Teaching, Subjectivity and Language in *Totality and Infinity*

Teaching is not reducible to maieutics; it comes from the exterior and brings me more than I contain.

*(TI, p. 51)*

Let us begin this reading of the nature of education in Levinas’s philosophy with the question of language, for Levinas claims that it is through language, or more specifically, through discourse, that my being is produced. He writes: ‘My being is produced in producing itself before the others in discourse; it is what it reveals of itself to the others, but while participating in, attending its revelation’ *(TI, p. 253).* If this is true, what does it mean for our understandings of discourse in education and the nature of education itself? The idea that discourse is fundamental to the trajectory of the individual’s ‘becoming’, and that this is in some sense basic to what education is, appears relatively uncontroversial. Dewey writes: ‘All communication (and hence all genuine social life) is educative. To be a recipient of a communication is to have an enlarged and changed experience’ (Dewey, 1966, p. 5). Martin Buber writes: ‘The relation in education is one of pure dialogue’ (Buber, 2002, p. 116). In this chapter, we will examine Levinas’s presentation of discourse as teaching in *Totality and Infinity*, in which subjectivity is produced through the revealing of myself to others in discourse.

My focus is *Totality and Infinity* because it is here that we find Levinas’s clearest and most distinctive discussion of the nature of teaching. To say that the discussion is ‘clear’ is misleading, however. The language of *Totality and Infinity* is strange, enigmatic, attempting to draw attention to the impossibility of capturing the relation with the Other1 in language. Colin Davis describes how the difficulty of Levinas’s writing should be understood in relation to Levinas’s awareness of the pitfalls of overcoming ontology, his attempt to become ‘Abraham boldly stepping out into the unknown rather than Ulysses seeking only what he had left behind’

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This difficulty of Totality and Infinity is, as Hand argues, an implicit element of Levinas’s whole project, which aims to expose the ways in which the history of Western philosophy, down to the very language and methods it has employed, has involved a totalizing suppression of the Other:

These… claims are put forward in an almost prophetic or messianic way, rather than as stages in a logical argument. But Levinas embraces such an approach, as the way to break free from the process of offering philosophical evidence, and therefore to get back to an original relation with being that for him exists before and beyond totality and history. The danger is that such an approach, relying on terms like transcendence, infinity and revelation, could be dismissed as a purely spiritual rather than rational vision. Again, Levinas recognizes this possibility, but turns the tables by suggesting that the systems of totalization given by Western philosophy and history have merely tried and failed to contain the idea of infinity. (Hand, 2009, p. 37)

Despite this difficulty of reading and writing about Levinas, the challenge Totality and Infinity presents to preconceptions about the nature of language and knowledge are forcefully conveyed. Let us examine how Levinas presents teaching as the Other’s offering of the world to me through speech, in contrast with more maieutic understandings of teaching and how this challenges other conceptions of language in education.

Teaching is, for Levinas, the space of encounter with the Other in which subjectivity is revealed as ethical. In teaching, subjectivity is constituted through Desire and goodness, both encountered through language. What does this mean? ‘Desire’ for Levinas means desire for the absolutely Other, a metaphysical desire that can never be satisfied, as opposed to the kinds of desires we can satisfy, and he uses this term, capitalized, to describe a movement of the subject outwards towards the absolutely Other. This metaphysical Desire can be distinguished from ‘desire’ that aims to bring the Other into the field of the same, or aims at the synthesis of self and Other. Desire for Levinas must maintain the otherness of the Other as beyond my possession. He outlines this sense of Desire in the 1964 essay ‘Meaning and Sense’:

The idea of the Infinite is Desire. It paradoxically consists in thinking more than what is thought and maintaining what is thought in this very excess relative to thought – in entering into a relationship with the ungraspable while guaranteeing its status of being ungraspable. (BW, p. 55)

How, then, does this view of subjectivity as bound up in relation with the ungraspable relate to education?

**DISCOURSE AS TEACHING**

Before examining Levinas’s presentations of language and teaching in Totality and Infinity, let me briefly address the question of Levinas’s philosophical approach. I have already commented on the influence of Husserl and Heidegger, and in the
Preface to *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas describes his approach in this text as indebted to Husserl:

The presentation and development of the notions employed owe everything to the phenomenological method. Intentional analysis is the search for the concrete. Notions held under the direct gaze of the thought that defines them are nevertheless, unbeknown to this naive thought, revealed to be implanted in horizons unsuspected by this thought; these horizons endow them with a meaning – such is the essential teaching of Husserl. (*TI*, p. 28)

What matters in this approach is, however, not Husserl’s thesis of intentionality but rather ‘the overflowing of objectifying thought by a forgotten experience from which it lives. The break-up of the formal structure of thought (the noema of a noesis) into events which this structure dissimulates... constitutes a deduction – necessary and yet non-analytical’ (*TI*, p. 28). Nevertheless, although the account of ethical subjectivity is presented in phenomenological terms, scholars have suggested different ways of reading Levinas. Robert Bernasconi, for example, has suggested that it is possible to read Levinas both transcendentally and empirically, but that neither reading is sufficient since Levinas aims to trouble the distinction between the two (Bernasconi, 1989). Levinas describes his own philosophy in his 1965 essay ‘Énigme et phénomène’ as a philosophy of darkness, darkness being an allusion to the idea of light in phenomenology. This helps us understand his ‘method’: while adopting the Husserlian phenomenological method, Levinas at the same time departs from intentional analysis through drawing attention to what lies beyond the phenomenon, opaque to consciousness itself. Levinas is operating beyond either descriptive or normative ethics, and his statement that ‘ethics is an optics’ (*TI*, p. 23) reveals the sense of ethics as what enables things to be brought to light in the phenomenological sense, while disturbing the field of consciousness itself. Levinas thus points to an ethical phenomenology, demonstrating the ethical as beyond and yet revealed by the phenomenon. This, then, is the philosophical ‘framework’ within which I take *Totality and Infinity* to operate.

Levinas’s philosophy has been seen as underpinned by one far-reaching theme: that ethics is first philosophy. It is in *Totality and Infinity* that this idea is first articulated at length. Levinas uses the term ‘ethics’ not in a traditional sense as a code of morality or moral decision-making, or meta-ethical examination. It is rather a relation of responsibility to the Other, which, Levinas argues, Western philosophy has sought to suppress through bringing the Other into the order of the Same. In *Totality and Infinity*, the linguistic order is the site of totality but also the site of infinity, or ethics. Levinas states that ‘the essence of language is goodness... the essence of language is friendship and hospitality’ (*TI*, p. 305): having language depends, as we will see, on the precondition of having responded in peace to the demand that the Other addresses to me. The use of language, however, may be totalizing, bringing the Other within the totality of the Same: ‘Thematization and conceptualization, which moreover are inseparable, are not peace with the other but suppression or possession of the other’ (p. 46). In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas seeks to show that the essence of language is interpellation, the Other’s addressing
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me and my response. As thought is conditioned by language, so the very structure of logical thought is anchored by the relation to the Other.

For Levinas, language presupposes a relation to the Other, who remains transcendent to the same. In Part I of Totality and Infinity, Levinas states that one of the aims of his work is to demonstrate that the relation with alterity is language itself:

We shall try to show that the relation between the same and the other – upon which we seem to impose such extraordinary conditions – is language. For language accomplishes a relation such that the terms are not limited within this relation, such that the other, despite the relationship with the same, remains transcendent to the same. The relation between the same and the other, metaphysics, is primordially enacted as conversation, where the same, gathered up in its ipseity as an ‘I’, as a particular existent unique and autochthonous, leaves itself. (TI, p. 39)

Levinas uses the terms ‘conversation’ and ‘discourse’ synonymously in Totality and Infinity. Conversation is a relation that maintains separation between self and Other, while at the same time allowing the Other a right over the egoism of the self. Through the approach of the Other, my spontaneity is limited: ‘The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics’ (p. 43).

This Other has been suppressed, Levinas argues, by the history of Western philosophy, exemplified by the teaching of Socrates as maieutics. Socrates’s teaching, Levinas suggests, means: ‘To receive nothing of the Other but what is in me’ (TI, p. 43). In order to consider how this view of teaching is radically different from Socratic maieutics, it is worth considering what is meant by the Socratic method. In the Theaetetus, Socrates claims that he is a midwife (Theaetetus 184b), who can deliver thoughts through his maieutic art. It is the respondent who actually gives birth to the idea, with Socrates as facilitator of the delivery. The method of this delivery is the elenchos: the process of cross-examination and testing of opinions to disperse the clouding of the mind by false opinions and produce uncertainty and thence the desire to know. The metaphor of Socrates as midwife sees the unsettling effects of the elenchos, through which what we thought we knew is challenged by the process of testing, as the birth pangs. Yet Socrates is a barren midwife; the Socratic dialogue is not an insemination, but rather brings to birth what is innate within the individual. Thus Socrates insists: ‘You ask me if I teach you when I say there is no teaching but recollection’ (Meno 82). For Socrates, then, knowledge and understanding are not imparted from without, but are seen as ‘in’ the soul of the individual.

Levinas is radically opposed to the Socratic idea of pedagogy as maieutics. For Levinas, language, knowledge and meaning are predicated on the relationship with the Other. To be taught means to encounter what is wholly other, which is precisely opposite to maieutics:

To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression, in which at each instant he overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it. It is therefore
To receive from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity. But this also means: to be taught. The relation with the Other, or Conversation, is a non-allergic relation; but inasmuch as it is welcomed this conversation is a teaching [enseignement]. Teaching is not reducible to maeuetics; 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. (TI, p. 51)

To be taught is to have been summoned into a non-violent relation with the Other, who is always in a position of magisterial height. The radical openness of this encounter is, Levinas suggests, the opposite of Socratic pedagogy. It is through this approach of the Other that I am called into question, and my subjectivity is only possible through the condition of being taught:

The height from which language comes we designate with the term teaching. Socratic maeuetics prevailed over a pedagogy that introduced ideas into a mind by violating or seducing (which amounts to the same thing) that mind. It does not preclude 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. (TI, p. 171)

The social image that Levinas uses to signify this relation between self and Other is that of a teacher. The height of the teacher, as Robert Gibbs notes, ‘signals the resistance without power, a command that can compel only pacifically’ (Gibbs, 1995, p. 15). Levinas emphasizes that the Other is my master, in a mastery ‘that does not conquer, but teaches. 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’ (TI, p. 171).

If this encounter with the Other is a teaching that interrupts ‘the closed circle of totality’, how are we taught through this relation? In an essay entitled ‘Dialogue’, Levinas emphasizes that discourse is the Other’s call to me, and my response to them: ‘Is not the very opening of the dialogue already a way for the I to uncover itself, to deliver itself, a way for the I to place itself at the disposition of the You?’ (GM, p. 149). Only in the opening of language, in which I am placed at the disposition of you, can I be taught what I could not have discovered within myself. This is, as Levinas emphasizes, similar to Descartes’s meditation on the idea of infinity coming to him from outside himself. For Levinas, in the approach of the Other, meaning and truth are produced from beyond myself, and in this way a common world is created between self and Other: ‘To speak is to make the world common, to create commonplaces. Language does not refer to the generality of concepts, but lays the foundation for a possession in common’ (TI, p. 76). As Davis writes, ‘through discourse I find that I am not the exclusive possessor of the world. What had seemed uniquely mine is revealed as shared with the Other’ (Davis, 1996, p. 47). Through discourse, the world and things are placed in the
space between me and the Other and their possession is put into question, as they
are offered to me and I offer them to the Other. Speech is therefore a teaching in
that this placing of things in question between self and other enables the founding
of our experience of the world and of community. This takes place through
thematization:

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

The etymology of ‘thematizing’, from tithēmi, implies placing/setting. Here the
placing refers to placing what is offered in speech before the self, the Other setting
it in the space before me, giving me the phenomenon, or to use Levinas’s phrase,
‘presenting the phenomenon as given’. The term ‘given’ here has the force of ‘gift’
rather than a flat geometric ‘given’ and is an intrinsic aspect of Levinas’s phenom-
enology, moving beyond Husserl by emphasizing that the Other cannot be seen as
phenomenological, since he is not given as something one can think about. As
Critchley writes, ‘the other is not a phenomenon but an enigma, something
ultimately refractory to intentionality and opaque to understanding’ (Critchley,
2002, p. 8). But in speech, the phenomenon is given. Thus the Other, who speaks
to me and sets the phenomenon in my world, remains outside my knowing, beyond
any phenomenon.

This idea of being taught should not be taken in a straightforward, developmental
sense, as the development of consciousness; it is rather a description of the
conditions of consciousness and subjectivity. However, thinking about how a child
acquires language helps us reflect on what this notion of the phenomenon as a gift
means. Let us imagine, as an example, a young child being given a bowl of
raspberries by her mother. The child’s consciousness of the fruit and its meaning
are invested through the embodied actions and address of her mother, her mother
looking for the child’s response to her action, in perhaps accepting the fruit and
enjoying eating it. Thus it is the mother who ‘gives’ the child ‘raspberries’, in the
sense that the fruit is thematized, set in place in the world for the child by
the mother, given a meaning and a context. By placing inverted commas around the
terms ‘gives’ and ‘raspberries’, I am trying to suggest that the terms are being used
here in a particular way. What is significant is not the idea that the child learns the
word ‘raspberry’, or the concept ‘raspberry’ through the mother’s actions, but
rather that through the ‘giving’, through the mother’s actions in addressing the
child and looking for her response, raspberries can appear as raspberries in her
world, or, in other words, the phenomenon of raspberries comes to the child. The
child may be only at an early stage in developing language, but as the mother looks
for the child’s response to her physical offering, the child is already subjected to the
address of the Other with which subjectivity begins. We can easily see why this kind
of interaction is a ‘teaching’, and why it is opposed to Socratic maieutics, since the
phenomenon comes to the child from beyond herself, and it is this structure of the Other’s offering me phenomena, and my receiving them, which is for Levinas fundamental to all consciousness, subjectivity and objectivity.

Although we are taught by the Other in the encounter, the teacher remains outside of my knowing: ‘The master, the coinciding of the teaching and the teacher, is not in turn a fact among others. The present of the manifestation of the master who teaches overcomes the anarchy of facts’ (TI, pp. 69–70). It is phenomena, not the Other, that are thematized; the infinite cannot be a theme ‘but signals itself… as thematizing, as him starting from whom everything can be fixed in its identity’ (pp. 69–70). This teaching founds objectivity:

Teaching, the end of equivocation or confusion, is a thematization of phenomena. It is because phenomena have been taught to me by one who presents himself – by reviving the acts of this thematization which are the signs – by speaking – that henceforth I am not the plaything of a mystification, but consider objects. The presence of the Other dispels the anarchic sorcery of the facts: the world becomes an object. (TI, p. 99)

Objectivity is the result of putting things in question between self and Other, the offering of the world by the Other and speaking about the world ‘with someone who has broken through the screen of phenomena and has associated me with himself’ (TI, p. 99). This is the precondition for reason. Difference and separation are then necessary conditions for reason, rather than reason being the overcoming of difference. Thus this offering of the word by the Other is what establishes rational thought. Objectivity, the truth of objects, and rationality rest, as Jeffery Dudiak notes, on the other who ‘while himself withdrawing from the realm of “objective facts” that he offers or that I offer to him, would produce the objectivity of things that enter into commerce between us, and this by means of his status as teacher’ (2001, pp. 121–2).

For Levinas, objectivity, reason and truth are predicated upon the relation with the Other: the condition for language is a relation with what is beyond language. Reason is therefore a significant aspect of this notion of language. In The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common, Alphonso Lingis, who translated several of Levinas’s major works including Totality and Infinity, expresses how this idea of responsibility is intimately bound up with reasoning:

The other turns to me and speaks; he or she asks something of me. Her words, which I understand because they are the words of my own tongue, ask for information and indications. They ask for a response that will be responsible, will give reasons for its reasons and will be a commitment to answer for what it answers. But they first greet me with an appeal for responsiveness. (Lingis, 1994, pp. 130–1)

The exercise of rationality is always intimately bound up with the ethical conditions of responsibility that makes its exercise possible.
When language is viewed primarily as communication, as it often is in common usage and in many conceptions of language teaching, these ethical preconditions of language can be hidden:

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

Levinas here suggests that the idea of language as communication, implying a transparency of ideas and reciprocity and reversibility of relation, misses the alterity of the Other which is the foundation of language. Reversibility and reciprocity imply that I and Other are on the same plane, equals in a symmetrical relationship, failing to recognize that I am responsible to the Other’s address in an asymmetrical responsibility. This idea that the relation between I and Other cannot be seen as reciprocal is fundamental to Levinas’s argument, since if I posit the Other as another I, I minimize their alterity and presume to know them as one like me. The speaking of language depends on its commencement by one who is outside language and beyond my knowing, for whom I have responsibility, and thus he is, in this sense my Master, calling me to responsibility from his position of vulnerability.

This should not be understood as an authoritarianism of the other person who stands outside language and commands me. It conveys more the idea that language comes from an alterity that is rooted in the embodied vulnerability of other persons to my responses, refractory to intentionality and lying beyond understanding. This emphasis that language is the site of my ethical subjectivity and that to receive language is to be taught, is very different from the common emphasis on the communicative function of language in teaching. Whilst not wishing to deny the importance of communication within schooling, pedagogic theories that overemphasize the communicative function of language can lead us to miss the ethical conditions of language, and the alterity of the Other who brings me language. For Levinas, if we are to talk about communication at all, then this notion of what is communicated must be seen as inextricably bound up with what cannot be communicated: the Other.

Whilst opposing the view that language is primarily communication, Levinas’s understanding of language also leads us to reflect on how other philosophies of language can underplay the ethical conditions of language, for example the views of structuralism or Heidegger. Let us pause to briefly consider these alternative approaches and how Levinas’s understanding is distinct from these. Levinas takes many ideas from structuralist linguistics but diverges at significant points. Ferdinand de Saussure’s Course in General Linguistics was the catalyst for the cluster of ideas known as structuralism, in which language is presented as a system, or a structure. For Saussure, language is a system of signs, each sign composed of
two parts: a signifier (*signifiant*), which is a word or sound-pattern, and a signified concept (*signifié*). The signifier itself is arbitrary and has no intrinsic relation to the signified, yet because our thought is structured by language, we cannot separate the phonetic and conceptual aspects of language: they are as closely linked for us as two sides of a sheet of paper. In the human sciences, one of the most significant uses of the Saussurian model was to challenge the modernist emphasis on autonomy. John Llewelyn summarizes this point clearly:

> Because in structuralist semiotics the components or terms owe their meaning to their internal interrelations, it is arguable that there is only one unit, the system as a whole. This suggests an analogy with mathematical systems, where it is arguable that the mathematician reads off from the system as a whole the theorems he calculates or infers. One might say that it is the system that thinks through the mathematician. And something like this is what is said by some of the human scientists who apply Saussure’s model to their own special fields. With some structuralists the idea that ‘it’ (*es, ça*) thinks in me turns into the idea of ‘the death of man’, so that it becomes debatable whether they can properly be called ‘human’ scientists. Lacan in psychoanalysis, Althusser in political theory, Lévi-Strauss in anthropology and Foucault in the genealogies of knowledge and power are among those whom Levinas would see as representatives of ‘modern antihumanism’. (Llewelyn, 2002, pp. 120–1)

The relationship between language and autonomy for Levinas is distinct from such ‘antihumanist’ models in which the free human is subsumed within structures of language, knowledge and power. But it is also clearly distinct from the emphasis on human autonomy in the use of language that we find in thinkers such as Locke, in his nomenclaturist philosophy of language. For Levinas, because all experience and cognition come from my condition of being addressed by the Other in passivity, I cannot have autonomy in the Lockean sense, yet neither am I subsumed by the system of language as I am in the structuralist opposition to autonomy. Levinas’s view that we are heteronomous subjects implies a singularity of the I: although language and understanding are brought to me by the Other, my responses are an integral aspect of the appearance of my world within my horizons. There is thus a confirmation of the self as unique in the way it *alone* can respond to the appeal of the Other’s address, but this is neither the autonomy of the Lockean subject, nor its antithesis in structuralism. Response, responsibility and signification are therefore intimately related for Levinas, as he explains in an interview:

> The beginning of all language is in the face. In… its silence, it calls you. Your reaction to the face is a response. Not just a response, but a responsibility. These two words [*réponse, responsabilité*] are closely related. Language does not begin with the signs that one gives, with words. Language is above all the fact of being addressed. (Levinas, 1988, pp. 169–70)

Thus we can see that although Levinas takes from structuralism the use of the words *signifiant* and *signifié*, his emphasis is very different. As Llewelyn points
out, Levinas uses the term *signifiant* not to refer to the phonetic or graphic signifier, but to the speaker who issues the signs, who looks for my response and thus elects me as responsible. Thus in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas writes:

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

The signifier is here the Other, not signified by the sign. It is precisely in the moment of signifying that the alterity of the Other is revealed: ‘The Other, the signifier, manifests himself in speech by speaking of the world and not of himself; he manifests himself by proposing the world, by thematizing it’ (p. 96).

Meaning is therefore dependent on the interpellation of the Other who signifies, an idea absent from the structuralist emphasis on meaning as determined through the differences between interdependent terms within the system of language. For Levinas, meaning is part of a system of different terms, as in structuralism, but this system arises through speech. To be more specific (since structuralists might agree that language and speaking go together), meaning arises through the Other’s speaking to me: ‘Speech is thus the origin of all signification – of tools and all human works – for through it the referential system from which every signification arises receives the very principle of its functioning, its key’ (*TI*, p. 98). It is only through the revelation of the Other that the world can be oriented in experience and take on signification. The address of the Other is the absolute upon which all meaning depends and the site of meaning is also the site of teaching, for to receive a meaning is to be taught: ‘To have meaning is to be situated relative to an absolute, that is, to come from that alterity that is not absorbed in its being perceived… To have meaning is to teach or to be taught, to speak or to be able to be stated’ (p. 97).

There is a further parallel between Levinas and structuralism here, in Levinas’s suggestion that all thought is always already structured by language, for example, in ‘Meaning and Sense’: ‘Everything remains in a language or in a world, for the structure of the world resembles the order of language’ (*BW*, p. 38). As Llewelyn points out, the use of this idea in structuralism led to ‘the death of man’, in terms of the end of the notion of a completely autonomous and free human who is author of his acts. Although sharing this emphasis that language is given to the self from outside, for Levinas the language that I speak is a gift to me from the Other, and in the approach of the Other, I am called to a position of ethical subjectivity, in which objectivity is possible, and this leads to a new sense of autonomy, as I will explore in Chapter 3.

Just as there are both similarities and differences between Levinas’s presentation of language and structuralist linguistics, so also with Heidegger’s views of language. We see Levinas taking up Heidegger’s phraseology and emphasis that to be human means to have language in ‘Meaning and Sense’: ‘There never was a
moment in which meaning first came to birth out of a meaningless being, outside of a historical position where language is spoken. And that is doubtless what was meant when we were taught that language is the house of being’ (BW, p. 38). We also hear echoes of Heidegger, when Levinas describes language as poetry: ‘Language qua expression is, above all, the creative language of poetry’ (p. 41). Heidegger’s later essays on language state that poetry is language in its purest form, but we can see here there is a different emphasis from Levinas’s statement that language *qua expression* is poetry, for Heidegger specifically states that, ‘In its essence, language is neither expression nor an activity of man’ (Heidegger, 2001, p. 194). Language, for Heidegger, revealed in its purest form as poetry, speaks itself: ‘Language speaks [Die Sprache spricht]. Man speaks in that he responds to language. This responding is a hearing’ (p. 207).

For Heidegger, poetry is the essence of language, and not merely verse. As pure language, it names, a naming that is not a designation: ‘This naming does not hand out titles. It does not apply titles, but it calls into the word. The naming calls’ (p. 196). The naming calls what is concealed to come to language as unconcealed, thus instituting Being. We can see this idea in *The Origin of the Work of Art*: ‘Language, by naming beings for the first time, first brings beings to word and to appearance. Only this naming nominates beings to their being from out of their being’ (p. 71). This bringing to Being through language also means a bringing to being as in some sense beyond speaking, as unsayable: ‘Projective saying is poetry… Projective saying is saying which, in preparing the unsayable, simultaneously brings the unsayable as such into a world’ (p. 71). This is why poetry is language in its purest form, showing the unsayable as such, revealing it to be other than the word, in a sense beyond language even while being brought to presence as hidden by language.

This idea of the unsayable being brought to presence as unsayable through language has resonances with Levinas’s writing. Levinas states that what is signified ‘is never a complete presence; always a sign in its turn, it does not come in a straightforward frankness’ (II, p. 96). However, there is a different emphasis on the unsayable for Levinas, whose concern is to show that the signifier, the Other, the one who addresses me is the forever inaccessible origin of language. This we can see clearly in ‘Meaning and Sense’:

The Other (*Autrui*) who faces me is not included in the totality of being expressed. He arises behind every assembling of being as he to whom I express what I express. I find myself facing the Other (*Autrui*). He is neither a cultural signification nor a simple given. He is *sense* primordially, for he gives sense to expression itself, for it is only by him that a phenomenon as a meaning is, of itself, introduced into being. (BW, p. 52)

The term *sens* used to describe the Other as ‘sense primordially’ can be translated as both ‘meaning’ and ‘direction’. The Other, while bringing me meaning, is also my direction. As I turn towards the Other who always escapes me, my world is unfolding and given new meanings: I am taught.
For Heidegger, the emphasis is less on the signifier lying beyond signification or expression than on the simultaneous absence and presence of the signified. While Heidegger challenges us to consider the nature of language as beyond conceptualization, Levinas shows us how language is invested with meaning by the fact that it is spoken by one who is vulnerable to my response to their speaking. While Heidegger emphasizes that it is language that speaks, for Levinas, this speaking is inextricably bound up with the offering of the word by the Other, the interpellation of the Other. It is not that Levinas would disagree that language speaks in the Other or in me – indeed the idea of language as brought to me from outside, by the Other, implies that language does ‘possess’ me. But Levinas’s emphasis on the Other speaking and founding my meanings and a common world of objects shows the ethical nature of language in a way that is deliberately different from Heidegger’s approach, motivated by the desire to leave the philosophical climate of his former teacher. Llewelyn summarizes this difference between them thus:

Prior to my being possessed by language, Levinas maintains, is my possession by the human being who speaks to me… For both Heidegger and Levinas [sociality] is linguistic, and a way of being possessed by language. But… whereas for Heidegger possession by language is a way of being with others, for Levinas it is also a possession by others. This latter possession disrupts my being possessed by language as this is understood by Heidegger. (Llewelyn, 2002, p. 123)

Ultimately, Levinas’s philosophy of language, like Heidegger’s, suggests that language is the ‘house of being’, but for Levinas, this being depends on a prior orientation towards the Other who, in addressing me, founds my language, and this ethical orientation is not present in Heidegger’s discussion of language. Even the use of the term ‘house of being’ by Heidegger emphasizes this difference: in language, for Heidegger, I dwell poetically. For Levinas, my abode as a subject is a tent rather than a house, as I do not dwell but rather move towards the Other.6

Although language begins with the approach of the Other, Levinas is careful to emphasize that we do not always relate to the Other in discourse. Rhetoric is the term Levinas uses for discourses that are not primarily relations with exteriority. Thus he points out that what we most often approach in conversation is not the Other, ‘but an object or an infant, or a man of the multitude’ (TI, p. 70). Rhetoric does still approach the Other, but is a corruption of discourse, as ‘propaganda, flattery, diplomacy, etc.’ (p. 70), and is a violence in its corruption of freedom. The tendency of rhetoric is totalizing, unlike discourse as teaching in which I am summoned to a position of infinite responsibility. This notion of infinite responsibility does not imply that we are always aware of such responsibility, but demonstrates the way in which intersubjective space is ‘curved’, and the sense of responsibility deepens the more we attend to it:

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

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

As we have seen, the opening of language in *Totality and Infinity* is the Other’s address to me. Language, objectivity and truth are made possible by the Other’s teaching, ‘bringing me more than I contain’ and electing me as responsible. Thus Levinas’s philosophy demonstrates the primacy of the ethical conditions of language before its communicative function. What does this mean, then, for our understanding of what it is to be a subject?

**SUBJECTIVITY AS ETHICAL**

It is only in approaching the Other that I attend to myself… [I]n discourse I expose myself to the questioning of the Other, and this urgency of the response – acuteness of the present – engenders me for responsibility; as responsible I am brought to my final reality… When I seek my final reality, I find that my existence as a ‘thing in itself’ begins with the presence in me of the idea of Infinity. (TI, pp. 178–9)

In this passage, we see the idea that my subjectivity, my final reality, is only as one responsible for the Other. I am thus not fundamentally a being-towards-death so much as I am a being-towards-the-other, or a being-*for*-the-Other. The address of the Other confirms my subjectivity as unique. I cannot escape the call singularly addressed to me:

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

Subjectivity in this view is constituted in receptivity and passivity. It is only as turned outwards towards the Other that I am. Subjectivity, the condition of being taught, means that my spontaneity, which was and is always an illusion, is called into question, and I recognize that the world of things is common between I and the Other.
The relationship between the I and the Other should not be seen, however, as a party of two. The relation with the Other means entering into a relation with others through the third party who is brought to me in the address of the Other:

Language as the presence of the face does not invite complicity with the preferred being, the self-sufficient ‘I-Thou’ forgetful of the universe; in its frankness it refuses the clandestinity of love, where it loses its frankness and meaning and turns into laughter or cooing. The third party looks at me in the eyes of the Other – language is justice. (*TI*, p. 213)

Levinas’s target here, with the phrase ‘I-Thou’, may be Martin Buber’s presentation of the reciprocal relation between self and Other, in which all my awareness is drawn towards the living reality of another. The language of ‘laughter’ and ‘cooing’ suggests that Levinas rejects the sentimentality of such a relation, or what the popularization of such a relationship quickly becomes. Levinas’s conception is far from self-sufficient and clandestine. Through the Other, I am also drawn into a relation with others, so that there never exists a self-sufficient I-Thou. The third party, always already present in the approach of the Other, demands justice and justification for my actions, how I divide, weigh up, calculate and make decisions about my practical responses to the needs of many others. In this sense, the ethical relation with the Other is always already inseparable from the political because of the third party’s demand for justice. The approach of the third and with it the excessive, impossible nature of my responsibility not just to the Other but to all the others means that a particular response is not determined in advance. This is the possibility of my responsibility rather than a clear knowledge of what I must do. The presence of the others, leading us to make comparisons, calculate, decide about the distribution of resources, is already there in the approach of the Other, and so we are obliged simultaneously to the infinite demand of the Other and the demands of many others, making totalizing rules and judgements necessary. We will explore the aporetic nature of the ethico-political towards which this points in Chapters 6 and 7, but it should be emphasized here that any attempt to separate politics and ethics in experience is impossible, because the presence of many others means that the totalization of comparison and political judgement is necessary, yet only possible because of the prior condition of ethical responsibility. The political can therefore be seen, as Caygill states, as the movement between totality and infinity (Caygill, 2002, p. 96).

The relationship to the Other is phenomenologically fundamental, but, as we have seen, what the Other means is always conditioned by the others and in this way I am an ethical and a political subject. To be a subject means to be subject to the Other, which is always to be subject to the others, a subjection I cannot escape. As Peter Atterton writes:

The self is a *subjectum* (*sub-jacere*, to throw, place, or set under) in the sense that it is subjected or subordinated to the responsibility that ultimately serves and defines it… [T]he self is a subject, then, not in any traditional Cartesian or
humanist sense. Self-presence, the presence of self to self in the interiority of consciousness (the cogito), which Descartes took to be the first certainty, is secondary to the relation with other. (Atterton, 2004, p. 14)

This idea that subjectivity is constructed through a relation with alterity is not unique to Levinas. In Lacan, for example, it is through entry into the symbolic order, which is other, that subjectivity is constructed. In Hegel, subjectivity depends on alterity, with subjectivity experienced as the restoration of the self-same that has been subjected to otherness. What is distinctive in Levinas’s presentation is this ethical subversion: to be a subject means that my spontaneity is always already limited in responsibility to the Other, and I am ‘elected’ to my unique subjectivity through the singular way in which I can respond. My singularity is confirmed as irreducible because only I can answer: ‘The uniqueness of the I is the fact that no one can answer for me’ (BW, p. 55).

My unique responsibility for the Other arises before I could choose to accept it: I am always already obligated, and the uniqueness of my responsibility is termed ‘election’. In ‘God and Philosophy’, Levinas describes this obligation deepening the more I attend to it:

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

This view is radically different from most conceptions of responsibility in moral and political philosophy, which tend to restrict responsibility according to legalistic notions of individual accountability or membership of a particular moral community. This idea of responsibility for the Other as dependent on alterity rather than any shared membership of a community or ideal of reciprocity is intrinsic to this Levinasian notion of responsibility.

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

**ELECTION TO SUBJECTIVITY – A TEACHING**

Levinas’s concern to show that the subject is formed in infinite responsibility to the Other, disrupting the order of the self-same, can be seen as in some ways comparable to the idea of subjectivity constructed through language, always other to the self, as argued, for example, by Lacan. What is distinctive in Levinas’s approach is that language depends on the prior possibility of goodness, of responsibility: as one who is taught, receiving language as an élève, I am elevated in my election to subjectivity (Llewelyn, 1995, p. 98). This responsibility is not to be understood in terms of moments of intense relationality, but as a condition and
Levinas’s Teaching orientation that pervades everything, including the whole of education. Paul Standish puts this well:

The Other is plainly not to be thought of as the stuff of ‘peak experiences’ between human beings, especially in view of the pervasive nature of responsibility – hardly the stuff of experience, considering how readily we lose sight of our responsibilities or how easily we go to sleep on them. In contrast, it is to be asked what human beings do that does not involve this responsibility – neglected or covered over though that usually is. If the obligation to the Other should be seen as pervasive, the things that we interact with and the way we word the world should be seen in this light. (Standish, 2007, pp. 79–80).

Standish here points towards how this way of understanding responsibility towards the Other affects how we conceive of education at every level.

But what does this mean in relation to other more standard conceptualizations of education? In subsequent chapters I will consider how reading Levinas interrupts and disturbs particular understandings of education within liberal and neoliberal paradigms that have come to dominate contemporary educational frameworks; therefore I will here only briefly draw attention to themes that relate in particular to Totality and Infinity. These themes are: the Ulysses/Abraham comparison, Bildung as an educational ideal, Martin Buber’s dialogical philosophy of education and Michael Oakeshott’s presentation of education as ‘the conversation of mankind’.

Ulysses and Abraham

A motif that reverberates throughout Levinas’s work and is set out within Totality and Infinity is the Ulysses/Abraham comparison. Against Ulysses, who after his wanderings returns to Ithaca, Levinas prefers Abraham, who leaves his homeland in search of an unknown land. Levinas describes the history of Western philosophy – and, that is to say, Western thought – as following Ulysses: it is characterized by its failure to recognize the Other, always aiming to return to the same. Totality and Infinity attempts to take philosophy elsewhere, highlighting how engagement with the Other is prior to knowledge. In Totality and Infinity, Levinas describes labour and economic exchange as following Ulysses’s path: ‘Labour remains economic; it comes from the home and returns to it, a movement of Odyssey where the adventure pursued in the world is but the accident of a return’ (TI, pp. 176–7). This motif has significant implications for how we think about education. In ‘Data Return: The Sense of the Given in Educational Research’, Standish has explored how the sense of a movement outwards towards the Other is at odds with ways of thinking about both educational research and education itself in terms of targets, goals and productivity. This is exemplified in both the New Labour and Conservative visions that universities should become productive forces in the ‘knowledge economy’, in which all is justified under the logic of Capital, seeking to bring all within the logic of the Same. A policy document issued from the Treasury under Gordon Brown demonstrates this approach:
The government’s ambition, shared with its partners in the private and not-for-profit sectors, is for the UK to be a key knowledge hub in the global economy, with a reputation not only for outstanding scientific and technological discovery, but also as a world leader in turning that knowledge into new products and services. (HM Treasury, *Science and Innovation Investment Framework 2004–2014*, cited in Callinicos, 2006, p. 12)

We will explore in detail how Levinas’s approach, read together with Badiou, exposes the limitations of this particular instrumentalized conception of education in Chapter 4. However, it is worth emphasizing here that Levinas’s writing challenges us to think about the meaning of education otherwise, beyond the logic of economic exchange that follows Ulysses’ path, as instead a giving up of oneself to the Other, ‘expend[ing] myself… My work goes beyond me in ways I cannot foresee, and with effects I cannot know. Without this all is limited’ (Standish, 2001, p. 513). The dominant aims of productivity within neoliberal education policies or the focus on the development of rational autonomy in liberalism confront in the thinking of Levinas a vision of the ethical that interrupts self-consciousness and rationality and proposes a venturing forth with no return, interrupting closed circles of productive logics in which all is subsumed to capital. While the conversations, the writing, the performances that arise within formal education may fall within the totality of economic exchange, the challenge Levinas poses is to recognize them as arising from an offering up of the self to the Other prior to this, from which there is no return, and which troubles the practices of that totality. Such an understanding has been, on this account, suppressed by educational discourses in order to confine what we can think within the realms of categorization, exchange and possessive rationality. Although Levinas would not oppose the idea that formal education should promote rationality and autonomy, as we will explore later, his writing nevertheless challenges the priority that has been accorded to these in liberal education.

**Bildung as an Educational Ideal**

This potential provocation of Levinas’s writing for the ideal of the return to the same is similar to the challenge these ideas pose to the concept of *Bildung* in educational theory. The notion of *Bildung* has been used with the sense of ‘upbringing’ of an individual to a model image, ideal ambition or telos (Nordenbo, 2003, p. 27). There is not scope here to explore the various ways in which this ideal has been conceived within education, and the relation between the self and society that is implied within the concept. Biesta offers a detailed examination of how conceptions of *Bildung* relate to Enlightenment conceptions of education as the ‘servant’ of the individual, and argues that these became foundational to modern educational theory (Biesta, 2008, p. 199 ff.). Biesta challenges how within this intertwining of the tradition of *Bildung* and the Enlightenment, the rationale for education became founded on the humanist idea of developing the potential of the individual subject to ‘become self-motivated and self-directing’ (Biesta, 2008, p. 199 ff.). Whilst the
teleology and focus on the individual implied in this concept of *Bildung* are interrupted by Levinas’s presentation of teaching in which the subject is always moving towards an unknown land, the specific humanist ideal Biesta mentions of developing potential for self-direction is also challenged by Levinas’s emphasis on heteronomy. We will investigate the nature of this challenge in detail in Chapter 3. While Levinas might not have wanted in practical terms to challenge the idea of character development implicit in *Bildung*, his writing on the scene of teaching provides a way of thinking about teaching that demonstrates the troubling inadequacy of viewing the self as prior to the Other, or having any idea of model image or telos as an outcome of education.

**Martin Buber’s Dialogical Philosophy of Education**

With his emphasis on the phenomenological irreducibility of the Thou in his *I-Thou* formulation, Buber stands close to Levinas. But Buber’s educational philosophy and Levinas’s presentation of the relation with the Other as a teaching depart at significant points. Buber summarizes education and the role of the educator thus:

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

We see here how Buber’s account of teaching, like Levinas’s, depends on an encounter with what is outside the self. For Buber, the encounter draws out from the learner ‘his powers’. Elsewhere Buber writes that ‘to educate’ means to draw out of the child that which is in him; not to bring the child anything from outside, but merely to overcome the disturbing influences, to set aside the obstacles which hinder his free development – to allow the child to “become himself”’ (Buber, 1948, p. 149), demonstrating the traditional idea of education as ‘drawing out’. This is in contrast with Levinas’s view that teaching depends on what could not have come from myself – the idea of infinity, the site of the opening of language. It is perhaps unfair to draw extended comparison between Levinas’s description of teaching and Buber’s, since Buber is addressing very specific pedagogical questions concerning the role of the educator. Yet, as discussed earlier, I think we must see Levinas’s description of the scene of teaching, although not an empirical description, as nevertheless informed by his pedagogical experience as both teacher and student for most of his career. After reading Levinas, what could it mean for me as a teacher to view my students as ‘bringing me more than I contain’? Might it lead to a radical understanding of the possibility of equality in educational institutions and in our attitudes towards knowledge? Whilst in subsequent chapters
I consider how this view of education enriches our vision of the aims of education and practices within religious education in particular, it also invites further reflection on our understandings of the dynamics of teacher-student relations.\textsuperscript{11}

\textit{The ‘Conversation of Mankind’}

Another model of education that appears initially similar to the notion of teaching as discourse is Michael Oakeshott’s view of education as ‘the conversation of mankind’. What is implied in this when considered through our reading of Levinas? If I think of my own education as part of this conversation, and reflect on how the Other has been addressed to me through various relationships, traditions and disciplines, in texts, conversations, images, music and gestures, I can appreciate that the not-I addressed to me is vulnerable to my response. In a very real sense, traditions survive in the receptivity of each successive generation, and are vulnerable to those to whom they are passed on. But this is perhaps to extend the implication of the vulnerability of the Other too far. The ways each individual uniquely receives aspects of different traditions and in turn offers them to others in ways that are again different reveals this as simplistic. One way to interpret Levinas’s view of teaching, as part of the ‘conversation of mankind’, would be to recognize the inherent risk that the learner will react with hostility or indifference towards what is brought to them.\textsuperscript{12} Thus the position of magisterial height is precisely a position of vulnerability, and the conversation of humankind contains ethical possibilities inherent within every word that is uttered.

This could be linked to Standish’s view that we might understanding the content of the curriculum as potentially a form of relation to the Other:

\begin{quote}
The curriculum – say, the triangle of teaching, learning, and content – is one way in which the relation to the Other can be realized. By the same token, but accenting the negative correlate of this, the curriculum is a site in which the underlying relation to the Other – this obligation and responsibility – is commonly, causally, systematically denied (Standish, 2008, p. 61).
\end{quote}

Standish suggests that it is important to recognize the dominance of totalizing forms of education that emphasize mastery of the subjects under study, and instead move towards a kind of thinking that goes beyond the self towards the stranger. He suggests that this practically challenges ‘the assumption that there must be a tidy matching of learning outcomes and learning outcomes, or… the exhaustive specification of criteria’ (p. 64). Rather ‘teaching and learning should open ways beyond what is directly planned’ (p. 64). I would agree that it is possible to view objects of study in this way: the Other is not straightforwardly the other person as is sometimes suggested, and as Levinas himself sometimes seems to emphasize. It is not possible to say who the Other is, because this would bring the Other into categories of the same: all we can do then is to speak of ways in which the Other addresses me. In light of Standish’s suggestions, it would be worth exploring further how it might be possible to view objects of study as a way in which we are
addressed by the Other, and considering how such a notion might trouble traditional concepts of teacher/teaching/learner/learning.

SOME POSSIBLE OBJECTIONS

Before attempting to draw this chapter to a close, let us pause to consider some challenges that might be raised against this presentation of subjectivity in *Totality and Infinity*.

The first challenge to consider is whether someone might take Levinas’s message to be something like that of a prophet who calls us to live in a new way, repenting and turning from our former selfish ways, in which case, someone might question why we should follow him. As we will explore in Chapter 6, Levinas’s writing can be seen as prophetic, but he should not be interpreted as offering an ethical option among others. He is rather describing and witnessing to the conditions of subjectivity as ethical, conditions of which we are commonly in denial. Thus, as Perpich comments, if I ask the question of why I should be concerned with the Other, the question has already come too late: ‘If I ask this question, it indicates that an other has already passed my way, already opened to me a world in which critical reflection is possible’ (2008, p. 140).

Yet despite the seeming abstraction of some of his formulations, it is important to emphasize that Levinas sees these ethical conditions of subjectivity as having bearing on the way we think about specific ethical needs, stating in an interview with François Poirié that one has to consider the meaning of these conditions ‘in an even more concrete manner’ (*RB*, p. 68). Elsewhere he considers in very practical terms how our thinking about the nature of human rights is transformed and deepened by considering the priority of the Other, in ‘The Rights of Man and the Rights of the Other’, for example (*OS*, p. 120 in particular). The following passage, from an interview conducted in 1986, exemplifies how the transcendental conditions of subjectivity described in *Totality and Infinity* relate to concrete political judgements:

> I maintain that this ideal of saintliness is presupposed in all our value judgements. There is no politics for accomplishing the moral, but there are certainly some politics which are further from it or closer to it. For example, I’ve mentioned Stalinism to you. I’ve told you that justice is always a justice that desires a better justice. This is the way that I will characterize the liberal state. The liberal state is a state which holds justice as the absolutely desirable end and hence as a perfection. Concretely, the liberal state has always admitted – alongside the written law – human rights as a parallel institution. It continues to preach that within its justice there are always improvements to be made in human rights. Human rights are the reminder that there is no justice yet. And consequently, I believe that it is absolutely obvious that the liberal state is more moral than the fascist state, and closer to the morally utopian state. (Levinas, 1988, pp. 177–8)

Here we see that for Levinas there is an essential link between the transcendental condition of relation with the Other and the practical demands for justice and
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political judgement. This is not presented as a formulaic ethical imperative, but as a possibility yet to be realized in practice.

A further objection that might be raised is whether the notion of the Other as the teacher is an apologia for authoritarianism. As Todd comments, the idea of the Other as master and stranger seems at first sight ‘downright indigestible’ for education to swallow (Todd, 2008, p. 172). However, the mastery of the Other does not come from a concrete relationship of power, and is not an empirical description of the teaching relation, but rather a description of the conditions of learning, which are the conditions of subjectivity. Todd articulates this clearly:

The mastery of the Other stems not from a relation of institutional power, but in a sense from his very vulnerability: that vulnerability gives his interpellation an urgency that undoes my self-sufficiency and places his need before my own. This could be illustrated in the way an infant might be seen to have ‘mastery’ over its mother. The mother will put the infant’s needs before her own, where mastery resides in the power of this vulnerability’s appeal. The Other is not a specific person, but their mastery resides in the appeal of the face that, as in this illustration, assumes an authority in vulnerability as potent as that of an infant.

Related to this notion of the mastery of the Other, someone might question whether Levinas is prescribing self-effacement, an impression encouraged by the vocabulary he uses of subjection to the Other. However, the notion of subjection does not mean that we must agree with or acquiesce in everything others say or do to me. The idea of community, which we will explore in Chapter 6, suggests that the condition of responsibility to the Other is worked out in practice against the needs of many others. The interpellation of the Other is not a private imperative: ‘Everything that takes place here “between us” concerns everyone, the face that looks at it places itself in the full light of the public order’ (TI, p. 212). Although my responsibility is infinite, what that responsibility means is always worked out within the bonds of human kinship and fraternity, which leads to responsibility for myself:

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

Responsibility, for Levinas, necessarily involves self-sacrifice, but this is not the same as self-debasement.

Having paused to consider these objections, let us draw this chapter to a close.

THE POSSIBILITY OF ETHICAL SUBJECTIVITY

In contrast to the conceptualizations of the subject as purely a social construction, or as an effect of various power relations, posited by various structuralist thinkers, what does it mean to think in terms of ethical subjectivity after Levinas? In such constructions, there is, as in Levinas, the notion of interpellation as fundamental to subjectivity, but in those approaches, it is social structures that interpellate, calling individuals as subjects of systems that give identities, necessary to the functioning of the social order. Levinas’s conception of subjectivity does not imply the unified notion of subjectivity that these thinkers were attacking; indeed Levinas specifically states that isolated subjectivity is a myth. What is unique, however, in Levinas’s provocation is the attention he gives to the ethical conditions of the interpellation to subjectivity as infinite responsibility. In coming to see my subjectivity as a continuing responding to the Other’s prior address, I, Levinas’s reader, am challenged to work out for myself what an ever-extending responsibility means in my situation as teacher and student, and this not in some theoretical elaboration but in response to the practical demands I experience. Perhaps this is similar to Zygmunt Bauman’s description of moral responsibility, which ‘cannot be taken away, shared, ceded, pawned, or deposited for safe-keeping’; as ‘unconditional and infinite… it manifests itself in the constant anguish of not manifesting itself enough’ (Bauman, 1993, p. 250). As my subjectivity is found in this unconditional responsibility in the present, it is also shown as not-yet: this extending responsibility towards the infinite and transcendent Other deepens, yet this not in any developmental, linear sense. The possibility of ethical subject is already revealed as a trace in the very conditions of language, knowledge and relationality.

There is, then, a sense in which all education is predicated on my already being an ethical subject, already obligated, responsible to the Other. But there is another sense in which this deepening understanding of subjectivity challenges how we tend to conceive of education. This is not offered in terms of a straightforward moral imperative, but rather as an interruption of the way we conceptualize education: in Totality and Infinity, Levinas is offering me, his reader, a word of invitation to recognize the structure of my subjectivity as responsibility. This is a prophetic discourse that appeals to me to join it and judge it. Reading Levinas draws me to (but could not force me to) question whether I can also testify to the possibility of goodness.

This prophetic form of discourse might be seen, in some senses, as a theology of education. God is central to Levinas’s thinking, but here God means what is otherwise than being. This God is not some sacred power or numen (DF, p. 14),
but the transcendence of alterity and the infinity of my responsibility, eluding intelligibility. This view of God is similar to Franz Rosenzweig’s view of redemption in The Star of Redemption, in which the messianic happens now; the not-yet is in the present moment through the proximity of the neighbour and the act of neighbourly love. Kenneth Reinhard elaborates on what this messianic temporality means:

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

We will take up and explore the implications of this non-teleological understanding of the messianic as an interruption of totalizing ontology in Chapter 7. But given suspicions that some philosophers of education have of the prominence of religion in Levinas’s writing, it is worth emphasizing that these ideas do not imply the idea of the divine as a being as in classical theism, or the ground of Being, but precisely the beyond being, which is the site of my (already ethico-political) subjectivity. It is possible to interpret these terms independently of any overarching religious framework, and most educational theorists who have been drawn to Levinas’s work have not attended to the religious dimensions of his thought. However, as theological ideas, the transcendence of alterity and messianic temporality powerfully rupture notions of education that prioritize communicative rationality as foundational, revealing the interruption of the logos by ethics, prior to intelligibility. We will consider further the particular challenges of Levinas’s notion of religion in the following chapter, and the implications of this for understandings of religion in education in Chapters 5 and 6.

In reading Levinas I come to understand that who I am is always already the result of a teaching. Reading Totality and Infinity also testifies to how language can be both totalizing and yet reveal the infinite ethical relation. Indeed the title Totality and Infinity draws attention to the impossibility of altogether avoiding a totalizing orientation: the scene of teaching cannot be separated from a totalizing thematization, even though that depends on the infinite space between I and Other. But the text calls me to be vigilant and attend to the tendency of my language, my thought, and my actions to be totalizing, and move towards a more ethical orientation, responding to the address of the Other with full hands. Caygill explains these possible two orientations well:

The self embroiled within totality can orient itself towards a war against the other in a bid to preserve its identity and resources, or towards a welcoming of the other in a redistribution of its resources and a risking of its identity. The outcomes of orientation are not mutually exclusive, but are developments that contain each other and thus call for vigilance. (Caygill, 2002, p. 102)
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In order to think through further what being vigilant in this sense means within an educational setting, we need to be careful that the overstraining language of transcendence does not come to represent an obstacle to attending to the concrete needs of the many embodied, vulnerable others who confront us with the need for action. In the following chapter, we will consider how Levinas’s presentation of these transcendent conditions on which alterity appears to depend have been criticized by Badiou. But before examining Badiou’s critique, and the possible meaning of this ethical vigilance towards which Levinas leads us, let us first turn to consider how Otherwise than Being, Levinas’s second major work, deepens this understanding of ethical subjectivity.

NOTES

1 The capitalized ‘Other’ is typically used to translate the French l’autrui as opposed to l’autre, and it indicates an absolute relation to the other person, independent of particular characteristics, of factors that might differentiate this person from that person. The usage is not entirely consistent.

2 Diane Perpich provides an excellent discussion of the relation between Levinas’s ethics and more traditional ethical enterprises in The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas (Perpich, 2008).

3 One could explore further how Plato’s Good Beyond Being, as acknowledged by Levinas, allows for alterity, or whether the Other is still subsumed in the self in our relation to the Good. Levinas suggests that the notion of desire presented in Diotima’s speech in the Symposium is a form of incest, while at the same time pointing out that Plato presents discourse as discourse with God in the Phaedrus and thus suggesting that ‘metaphysics is the essence of language with God; it leads above being’ (TI, p. 297). The relationship between self, Other and teaching for Plato is more complex than the simple rejection of maieutics implies.

4 This notion of non-reciprocity in Levinas has been criticized, for example Derrida suggests that this must depend on a metaphysical symmetry of asymmetrical responsibility (Derrida, 2001, p. 160). We will explore how Levinas takes up this theme of the irreversibility of relation in Otherwise than Being in the following chapter.

5 I focus on these two approaches to language in particular because they appear to have influenced Levinas’s own approach.

6 For a more detailed examination of the relation between Heidegger and Levinas’s philosophies of language, see Strhan, 2011.

7 Cf. Fagan 2009, p. 11 for a particularly helpful discussion of the relation between the Third, the political and ideas of justice in Levinas’s thought.

8 See Bernasconi 2010 for more on how Levinas’s understanding of responsibility contrasts with mainstream moral philosophy on this point.

9 I do not propose to compare Levinas and psychoanalytic perspectives on alterity and affectivity. Todd has offered an illuminating reading of how Levinas allows us to see possibilities for ethical relationality in education, informed by psychoanalytic readings of ethics, in Learning from the Other: Levinas, Psychoanalysis and Ethical Possibilities in Education (2003a), and Critchley has likewise given a thoughtful reading of how the ethical demand proposed by Levinas can be related to Freud’s idea of trauma in Infinitely Demanding (2007).

10 For detailed examination of this, see Bernasconi’s ‘Failure of Communication as a Surplus: Dialogue and Lack of Dialogue between Buber and Levinas’ (Bernasconi, 1988).

11 Some provocative implications of these dynamics, following Levinas, are explored by Clarence Joldersma in ‘The Importance of Enjoyment and Inspiration for Learning from a Teacher’
(Joldersma, 2008) and Todd in ‘A Fine Risk To Be Run? The Ambiguity of Eros and Teacher Responsibility’ (Todd, 2003b), but there is valuable work still to be done in further considering these modes of relationality opened up by Levinas’s work.

12 Examples of such reactions are explored by Todd in relation to Melanie Klein’s case studies (Todd, 2003a, pp. 32–3).