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(English version)

The encounter of the other from an educational standpoint

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L'altérité ne se résorbe plus dans mon activité de pensant. (Pillant, 2021, p. 47)

Abstract

Driven by educational motivations and concerns, in this article I am interested in discussing the encounter of the other—its welcoming. My goal is not to derive specific pedagogical actions. Rather, my goal is to carry out a propaedeutic theoretical attempt at reflecting on some of the fundamental questions that arise when we try to understand the encounter with the other. In the first part of the article, I make a short incursion into the vast problem of individualism; more precisely, the intention is to highlight some aspects of the historical processes through which the self of individualism came to impose itself as a model of life in Western societies. This part paves the way for the second part of the article, which is devoted to Emmanuel Lévinas's ideas about self and other. Lévinas has produced an innovative approach that inspires much of the current research on ethics, not only among philosophers but educators as well. In turning to Lévinas I endeavour to point to and comment on some of the assumptions that we find at the core of his account. In the last part of the article, I explore what can be learned from these assumptions from an educational standpoint.

Keywords: Self and other; individualism; Lévinas, ethics, responsibility; subjectification

1. Introduction

Welcoming the other is one of the central problems in contemporary ethical projects for several reasons. One of the most important is the massive human mobilization that the 20th and 21st centuries have witnessed. Human mobilization puts self and other face to face or indirectly (for example, virtually). Another reason, related to the first, revolves around the modes of subjectification that modern and advanced capitalism have brought with them. Capitalist forms of subjectification emphasize the idea of a free and autonomous individualistic self whose ties with the social, cultural, and historical dimensions of life are only derivative: in no way are they considered to be constitutive of the self's core. It has been argued that these forms of subjectification lead to weak and alienating forms of alterity and, consequently, to the need to rethink the human and its relation to the world (Fischbach, 2012; Martin, 2004; Mészáros, 2010).

Driven by educational motivations and concerns, in this article I am interested in discussing the encounter of the other—its welcoming. My goal is not to derive specific pedagogical actions. Rather, it might be more accurately expressed as a propaedeutic theoretical attempt at reflecting on some of the fundamental questions that arise when we try to understand the encounter with the other. In the first part of the article, I make a short incursion into the vast problem of individualism; more precisely, the intention is to highlight some aspects of the historical processes through which the self of individualism came to impose itself as a model of life in Western societies. This part paves the way for the second part of the article, which is devoted to Emmanuel Lévinas's ideas about self and other. Lévinas has produced an innovative approach that inspires much of the current research on ethics, not only among philosophers (see, e.g., Hand, 2009) but educators such as myself as well (see, e.g., Ernest, 2009; Maheux and Proulx, 2017; Radford and Silva, 2021). In turning to Lévinas I endeavour to point to and comment on some of the assumptions that we find at the core of his account. In the last part of the article, I explore what can be learned from these assumptions from an educational standpoint.

2. The self of individualism

In the contemporary world, the self of individualism is the figure of subjectivity *par excellence*. Ideologically, it is not presented as one choice among many, but as *the natural* way of being. Its naturalization, however, is sustained at every moment by a whole legal apparatus that operates in full light, through a whole series of legal precepts. These precepts make the individual appear as the centre of society and endow him with attributes such as autonomy and freedom. What is often lost sight of is that the self of individualism is a historical construct. As such, it is the result of a series of societal processes and forces of different kinds (economic, political, cultural, etc.).

Several historians and philosophers have shown how the self of modernity and post-modernity is anchored in the conception of the human that emerged in the early Middle Ages and the Western Renaissance (Arendt, 1958; Taylor, 1989), when the incipient artisanal capitalism and new forms of economic production led to the emergence of a new social consciousness that culminated in what Morris (1972) has called “the discovery of the individual.”

Indeed, if we consult the political treatises of the early Middle Ages, we can see how, little by little, the individual's image of society and the very image that individuals had of themselves underwent a correlated change. One interesting example is the *Liber de moribus hominum et officiis nobilium (Book of the Manners of Men and the Offices of the Nobility)*, written around 1275 by the Dominican friar Jacobus de Cessolis in Italy (modern translation in de Cessolis, 2008). While other treatises have portrayed late medieval societies through organicist metaphors, Jacobus does not. In the organicist metaphor, society is considered like a body, where each part has its own position and role to play. By contrast, in Jacobus's treatise, a new society is envisioned—one in which individuals are tied to each other by *obligations*. These obligations are of a *contractual* nature. Jacobus presents “the idea of a kingdom organized around professional ties and associations, ties that are in turn regulated by moral law, rather than around kinship” (Adams, 2009, p.1).

There are a few points that deserve our attention in the medieval conceptions of society that may shed some light on the history of individualism. Let us start by noticing that the question of self—the question of the self’s identity—is not addressed in medieval treatises. The *nature* of identity or the *nature* of the self was not a problem for medieval individuals. As Taylor (2003) notes, this was not because individuals in the Middle Ages did not have identities or were not occupied with their own being. The question simply did not arise. The question of the self is a question of modernity. For such a tremendous question to arise, new societal processes and the concomitant new forms of social consciousness needed to be put in place. Our sense of self—how each one of us comes to experience our self in our daily life, and the manners in which we come to see ourselves and others—are framed and distributed across the various processes of society: cultural, political, economic, aesthetic, and so on. Jacobus’s *Liber*, with the new vision of the state as regulated by rules rather than by the natural transcendental order of the organicists, hints, indeed, at the collapse of an old social order and the beginning of a new one. This new order was driven by the spread of commercial activities that, in the midst of a new “redistribution of political and social capital” (Adams, 2009, p. 5), brought with it, in a lengthy process of secularization, the construction of a new society (Lenoir, 2022).

This new order also brought new forms of experience for the self and the possibilities of new forms of subjectification that culminated in the conception of the individual as a product of their own action. The individual appears as the sculptor of their own destiny. It is indeed in this way that the individual is posited by Jean Pic della Mirandole, where, in 1486, this author imagines that God has placed the human in the middle of the world “without a determined place and without his own aspect ... so that, sovereign of yourself, you complete your own form freely, like a painter or a sculptor (*ut tui ipsius quasi arbitrarius honorariusque plastes et fctor, in quam malueris tute formam effingas*)” (della Mirandola, 2008, p. 8).

Since then, the Western world has embarked upon a new path on which, unlike other historical periods, the individual was gradually placed at the centre of the universe (Todorov, 2000). In terms of Lipovetsky (1989), a process of personalization then took place; that is, a process that “has massively promoted and embodied a fundamental value, that of personal fulfillment” (p.7). Modernity produced procedures of subjectification from which emerged, gloriously, a new vision of the human: the individual as foundation. By this I mean that the individual became their own foundation and the foundation of the world. As the French philosopher Étienne Balibar (2014) says, “it is only a posteriori, when they have already constituted themselves as individuals [...] that individuals [of modernity] can relate to each other in different ways. But these relations are by definition accidental, they do not define their essence” (p. 213).

In the field of politics, neoliberalism encapsulates this idea of the individual as the foundation by considering it the foundation of society. Philosophy proclaims this same idea by asserting that the foundation of the individual is in their freedom of action (as does Kantian philosophy). In the field of psychology, this idea is affirmed in the conception of the individual as someone who is formed from within, from their own interiority. Thus, for example, the mind is considered an attribute of the individual. In the field of education, this idea of the individual as the

foundation of oneself has repercussions on the concept of learning, which is conceived as the result of the ideas that the student produces himself from their own actions and representations. In mathematics education, as constructivism tells us, the student constructs their own knowledge (von Glasersfeld, 1995). Figure 1 summarizes these ideas.

Politics	The foundation of society is the individual.
Philosophy	The foundation of the individual is its freedom of action.
Psychology	The mind is an attribute of the individual.
Education	Learning is the result of ideas that the student forms from their own actions.
Mathematics Education	The student constructs their own knowledge.

Figure 1. The individual as foundation (Radford, 2021a).

Figure 1 shows that each of the societal spheres (Radford, 2021a) translates, in its own way and in its own language, only the most general possible ideal form of the human as conceived by modernity and postmodernity. It is a conception that strips the human of all its social, historical, and cultural determinations, and thus turns him into a languid, emptied self who carries in its innermost core only one thing—what philosophers call its *ipseity*; that is, its selfhood.

3. Rethinking the self beyond knowledge and representation: Lévinas’s ethics

Rethinking the self beyond knowledge and representation is a task that Emmanuel Lévinas has given to himself.

Lévinas starts from the recognition that all Western ethical systems have been configured from the perspective of the self: the other of the ethical relation is grasped, conceived, and understood in relation to the self. Take Kant’s categorical imperative, for example. The categorical imperative answers the question: *What should I do?* Kant states this imperative as follows: “*act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law*” (Kant, 2006, p. 31, original emphasis). “I should not steal” is one example since you do not want to find yourself in the situation that someone steals from you. Hobbes’s ethics does pretty much the same thing. Self and other enter into an ethical relation trying to find a midpoint where each one feels safe and satisfied. Following the ideas of early modernity that we find germinating in Jacobus de Cessolis’s 13th century treatise mentioned above, in Hobbes, the ethical relation is ensured by an either explicit or explicit contract that self and other establish. Self sees the other from its own perspective, and so does the other.

Lévinas takes a different path, one that wants to avoid the other to appear through the self’s imperialist conceptual gaze. He wants to move beyond the reifying lens of Husserl’s

phenomenology, where the object of perception and representation, despite its independence vis-à-vis the perceiving self, falls under the conceptual apparatuses of the self—under the power of self's thought and intentionality. "In the intelligibility of [Husserlian] representations," Lévinas says, "the distinction between me and the object, between interior and exterior, is effaced" (2006, p. 129). The self dominates and absorbs the object into its own categories. For Lévinas, the application of Husserl's intentional phenomenology to the encountering of the other becomes problematic, as "the very occurrence of representation, is the possibility for the other to be determined by the [self] ... without introducing alterity into it" (p. 129). "The same is in relation with the other but in such a way that the other does not determine the same; it is always the same that determines the other" (p. 130). Ethics, hence, must find a new approach.

3.1 Decentering the self

First, Lévinas removes the self from the privileged place with which it has traditionally been endowed and from which it has been conceived as a constitutive consciousness and the principle of the ethical relation. "Western philosophy has most often been an ontology: a reduction of the Other to the Same" (Lévinas, 2006, p. 33). In Lévinas's ethical approach, it is not from the self and its acts that ethics appears. Stripped of its imperialism, the self appears conceived not as the origin of the ethical relation, but as the *result* of it. To say the least, Lévinas's ethics turns things 180 degrees.

3.2 Not knowledge, but presence

Second, Lévinas realizes that the imperialist gaze of the self rests on the representational and conceptual apparatuses that allow the self to attend to the other in the way it does. In other words, he finds that the very fabric of the imperialist ethical relation is *knowledge*. For him, self's consciousness is such that, unavoidably, it is continuously reifying the other. Lévinas, then, tries to find a different way, and suggests that the very fabric of the ethical relation is *presence*, the presence of the other. There is room now for the other to come into existence not through the cogitations of the self's mind, its conceptual apparatuses, and modes of representation, but as something that should be beyond concept, something that permanently evades the stratagems and ploys of conceptual thematization. He thinks of the other as a *sensible irruption*, almost an unexpected appearance. This unthematizable other that makes a sensible irruption in the self's life Lévinas calls a "face" (1982, p. 81); that is, a signification "without context." In other words, the other as "face" does not take on meaning by referring to something else (which is characteristic of conceptual meaning).

The face is meaning on its own. You are you. In this sense, we can say that the face is not 'seen'. It is that which cannot become a content, which your thought would embrace; it is the incontrovertible, it leads you beyond (au-delà). (1982, p. 81)

In this sensual irruption of the other as face, we do not see or perceive the other through common vision, for vision is already, in Lévinas's account, of the order of the conceptual, the order of knowledge; "vision is the search for an adequacy; it is that which par excellence absorbs being" (Lévinas, 1982, p. 81).

Removing the self from its privileged place of constitutive consciousness is, hence, the first step towards a new ethics. The other appears now as non graspable and non-thematizable through the ontological categories of being. But this step is not enough. The self still has to *respond* to the appearing, to the face. And it is here where ethics begins.

3.3 Ethics as responsibility

In Lévinas's account, ethics is not an ethics *of* responsibility. Ethics is understood *as* the responsibility *for* others. The self is responsible for the other despite itself; it is a responsibility that comes before any consciousness, any commitment and choice (Lévinas, 1981).

Responsibility, in this account, is indeed “the essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity ... It is in ethics, understood as responsibility, that the very node of the subjective is knotted” (1982, p. 91). Lévinas goes on to say that “responsibility is not, in fact, a simple attribute of subjectivity, as if subjectivity already existed in itself, prior to the ethical relation. Subjectivity is not for itself; it is, once again, initially for the other” (pp. 92-93).

Hence, subjectivity does not emanate from the self. For Lévinas, subjectivity is based on hospitality, on welcome, on the reception of the other. “Truth, now, is no longer the adaptation of the object to the consciousness of the thinking self, but is the reception of the other” (Nodari, 2010, p. 177).

To better understand this crucial concept of Lévinasian ethics let us turn to an episode from Yves Pillant's book *Une philosophie de la rencontre*. The episode happens in 1940-41 during World War II:

Magda Trocmé suddenly heard a knock at the door. When she opened it, she found a shivering woman in front of her, freezing from the snow, visibly frightened. She was the first Jewish refugee fleeing Nazi persecution to come forward (...). The woman asked her in a weak, worried voice if she could come in. “Naturally, come in, come in,” Magda Trocmé immediately replied. (Pillant, 2021, p. 59)

The presence of the other comes to Magda Trocmé in a sensible way: through the proximity of the body, through touch—the physical contact of skin to skin or distant contact with the eyes. The presence of the other is the exposure of its vulnerability—and so it goes for Magda, who, by the presence of the other encounters herself exposed. Pillant notes that

This woman who emerges is exposed in her full vulnerability: the cold that hurts her body, the danger of being caught by the police that provokes fears and psychological pressures, the isolation that says a condition of great dependence on the help that is the other, the extreme obsession of what happens to her loved ones. In front of this woman thus exposed on the doorstep, Madga is also suddenly exposed. She is first of all immediately put in a transgression: the Vichy law forbids to open her door and the respect of the law belongs to the morals of that time. She is thus exposed socially, but just as much in terms of what she has to decide, immediately, in this face to face encounter. In an instant the vulnerability inhabits Magda and the woman in one and same envelope. (Pillant, 2021, p. 60)

Lévinas argues that “To hear the other’s misery crying out for justice does not consist in representing an image, but in posing oneself as responsible” (Lévinas, 2006, p. 237). Thus, when Magda opens the door, it is not a representation of the woman—the persecuted, fragile cold being standing there, in front of the door—but an other whose presence is a *call* to Magda’s responsibility. And in posing oneself as responsible, “the relation with the other is accomplished as service and as hospitality” (Lévinas, 2006, p. 334). “I welcome the Other who presents himself in my home by opening my home to him” (2006, p.185).

3.4 *The a-systemic self*

As mentioned above, Lévinas removes the self from the privileged place it occupies in major Western philosophical systems. What is then this self that comes into presence with the other? To answer this question, we have to bear in mind that, joining a postmodernist trend, Lévinas embraces an a-systemic way of thinking. That is, for him, self and other are not part of any totality or whole. But how can this be possible? For self and other to be beyond any system, Levinas needs to think of them in a radical new way, beyond Hobbes and Kant—and Hegel too: a self as *radically unique* whose uniqueness cannot come but from within itself.

It might be argued that this is nothing else but the kind of self that emerges from Kant’s work. True, but Lévinas radicalizes Kant’s subjectivism. Kant assumed that self and other share a universal reason, and this sharing makes them participants in a whole—the whole or totality of the world of Reason. It is this idea that is at the heart of Kant’s categorical imperative (Radford, 2021b). Lévinas wants to go further, *beyond totality*. The solution he found consists in placing the self (this “absolute commencement” (2006, p. 135)) in an isolated site—Lévinas says “demeure” (p. 162); that is *dwelling*)—*separated* from everything. In this dwelling, the self lives a happy life; it is a fulfilled being, “a citizen of paradise” (p. 154). And it is only because the self is radically separated from others that it can start from itself and its individuation can proceed.

The separation is the very act of individuation, the possibility, in a general way, for an entity which is posed in the being, to be posed there not by its references to a whole, by its place in a system, but starting from itself. The fact of starting from oneself is equivalent to the separation. (Lévinas, 2006, p. 334)

Lévinas insists that “Separation is accomplished positively as the interiority of a being referring to itself and maintaining itself of itself” (2006, p. 333). Separation is what allows the self to avoid falling into totality. “To separate oneself, to not remain bound up with totality, is positively to be *somewhere*, at home” (2006, p. 190; emphasis in the original).

We end up, hence, with a figure of the self as a self-maintaining entity, which finds enjoyment in the contents of its own life—not in the bread that it eats but in the rejoicing surplus that entails eating the bread. “We live from our labor which ensures our subsistence; but we also live from our labor because it fills (delights or saddens) life” (Lévinas, 2006, p. 114).

How can this self enter into relation with others? How can these paradisiac beings enter into ethical relations? This question is all the more difficult since

The alterity of the Other does not depend on any quality that would distinguish it from me, because a distinction of this nature would imply between us precisely this kind of community that already cancels the alterity. (Lévinas, 2006, p. 211)

This self-sustaining happy self who lives at home with itself and whose “happiness of enjoyment affirms it at home with itself” (p. 152) consumes what itself is not (e.g., bread) and is, as such, sufficiency in its non-sufficiency: “it is enjoyment of ‘something else,’ never of itself ... enrooted in what it is not” (p. 152).

The enrooting in the self of what this self is not is a constant source of inquietude that materializes in the sudden presence of the visage: the fragile and cold woman’s knocking at the door.

This relation between the other and me that shines in its expression does not lead to number or concept. The other remains infinitely transcendent, infinitely foreign, but its face where its epiphany occurs and which calls upon me, breaks with the world which can be common to us. (Lévinas, 2006, p. 211)

Yet, the fragile and cold woman talks: “Can I come in?” Lévinas says that in addressing the self,

The solipsistic dialectic of the consciousness always suspicious of its captivity in the Same, is interrupted. The ethical relation which underlies the discourse, is not, indeed, a variety of the consciousness whose ray starts from the Self. It puts in question the self. (2006, p. 213)

Instead of thematizing and representing, “words decide the issue over [conceptualizing] vision” (2006, p. 212). In this way, the self’s home is witness to a non-assimilating relation that is made of hospitality.

Lévinas’s insistence on the impossibility of conceptually apprehending the other, that our experience of the other is the excess of Being over the thought that wants to contain it (Farías Gutiérrez, 2021), that the carnal experience of the other is not a cognitive experience, leads to an interesting insight into the language of ethics: to a kind of paradox.

The *paradox* here is that what this ethical language seeks to thematize is by definition unthematizable, it is a conception of the subject constituted in a relation to alterity irreducible to ontology, that is to say, irreducible to thematization or conceptuality. Levinas’s work is a *phenomenology* of the *unphenomenologizable*, or what he calls the order of the enigma as distinct from that of the phenomenon. (Critchney, 1999, p. 184)

In this ethical language, one must try to say what cannot be said. For Lévinas, this language moves within a sphere of signification that is of the order of the sensible—one that does not turn toward the world of idealities; that is, of knowledge. It is an order that is described in terms of proximity, in which proximity is the signification of the sensible that “does not belong to the movement of cognition” (Levinas, 2006, p. 61). It is this new realm of signification that led him to distinguish between *what is said* and *the saying* (*le Dit* and *le Dire*). While the language of

cognition is the said, always naming and reifying things, the language of ethics is the saying always avoiding the realm of understanding, bringing rather to the fore feeling and living. The former is about *thematization*; the latter is about *exposition*. “The *one* is exposed to the *other* as a skin is exposed to what wounds it” (Lévinas, 1978, p. 83, emphasis in the original). In this exposure, “human spiritual existence can be affirmed as sensibility and vulnerability of the flesh” (Cozza Sayão, 2011, p. 116).

To sum up, Lévinas attempts to rethink ethics from a perspective that runs counter to the legendary egocentric and logocentric position of the subject-object relation of Western thought. He turns with penetrating and accusing eyes to what has been at the centre of this intellectual tradition since antiquity: knowledge and reason. In this sense, Lévinas joins the line of postmodern thinkers disenchanted “with the reign of reason and all its works and the pluralistic groping for a livable community in an intellectually and politically oppressive world” (Min, 1998, p. 577). However, he distinguishes himself from these disenchanted thinkers by radicalizing the subjects of ethics (i.e., self and other) and the place ethics come to occupy between them. First, he is led to decentre the self, which is no longer considered the origin of the ethical relation. The self becomes a *product* of the ethical relation. Second, the ethical relation is one of *disinterested responsibility* for the other. This move requires him to think of other and self as capable of entering into communication, into a “dialogue” (Lévinas, 2006, p. 104) through a language that does not thematize nor subject the other: the language of sensibility, proximity; the language of the saying. His work is certainly bold and daring. It emerges as a cry that comes out of the deepest subsoils of our acquired habits of thought to vindicate the value of human dignity. In the attempt to move beyond the imperialist gaze of the self, Lévinas seeks to encounter the Other as *it is*; and to do so, Lévinas demands that we put in abeyance our conceptual epistemological categories and mechanisms (Radford, 2021b).

The Other is appreciated precisely *as* Other, in her radical alterity and irreducible singularity, only when thought renounces its totalitarian hubris and learns to think of the Other on its own terms ... “beyond essence.” (Min, 1998, pp. 573-574, emphasis in original).

There are, notwithstanding the genial move with which Lévinas tries to break with the traditional Western schemes of thinking about self and other, some inherent difficulties.

4. The eviction of the world

The first difficulty, which has been brought to light by Anselm Kyongsuk Min (1998), is that the Lévinasian self and other are the effects of an abstraction whose price to be paid is very high. Thus, the other that we find in its angelic presence has been stripped of its constitutive social, political, and cultural nature. It is an other which, by its presence, covers us with the light of its epiphany. We meet the other in an *unmediated* way; we meet the other directly, in a sublime encounter of two souls. The whole of the mediating, historical-cultural, constitutive relations vanishes into thin air and we end up encountering the other as a historical abstraction.

The Other of Levinas’s is “concrete” only in the phenomenological sense of the lived immediacy of the face-to-face encounter. One wonders, however, how

concrete such an encounter really is, whether in fact it is not an abstraction, precisely because the Other is separated from all the mediating sociohistorical conditions that account for the vulnerability and degradation of the Other. (Min, 1998, p. 580)

The abstraction that Lévinas carries out and that supports his whole ethical a-systematic system remains blind to the sociocultural aspects in which we live our lives. The path he envisions to move away from the subjecting mechanisms put in place through knowledge, technology, and politics consists in isolating and insulating self and other. Insulated from the whole turmoil of injustice and subjection, self and other can see each other, can meet each other, Lévinas expects, without the haunting prejudices of knowledge and consciousness. Self and other can now see each other as they *are*—as subjects *emanating each one from within*. Thus, while one would have expected to have moved beyond individualism, what one finds at the end is not the isolated egocentric self, but a couple of isolated selves seeing each other. The Cartesian cogitating ego is replaced with two sentient egos.

Levinas finds a corrective of this egocentrism in heterocentric subjectivity, the ego questioned and challenged by the irreducibly transcendent claim of the Other. The ethical center has shifted from the ego to the Other. Levinas's ethical metaphysics, however, remains an essentially Cartesian philosophy of the subject, albeit with a different ethical content. It still remains a philosophy of the subject as individual, without intrinsic sociohistorical mediation... The individualist subjectivism of modern philosophy is only abstractly negated, not concretely *aufgehoben*. Levinas's metaphysics remains infected by the very subjectivism it has not wholly overcome. (Min, 1998, p. 584)

In fact, Lévinas's problem is not with the modern and postmodern subjectivist stance of the human. As we saw, he radicalizes subjectivism. He pushes it to its last consequences. He pushes the philosophy of the human to a place where not even Kant ever dared to go. His problem is to think of ethics in a human world free of systems. Such a world has been the dream of postmodern thinkers. In this context, Lévinas makes a radicalizing move: To move beyond any system, one should bracket knowledge, history, culture, and everything that may insinuate the presence of a system.

Contrary to the philosophers of the existence, we are not going to find the relation with the being respected in its being—and in this sense absolutely external, that is to say metaphysical—on the being to the world, on the *concern* (*souci*) and the *making* (*faire*) of the Heideggerian *Dasein* (Lévinas, 2006, p. 111)

Lévinas is absolutely right in pointing out the oppressive role that knowledge and technology have had in supporting the mechanisms through which the self has legendarily subjected the other. And it is in the course of the elaboration of this a-systemic stance that we find the paradisiac self-sustaining individuals each living a fulfilled life. It is true that, in doing so, Lévinas's theorizing does not move beyond the contemporary neo-liberal conceptions of the individual and the social. However, and this I think is the surprising move, the novelty Lévinas

offers us is that, in his account, these individuals may not know that in their most inner natural constitution they are bearers of an ethical predisposition: an unconditional ethical relation that manifests itself in the disinterested responsibility for the other—the compelling responsibility that Magda Trocmé feels when the fragile and cold woman knocks at her door.

However, a true encounter with the other, I would say, following Min, cannot be achieved by abstracting our earthly conditions. Our encounter with the other does take place at the very heart of those conditions, in our mundane and everyday contexts, in the concrete and material life in which, unfortunately, people oppress, marginalize, discriminate against, and control the other. Ethics must not be a mere encounter between self and other, but a *liberating force* that helps us to confront the historical, political and economic sources and structures of oppression, violence and inequality (Radford, 2021b).

5. Welcoming the other in social praxis

A second inherent difficulty in Lévinas's marvelous ethical system concerns the concrete possibilities of welcoming the other in social praxis. Lévinas demands that we take the other as it is, and by this he means without the participation of our conceptual filters (a participation that would lead us to mobilize reason and logocentrism, which he endeavours to put aside). In his book *Entre l'un et l'autre*, Dugravier asks the following questions: “Can I simply (re)cognize the other as such?” (2021, p. 20). In order for the self to recognize the other, “Must there not be a relationship with the absolutely other *for him to be other?*” (p. 20; emphasis in the original). “How can I meet the other if no experience of life with him is given to me, if I can know nothing of him nor can I hope to know him?” (p. 22).

The first question leads us to the issue of what is required for the other to be recognized as other against a backdrop that requires the absolute absence of conceptual relations. The only recognition that is allowed is non-conceptual—one that moves within the sphere of sentiency, a kind of sphere that repels and represses consciousness, concepts, representations, and understanding.

Dugravier's second question digs deeper and leads us to the problem that presents the lack of some general common ground between self and other. The encounter occurs outside any life experience; the self has to bracket its own life to welcome the other. But how is this possible? Is not the bracketing of one's own life the emptying of the self? And “What to say of the other, and above all what to say to the other, if all discourse is thematization?” (Dugravier, 2021, p. 23). The Lévinasian encounter, as mentioned before, requires the absolute abstraction of any earthy conditions. We are here at the summit of total abstraction. *At the same time*, in the precise moment of the encounter of the other, and side by side with this abstraction, Lévinas effectuates the most concrete singularization. “You are you” (Lévinas, 1982, p. 81). By the same token, the other is the other *as such*. “The face is not a modality of the quiddity, an answer to a question, but the correlative of what is anterior to any question” (Lévinas, 2006, p. 193). We have here two extreme singularities face-to-face, without anything constitutively in common—two extreme singularities whose only commonality is not to share anything.

Let us imagine a mathematics class. It is the first day of school. The children arrive with a variety of expectations. They are to be welcomed by their new teacher. How will the teacher welcome them? The sensitivity of pre-linguistic and pre-conceptual proximity is absolutely indispensable. But is it enough? What will the teacher *say* to the children, and what will the children *say* to the teacher? The precariousness of receptive passivity and sentiency reach their own limits here.

Dugravier is not alone in asking the previous questions. Similar queries are made by Pillant (2021), in his book *Une philosophie de la rencontre*. There is, from the outset, notes our author, a relation of two terms whose fundamental characteristic is non-coincidence. The self and the other do not coincide; they are *different*.

In facing the other, it is not a relation to the other such as a relation to things that is established, but a kinetic relation that begins in the opening that the other provokes by expelling me from my stability and my mastery of the world. *In the encounter, the other is not a fragment of the world, it is what detaches itself from it and calls me beyond myself. My passivity of reception comes here to drag me, to put me in exceedance (dépassement) and to move me: the other places me in answer.* (Pillant, 2021, p. 50; emphasis in the original)

Following Lévinas, in Pillant's work, self and other are affected, but remain radically different, as already given. The other comes to challenge the stillness of the self, calls it, challenges it with its presence, moves it, but that which moves is already given in its own singularity.

In his analysis of Magda and the visitor, Pillant asks whether or not, between the appearance of the other and Magda's first response, there is a knowledge that seeps in.

Can we say that the encounter is without knowledge and that we will have to get to know each other afterwards? Yes and no. Magda knows at first sight the danger this woman is in, and the visitor knows that she is knocking at the door of a home that could give her shelter. Does this "prior" knowledge say anything about the encounter? It says the situation without saying anything about Magda's response. The word that says "enter" does not pertain to any knowledge. On the contrary, if it were a matter of comparing, weighing, evaluating risks and benefits, the answer would be ready. And the dialogue itself, before being an exchange of conscious content, is the establishment of a felt encounter between an I and a you. I and YOU are absolutely separate, and even if people knew each other beforehand, their intimate secret would remain inaccessible to each other, each remaining radically unique, having an irreproducible, inimitable mode of existence. (Pillant, 2021, p. 64)

It seems to me that the interpretation offered by Pillant, prolonging Lévinas's reflection, wants to save at all costs what we could call the radical separation of the self and the other from their concrete context. Thus, faced with the irradicable presence or mediation of "prior" knowledge (the historical context of the German occupation, etc.) impossible to deny in the encounter between Magda and the visitor, Pillant attempts to set it aside by arguing that this prior knowledge "Says

the situation without saying anything about Magda's response. The word that says 'enter' does not belong to any knowledge" (2021, p. 64). The logic of radicality that we see in motion here needs to separate the ethical stance from the self's understanding of the situation. Ethics lives in the "archaic pulsation proper to feeling" (Pillant, 2021, p. 75). This separation is nothing less than the great problem that has tirelessly pursued the major Western philosophical systems, namely the problem of the relation between the sensual and the conceptual. It appears, for instance, in Plato, Kant, and Husserl, in their distinction between the sensible and reason. "In sensibility," Husserl says, "we distinguish *primordial sensibility*, which contains no sediment of reason, and secondary sensibility, which arises through a production of reason" (Husserl, 1989, p. 345; emphasis in original).

6. Welcoming the other as an educational problem

I would like to suggest here a different interpretation from the ethical relation that Lévinas articulates: one in which, "otherness is no longer resorbed in my activity as a thinker" (Pillant, 2021, p. 47). Nor is otherness resorbed in my activity as a sentient being. Consciousness loses the primacy given to it in the rationalist approaches of classical ontology, such as Husserl's, in the exact same way as sentience loses the primacy given to it in empiricist approaches. I would like to suggest an interpretation in which consciousness and sentience are two sides of a same coin. In this view, the self and the other are maintained in their difference but, instead of thematizing this difference as radical, I would like to see it first of all *dialectically*; that is to say as a historical-cultural difference that is relative to the terms of the relation and to the relation itself. It is not a question of making difference an identity concept. It is about making it a dialectical concept, where the other will always be a surplus beyond theoretical graspings of the self, and reciprocally. In the dialectical encounter self and other are capable of producing what François Jullien (2012, p. 61) calls "a common of intelligible" (*un commun de l'intelligible*). The texture of this common of intelligible is made up of the tensions that the gap between self and other brings with it, bringing thereby life while "activating, intensifying, and renewing it" (p. 73). My interpretation is motivated by the educational problem that the welcoming of the other presents to teachers and educators every day. While I do not pretend to be following in the steps of Lévinas's principles (which not only make no room for a Hegelian dialectics, but explicitly erects itself against it), I do think that Lévinas's work can be a source of inspiration.

In Lévinas's ethics, as we have seen above, the whole effort consists in evacuating knowledge from the relation to the other. He finds in knowledge and reason the contaminants of a relation that wants to rise beyond the imperialism of the logos. It is a matter of following the contemporary path of "freeing man from the categories reserved for things" (Abensour, 1991, p. 575), of going beyond sociality:

not the sociality from a common element to the beings in relation—the reason, the belonging to the human kind—but a sociality where the Encounter is the relation with the other as such, in its incomparable *unicity*—and not with the other as part of the world. (Abensour, 1991, p. 575)

This relinquishment of knowledge and reason is the strength of Lévinas's work and, at the same time, its weakness. The relinquishment of knowledge and reason is the Achilles heel of his system. Lévinas conceptualizes knowledge and reason as entities that *cannot be changed*, as if they have always been and always will be instruments of the enslavement and subjection of the other. The human appears as powerless to effectuate changes. I opt for a conception where individuals do have the capacity to reflect on what they are doing and to embark in a critical appraisal of the relations between self and other that we find in society and that we enact willingly or unwillingly (Radford, 2021b). From this viewpoint, ethics can appear as an invitation to break with the imperialist gaze of the self not by emptying it from its cultural-historical constitutive dimensions, but rather by learning to put into question our habits of thought and conduct—what Scott calls “the question of ethics”: “an interruption in an ethos, an interruption in which the definitive values that govern thought and everyday action lose their power and authority” (1990, p. 4). It is an interruption that requires us “to become alert to exclusions and to forgotten aspects in a people's history, to overhear what is usually drowned out by the predominant values, to rethink what is ordinarily taken for granted” (Scott, 1990, p. 7). The constant fear that plagues Lévinas's ethical system inevitably confines it to a sensitive, non-conceptual, unreflective relationship. The critical stance that I am suggesting here would be placed at the very heart of ethics. It is a requirement to a veritable answer to the Freirean question: How can we change our world? (Freire, 2005). Without a reflective and political stance, any possibility vanishes into thin air and we are left with a reified metaphysical ethical relation.

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