of studies of Levinas in relation to education (e.g. Todd, 2003a; Biesta, 2006; Egéa-Kuehne, 2008). It is fair to say, however, that many educational theorists are suspicious that this interest in Levinas is attributable to his being currently in vogue, and that present prominence of his work may be a passing trend. The obsessive quality of his uncompromising writing remains opaque, or at least counter-intuitive, to many working within education. Yet the concerns of Levinas's philosophy are of obvious relevance for how we think about education on all levels. In her introduction to *Levinas and Education*, Denise Egéa-Kuehne emphasizes that his central concepts of ethics, justice, consciousness, responsibility and conscience, developed through the encounter with the other and intersubjective relation are 'notions which rest at the very heart of education' (Egéa-Kuehne, 2008, p. 1).

The central concern of this book is to think through how Levinas's theories of subjectivity and teaching lead us to reconsider the very nature of education, what and who education is for, and how his thinking disturbs the intellectual closure represented by some dominant frameworks of educational discourse and practice, leading to a radical understanding of ethical and political responsibility. Before turning to this, let me first outline the historical context of Levinas's philosophy and how that related to his own work within education.

### **LEVINAS: PHILOSOPHER, TEACHER, PROPHET**

It was as if, to use the language of tourists, I went to see Husserl and I found Heidegger. Of course, I will never forget Heidegger's relation to Hitler. Even if this relation was only of a very short duration, it will be forever. But the works of Heidegger, the way in which he practised phenomenology in *Being and Time* – I knew immediately that this was one of the greatest philosophers in history. (RB, p. 32)

It was while studying at Strasbourg that Levinas read Husserl's *Logical Investigations* for the first time, an experience that gave him the sense of 'gaining access not to yet another speculative construction, but to a new possibility of thinking, to a new possibility of moving from one idea to another, different from deduction, induction, and dialectic, a new way of unfolding "concepts"' (p. 31).<sup>1</sup> Inspired by this sense of a new direction in philosophy, Levinas went to Freiburg to study with Husserl himself in 1928–29, writing his thesis on Husserl's theory of intuition. Yet the approach he had discovered in Husserl was, as he put it,

‘continued and transfigured by Heidegger’ (p. 32). While Levinas was credited with introducing Husserlian phenomenology into France through his doctoral thesis and translation of *Cartesian Meditations*, he came to critique his former teacher from a ‘historical’ perspective, informed by his engagement with Heidegger, for excessive theoreticism and ‘overlooking the existential density and historical embeddedness of lived experience’ (Critchley, 2002, p. 7). Much inspired by Heidegger, Levinas describes his approach, towards the end of *Theory of Intuition in Husserl’s Phenomenology*, as ‘post-Husserlian’ (THP, p. 130). In these early phenomenological writings, we can also see the beginnings of Levinas’s own distinctive later position, when he states that the Husserlian reduction to an *ego* ‘can only be a first step towards phenomenology. We must also discover “others” and the intersubjective world’ (p. 150). Yet in *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas will still describe his work as ‘in the spirit of Husserlian philosophy’, an approach he explains as follows:

Our presentation of notions proceeds neither by their logical decomposition, nor by their dialectical description. It remains faithful to intentional analysis, insofar as it signifies the locating of notions in the horizon of their appearing, a horizon unrecognized, forgotten or displaced in the exhibition of an object, in its notion, in the look absorbed by the notion alone. (OB, p. 183)

Therefore, while influenced by Heidegger’s emphasis that phenomenological analysis should begin in the facticity of the human in the everyday situation, Levinas nevertheless retained in his later writings a sense of his work’s debt to Husserl, albeit moving away from his former teacher to the extent that it can be questioned whether his work can really be seen as remaining within phenomenology. If the intentionality thesis, which sees every mental phenomenon as directed towards its object, is axiomatic within phenomenology, then, as Simon Critchley suggests, ‘Levinas’s big idea about the relation to the other person is not phenomenological, because the other is not given as a matter for thought or reflection... Levinas maintains a methodological but not a substantive commitment to Husserlian phenomenology’ (Critchley, 2002, p. 8).

This Husserlian phenomenological method was, Levinas argued, transformed by Heidegger. It was, he later stated, the brilliance of Heidegger’s application of the phenomenological approach, rather than ‘the last speculative consequences of his project’ that remained with him (RB, p. 33). Levinas followed Heidegger in rejecting Husserl as too theoretical, too removed from the everyday, stating:

Husserl conceives philosophy as a universally valid science in the manner of geometry and the sciences of nature, as a science which is developed through the efforts of generations of scientists, each continuing the work of the others... *In this conception, philosophy seems as independent of the historical situation of man as any theory that tries to consider everything sub specie aeternitatis...* [The historical] structure of consciousness, which occupies a very important place in the thought of someone like Heidegger... has not been studied by