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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Conserving the dignity of teaching through ethics as ‘*mise en question*’

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Email: katja.castillo@oulu.fi**Abstract**

In this article, we examine Emmanuel Levinas' understanding of ethics through a conceptual analysis of ethics as ‘*mise en question*’. We contribute our perspective to the conversation on the Levinasian approach to education provoked by Alistair Miller, Soyoung Lee and Paul Standish. Through a systematic reading of Levinas' texts as well as his unedited notes, we formulate a stance to support Levinasian ethics in the context of education. We argue that Levinasian ethics understood through *mise en question* helps reformulate the pedagogical relationship as a dynamic relationship where both the teacher and the student are called into question by the other. The otherness of the teacher challenges the student towards responsibility, to be a student-in-question, and the otherness of the student summons the teacher to respond, to be a teacher-in-question. In this way, the dignity of teaching can be conserved. By analysing Levinas' unedited notes, we trace his commitment to teaching as a dialectic process where the subjectivity of the subject shifts away from being to a being-in-question.

KEYWORDS

Ethics, Levinas, pedagogical relationship, questioning, subjectivity, teaching

INTRODUCTION

‘It is through the question of the student interrogating the teacher, not only through the question of the teacher giving birth to the student's spirit, how written teaching can conserve its dignity of teaching, that is to say its spiritual oeuvre’ (Levinas, 2009a, p. 253 [trans. Castillo]).¹

Levinas' phenomenological ethics has been under fascinating scrutiny in the conversation provoked by Alistair Miller (2017), followed by responses from Soyoung Lee (2019) and Paul Standish (2019). In this article, we intend to negotiate between the rich phenomenological language of Levinasian meta-ethics and what Miller (2019, p. 444) calls the more prosaic dimensions of teaching. Soyoung Lee's (2019) thorough and dismantling response to Miller provides an inspiring examination of the ethical dimension in teaching and shows how at the very heart of teaching lies a profound ethical demand for the teacher to respond to the students' questions. These questions should be addressed beyond ethical systems, beyond ready answers, but with infinite responsibility. Lee suggests that the unsureness, the disturbance of teachers' sense of security, should be regarded as a value itself. Standish (2019) tackles Miller's accusation that Levinasian ethics provides only an esoteric discourse without substantial repercussions for any serious formulations of moral theory. Standish positions Levinas' philosophy firmly within continental philosophical conversations, and at the same time remarks how distinct philosophical traditions do not form isolated fields for conversation.

In his latest response, Miller asks: 'How could Levinas's vision—whatever its merits *qua* phenomenology, metaphysics, philosophy, literature or transcendent ethical vision—possibly translate into practical ethics and a transformation of people's everyday lives?' (Miller, 2019, p. 442). To challenge Miller's question, we argue that Levinas' understanding of ethics is indeed an 'optics' (Hand, 2009; Lee, 2019), which provides a phenomenological perspective to ethics. However, our research indicates that Levinasian ethics reaches beyond optics; it evolves deeply connected to questioning, as *mise en question*. Levinas' philosophical method can be seen as an attempt to *deformalise* infinity by connecting it to the intersubjective relation. In education, the other gives the idea of infinity to the subject through teaching (Hansel, 2011). The idea of infinity is not primarily conceptual, but relational. Based on this view, we claim that Miller is mistaken in discrediting the Levinasian *other* as a 'hypothetical transcendental subject' (Miller, 2017, p. 534). Miller's articulation of otherness is misleading and harmful to any fruitful notion of Levinasian ethics as a foundation of philosophy of education. It also lacks the appreciation for Levinas' commitment to phenomenology, as Lee (2019) points out. We return to the concreteness of the other through a continuation of Joldersma's (2002, 2012, 2016), Chinnery's (2010) and Ben-Pazi's (2016) formulations of the pedagogical relationship through temporality and by drawing from Todd's (2015, 2016) works on embodiment and space. *Mise en question* is both a meta-ethical and a prosaic way to conserve the dignity of teaching.

In this article, we excavate deeper into the origins of Levinas' ethical stance that we see intertwined with his formulation of teaching. We bring forth new research on the evolution of Levinas' understanding of ethics in educational encounters through the concept of *mise en question*. A close reading of the concept of questioning makes it evident that Levinas' philosophy has practical contributions to philosophy of education, especially in the reformulation of the pedagogical relationship. We provide grounds to support the claim that the idea of question is central to the development of Levinas' educational thought. We analyse Levinas' unedited notes brought together in *Carnets de Captivité* (Levinas, 2009), which is part of a larger project to collect Levinas' writings and compile them in a chronological and thematic order (Marion, 2009, pp. vi–vii). Among other topics, Levinas' diverse philosophical notes bring to light his views regarding the unique characteristics of the relationship between the teacher and the student as a basis of society (2009a, pp. 253, 279, 297–298, 358–360, 427). We examine these notes against the backdrop of *Totality and Infinity* (1969), *Time and the Other* (1987), *Ethics as First Philosophy* (1989), *Transcendence and Height* (1996 [1962]), *Humanism of the Other* (2006) and *Otherwise than Being* (1998).

In this article, and on the basis of Levinas' rendering of ethics, we shall elaborate the following claims:

1. The analysis of Levinas' usage of the concept *mise en question* as ethics (Levinas, 1969, 1996, 2009) provides a robust reading of Levinasian ethics.
2. The dignity of teaching conserved through questioning (Levinas, 2009a, p. 253) refers to a profound understanding of the relationship between the teacher, the student and the text.
3. Ethics as an event of *mise en question* in educational encounters demonstrates that Levinas' philosophical thought calls for a reformulation of the pedagogical relationship based on subjectivity as being-in-question.

Considering the foregoing, we wish to participate in an important conversation on the relevance of Levinas' philosophy to education, a discussion that characterises the very nature of ethical questioning.

ETHICS THROUGH *MISE EN QUESTION*: CALLED OUT FROM THE COMFORT OF OUR DWELLING

Providing an outline of the vast group of educational scholars who have studied Levinas' philosophical writings (Biesta, 2003; Chinnery, 2010; Joldersma, 2002; Todd, 2016; Wimmer, 2008; Zhao, 2012, 2015) to suggest a new concept that will 'turn our traditional frameworks of interpretation on their head' (Todd, 2016, p. 406) is an ambitious task. This intention of ours may be ambitious, but it is perhaps less grandiose and more specific. In this section, we look at ethics as *mise en question* (Critchley, 1999; Davis, 1996; Levinas, 1969, 1996, 2006). Questioning is not an entirely new concept: Critchley argues that, for Levinas, the calling into question of the self simply represents ethics (Critchley, 1999, p. 63). Dickman (2018) has developed 'an apology of questioning' (p. 275) through Levinas and Heidegger, but his approach is more of a concrete pedagogical application of Levinas' philosophy (Dickman, 2018; also see Dickman, 2009a, 2009b). Even though Levinasian ethics has been under scrutiny (Ben-Pazi, 2016; Critchley, 1999; Glass, 2018; Lee, 2019), the ethics through *mise en question* has so far not been studied in great detail. Perhaps this is due to the various translations of the term '*mise en question*', such as 'calling into question' in *Totality and Infinity* (1969, p. 43), 'putting into question' in *Transcendence and Height* (1996, pp. 12, 16–18) and 'challenged' in *Humanism of the Other* (2006, pp. 30, 32–33).

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas writes, 'We name *this calling into question of my spontaneity* by the presence of the Other ethics' (1969, p. 43, our emphasis). To highlight the importance of this text, Davis (1996) suggests that it may be one of the most cited from *Totality and Infinity*. It is therefore remarkable that the concept of *mise en question* has not been given much importance. Davis notes that the term appears for the first time on page 43 and is repeated four times in four consecutive phrases; in addition, it is used as an active verb (*met en question*) in two phrases, leading to the oft-quoted passage cited below.

A calling into question [*mise en question*] of the same—which cannot occur within the egoist spontaneity of the same—is brought by the other. We name this calling into question [*mise en question*] of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics. The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question [*mise en question*] of my spontaneity, as ethics. Metaphysics, transcendence, the welcoming of the other by the same, of the Other by me, is concretely produced as the calling into question [*mise en question*] of the same by the other, that is, as ethics that accomplishes the critical essence of knowledge. And as critique precedes dogmatism, metaphysics precedes ontology. (Levinas, 1969, p. 43, see Levinas, 1971, p. 33)

Here, the relationship between the 'other' and the 'same' is built through questioning and is pictured as a welcoming (*l'accueil*), as a positive action, which happens as a response to *mise en question* (Levinas, 1971, p. 33). Through *mise en question* the spontaneous and egoist subject is called to welcome the other, to become hospitable. Furthermore, calling into question is the first way the other relates to the I. The relation is initiated through spontaneity and sensibility, which the other calls into question. For Levinas, the subject relates to the other spontaneously, through sensing. In this structure, the critical essence of knowing follows ethics. Critchley (1999, p. 63) notes that the subject called into question is not in fact a conscious subject but a sensible subject capable of enjoyment. In Critchley's interpretation, the sensible subject is an embodied subject, able to eat and feel hunger. Calling into question situates the sensible subject as a target of inquiry, challenging the subject to subject to the other. Sharon Todd proposes that Levinas' views on sensibility should be seen as the pedagogical aspect of his thinking and that sensibility highlights the ability of the subject to change (Todd, 2016). The sensible subject can be regarded as a flexible subject, open to alteration and movement.

According to Todd, the Levinasian subject calls for a 'radical sense of embodiment' (2016, p. 410). Levinas approaches subjectivity with the intention to capture in his ethics the constantly changing subjectivity of the subject, which is not rooted in fixed essence but in an ethical relation to exteriority. As Standish (2019) points out, to be or not to be is not the question. Levinas shifts the focus of interest from the 'what' to the 'how' of subjectivity—that is, to the question of how subjectivity is possible.

In other words, the ethical action of questioning invites the sensible subject to remain in connection with the world while becoming intertwined with others. As Lee (2019) notes, Levinas is not proposing a new ethical system but an opportunity to look at the emergence of intersubjective relationship through otherness. *Mise en question* also describes the necessary tension within an asymmetrical relationship,² where the subject meets something outside of its current understanding. It is a call from the Other, like a knock on the door. Knowledge is not only constructed inside the conscience but also requires interaction with what is unknown to the self. Therefore, the search for knowledge begins with an ethical challenge (Levinas, 1969). It calls the subject to movement and to a process of change:

This relation is not prephilosophical, for it does not do violence to the I, is not imposed upon it brutally from outside, despite itself, or unbeknown to it, as an opinion; more exactly, it is imposed upon the I beyond all violence by a violence *that calls it entirely into question*. The ethical relation, opposed to first philosophy which identifies freedom and power, is not contrary to truth; it goes unto being in its absolute exteriority, and accomplishes the very intention that animates the movement unto truth. (Levinas, 1969, p. 47, our emphasis)

Thus, ethics as *mise en question* initiates the relationship between the I and the Other, imposing 'upon the I beyond all violence by a violence that calls it entirely into question' (ibid.). Calling into question is not comfortable; Levinas in fact refers to it as a 'violence beyond violence'. However, questioning is necessary for the subject to be constantly pushed into a responsible existence and into a movement towards the truth. Therefore, *mise en question* as a welcoming leads to the opening and clearing of a space (Levinas, 1969) for the unknown. In fact, Levinas pictures *mise en question* as a way in which the Other relates to the I and directs a spotlight towards, working as its interrogator (Levinas, 1969, pp. 69–70). To welcome the other means to allow the other to question the subject's assumptions and positions, as a teacher is willing to answer when asked a question or as students are able to verify and clarify their interpretations through posing questions. In his unedited notes, Levinas (2009a, p. 311) drafts an account of the way that interrogation is accompanied by suffering. The ethical relation that calls being into question is dynamic and challenging. It is not a place of being at peace with oneself and with the world.

In his article 'Transcendence et Hauteur' (Levinas, 1991), originally published in 1962, Levinas writes at length about *mise en question*, translated as 'putting into question' (Levinas, 1996, p. 12). Putting into question causes the I to 'coincide less and less with itself' (ibid.). Therefore, it is not a 'special case of self-knowledge' (ibid.). It brings and binds the I and the Other together in responsibility. Even more, Levinas calls *mise en question* 'an event where the I feels shame for its self-certainty'. Through shame, the I becomes aware of the limits of its knowing. This pushes the self to movement, which Levinas refers to as 'exile' (1996, p. 17):

Hence, to be I signifies not being able to escape responsibility. This surplus of being, this existential exaggeration that is called being me—this protrusion of ipseity into being is accomplished as a turbulence of responsibility. Putting into question is a new tension within the I. Instead of annihilating the I, putting into question binds it to the Other in an incomparable and unique way. (ibid.)

Levinas claims that subjectivity is always related to responsibility, 'not being able to escape responsibility' (ibid.). Putting into question creates a new tension within the self as the Other does not entirely fit the categories of knowledge, and something always escapes. The incomparable and unique connection between the I and the Other is an ethical relation, which cannot be reduced to knowing. It emerges through responsibility and always reaches beyond

knowledge, towards the unknown.³ The I and the Other do not merge to be the same but are connected to each other through the unique tie of *mise en question*. Teachers recall their students' challenging questions as well as situations that caused a sense of disturbance in their professional lives. The relationship with the students reaches beyond the societal requirement; it binds teachers to their students with an ethical requirement. The ethical relationship leaves traces of the other in the students as well; we carry traces of our teachers with us throughout our lives.

Mise en question is present in Levinas' mature thought, in *Otherwise than Being*, but in a very limited way, occurring only six times in the entire book (Levinas, 1998 [1974]). In the French text, however, Levinas uses a different term, *questionnement*, which seems to have a slightly different function than pushing the subject towards responsible consciousness (Levinas, 1974, pp. 32–33, 130). Levinas describes subjectivity as the 'responsibility of being-in-question' (Levinas, 1998, p. 111). Here, questioning is placed as a prerequisite for dialogue. It is as if the *mise en question* would collide with being in a profound way, to the point of transforming the subject's being towards a being-in-question.

The subjectivity of a subject is [the] responsibility of being-in-question in the form of the total exposure to offence in the cheek offered to the smiter. This responsibility is prior to dialogue, to the exchange of questions and answers, to the thematization of the said, which is superposed on my being put into question by the other in proximity, and in the saying proper to responsibility is produced as a digression. (ibid.)

Levinas shows how the other challenges the self to move beyond the known, by continuously calling the subject out of its comfortable dwelling and into the world, to a position of 'total exposure' (ibid.). The ethical movement is a summons to exposure, to a position of having to answer. It is not a movement between two subjects with similar qualities and aspirations or a handshake between equals. The movement emerges from responsibility paving a way to dialogue, interpreted as 'the thematization of the said'. The ethical relation pushes the subject to a constant conversation, which Levinas maintains by differentiating the saying from the said. Thematisation takes place through 'the saying' in proximity. In conversation between the self and the other, thematisation leads to categories and fixes meaning to particular matters, forming the structure of 'the said'. However, the said is always returned to conversation. In this way, the subject's relationship with the other remains in movement.

Levinas provides us with a rich and multilayered conception of subjectivity rooted in responsibility, with the intention of encompassing both the metaphysical level and the sensible experience of ethical encounter. Levinas writes, 'The Other becomes my neighbour precisely through the way the face summons me, calls for me, begs for me, and in so doing recalls my responsibility, and calls me into question' (1989, p. 83). Thus, calling into question reveals, reminds and recalls the subject of her or his responsibility to the neighbour. As a summary, the dignity of teaching rests on ethics initiating a challenge to the subject, as the other calls the being into question.

THE TEACHER AND THE STUDENT-IN-QUESTION

We have seen how *mise en question* provides a new entry point to Levinas' ethical phenomenology. In this section, we explore how the phenomenon of teaching is interwoven with sensible and spontaneous life. Ethics as *mise en question* opens up a perspective on the special nature of education as an effort to represent the world and call into question the subject's naïve assumptions regarding it. When the teacher is seen as the student's temporarily transcendental other, an ethical relation with the student puts the student into question and challenges the student to move beyond her or his past and present towards an open-ended future. The ethical in the pedagogical relation is an intention to reformulate an educational basis for a democratic society with regard to the future. Within an asymmetrical relationship with the teacher as the temporal other, the student as a subject is called into question: to be a *student-in-question*.

In his unedited notes, Levinas (2009, pp. 472, 499) writes, 'The one who studies but does not teach has no role in the world to come' (trans. Castillo). Teaching signifies engaging in an action with transformative repercussions in the

future, to have 'a role in the world to come' (p. 499). The aspect of temporal transcendence is present in Joldersma's (2016) and Biesta's (2013) interpretations of the Levinasian *other*. Indeed, the other can be perceived as being in a temporarily transcendental position in relation to the subject. This transcendence is not mystical, as Miller (2017) claims, but just ties together the time of the other and the time of the subject. The transformative force arises from the transcendental nature of the pedagogical relationship. Both Biesta (2013) and Joldersma (2016, p. 395) have argued that the teacher as the student's other reaches beyond the student's present and opens futures way beyond the student's imagination. Joldersma describes teaching as a temporal disturbance to the student's present, opening something radically new to the student. Without the teacher as an other, Joldersma argues, students will remain captive to their present moment, and, therefore, teaching is an ethical act of redemption (Joldersma, 2016, pp. 401–403). Temporality is incorporated in the Levinasian formulation of ethics (Poleshchuk, 2009), and the transcendence of the ethical relation is linked to the concept of time. The subject's present moment carries with it traces of the past and reaches out to the future. In questioning, the past and present come together as the subject welcomes the other and moves towards alterity. Teaching is not mystical; it simply reveals what the student does not know yet.

Interestingly, in his unedited notes, Levinas sketches out the idea that teachers' questions 'give birth to the students' spirit' (Levinas, 2009, p. 253). Levinas (1969, p. 43), however, is critical of Socratic *maieutics*: the teacher's questions must go beyond what the student already knows, beyond what is already in the student. They should push the student towards alterity, towards the unknown. In Levinas' notes, we find his rejection of the idea that the teacher should constantly know where to lead conversations. He refers to the Talmud and formulates his dialectical model for ethical questioning in teaching by contrasting Talmudic discussion with the Socratic model (Levinas, 2009, p. 253). We agree with Matanky that Levinas' conceptualisation of teaching is faithful to both phenomenology and his 'particular Jewish singularity' and that these two aspects should be taken into consideration when reading Levinas (Matanky, 2018, p. 417).

The difference between Socratic *maieutics* and Levinas' educational thought is exemplified in two short notes, the first of which is titled 'Écrit et Oral: L'École' (Levinas, 2009, p. 279). Levinas writes that the relationship to the written text is reading, which is enabled by learning to read. School as an institution provides the students with the tools to read. Levinas places the pedagogical relationship at the core of the educational institution. He states that the teacher–student relationship provides a basis for society, as it is a relationship with someone who can be questioned (*ibid.*). In his second note, Levinas adds:

There exists an institution that is beyond institutions[,] where one learns to read the written and where the spoken relation appears as a condition for the written: the School. There the world of history is suspended in *logos*. There the transcendental condition of all history is realised—the light where I see the light—the word of the teacher to a student. (Levinas, 2009, p. 316, trans. Castillo)⁴

The aforementioned notes depict the school as a place for *reading the world* together with the teacher. It is a place where discussions between teachers and students are as important as the texts and contents studied. In fact, they are the condition for the written. Biesta (2013) discusses the transcendence of the teacher in terms of *giving the students the gift of teaching*. Receiving the gift of teaching and being taught by the other is a challenge to the current emphasis of educational language, which is largely on learning.⁵ Therefore, analysing the role of the teacher through otherness reformulates the meaning of teaching in the pedagogical relationship. Levinas describes this role of the master using *mise en question*:

Ideas instruct me coming from the master who *presents* them to me, who puts them in question; the objectification and theme upon which objective knowledge opens already rest on teaching. The calling into question of things in a dialectic is not a modifying of the perception of them; it coincides with their *objectification*. The object is *presented* when we have welcomed an interlocutor. The master, the

coinciding of the teaching and the teacher, is not in turn a fact among others. The present manifestation of the master who teaches overcomes the anarchy of facts. (Levinas, 1969, pp. 69–70, Levinas' italics)

Ethics as *mise en question* in the context of education also means to question ideas as things. Therefore, the search for meaning begins in ethics and then leads to objectification. The master impersonates both the teacher and the teaching. Here again Levinas states that objectification and objective knowledge rest on teaching, on the ethical relationship between teacher and students. Interpreting the calling into question of ideas referring to content knowledge, which is brought in for examination, for questioning and conversation, opens a dimension reserved for education. School becomes the place where the written word is approached through conversation, through the spoken word.

The teacher's calling into question requires openness to intersubjective and intergenerational relationship with otherness:

Reflection can, to be sure, become aware of this face to face, but the 'unnatural' position of reflection is not an accident in the life of consciousness. It involves a calling into question of oneself, a critical attitude which is itself produced in the face of the other and under his authority. We shall show this further. The face to face remains an ultimate situation. (Levinas, 1969, p. 81)

The 'unnatural' position of reflection should not be an accident for the teacher. Understanding Levinas' position as a critique of the Socratic model, we argue that it is not enough to look at the pedagogical relationship through the binary contrast of the student-in-question and the other as teacher. In contrast to the Socratic model, the existential putting into question in education refers to questions arising from both the teacher and the student as both are looking at the same written text through their unique and singular subjectivities. How, then, does the student as the teacher's other summon the teacher to respond, to become a teacher-in-question?

THE STUDENT AND THE TEACHER-IN-QUESTION: QUESTIONING THE TEACHER SAFEGUARDS FREEDOM

To present the teacher as the student's other is to present only one side of the complexity of the pedagogical relationship. To avoid reducing the pedagogical relationship to a process of one-sided questioning, other directions for questioning need to be analysed as well. In Levinas' unedited notes, he depicts another way in which questioning works. Written teaching conserves its dignity not only when the teacher asks questions to the student, but also when the student interrogates the teacher (Levinas, 2009a, p. 253). This tension between the teacher, the student and the written teaching is one of the focal points of the ethical pedagogical relationship. It reaches beyond the Socratic model, where only the master asks questions. It also explains the asymmetrical nature of the pedagogical relationship, where even if the teacher is seen in a position of power and the student is seen as the more vulnerable subject, the student maintains her or his freedom through the possibility of questioning the teacher and the teaching.

The 'disturbance in the teacher', as Lee (2019, p. 15) points out, happens through the practical challenges caused by the teacher's interaction with the students. The teacher is the host who welcomes the students to the classroom, and in this space the students' questions shift the focus from the role of the teacher to the role of the student. The teacher becomes disinterested in himself and instead directs himself towards the student as an other, to interact as a *teacher-in-question*. This show of humility from the teacher brings forth a space for the students to formulate their own ideas, to maintain their freedom. According to Matanky, Levinas' pedagogical stance calls on teachers 'to break the cycle of repetition' and challenges teachers to think together with their students (Matanky, 2018, p. 421).

Questioning indeed moves deeper, as is shown in *L'Humanisme de L'autre Homme* (1972), where Levinas speaks of *mise en question* as a way of relating to the Other. Levinas describes the relation to the Other as challenging oneself,

emptying oneself from oneself continually. Levinas takes wealth as an example: if the self is rich, the other questions the self's right to own anything (Levinas, 2006). In education, it is possible to make a similar comparison to knowledge. If the teacher is the student's other and if the teacher places the student-in-question, he keeps challenging the student to always discover new aspects of the world. In addition, as the teacher is placed in the processes of education, the student cannot claim full ownership of her or his knowing. Simultaneously, if it is the student who places the teacher in question by showing that the teacher is the guardian of knowledge, the relation questions the teacher's right to perceive knowledge as a static property. Knowing becomes a shared experience, a common ground, rather than a point of struggle for power. Levinas (p. 76) writes, 'The presence of the Other is equivalent to this calling into question of my joyous possession of the world.' The Other poses a constant challenge to one's subjective understanding of the world and calls one to redefine the world through shared meaning-making, together with others.⁶ Shared meaning-making begins with an ethical challenge, and, in this way, ethics as first philosophy precedes ontology.

The student brings to the educational encounter the future (Ben-Pazi, 2016) and as an other transcends the present moment. The student is learning not only for the sake of the present moment but also for the sake of the future. Therefore, the student challenges the teacher simultaneously from a position of humility and height, and the teacher-in-question is summoned to respond: 'The one for whom I am responsible is also the one to whom I have to respond. –It is this double movement of responsibility which designates the dimension of height. It forbids me from exercising this responsibility as pity ...' (Levinas, 1996, p. 19). The teacher is called to be a responsible subject in the moment of teaching to help the student to move towards an unknown future. Therefore, teaching nurtures the student as an other within the same, but acknowledges the alterity of the student and also the uncertainty of the future. The dignity of teaching is conserved when students challenge their teacher through their questions, which call the teacher to remain in a position of being-in-question.

CONCLUSION

The Levinasian formulation of ethics should be considered a meta-ethics rather than a search for normative ethics or guidelines for moral education. For this reason, Miller's (2019) comparison of Levinasian ethics to virtue ethics is a misguided interpretation of the former. Defining normative ethical guidelines using Levinas' philosophy is a secondary task; the research on Levinas' philosophy is more focused on studying Levinasian ethics as a meta-ethics and as a rich entry point to the ethics of phenomenology. It provides us with a manifold perspective on the intersubjective relationships between the self and the other. The self as a sensible subject is prior to the knowing subject, and ethical subjectivity characterised by responsibility takes form in the relationship to otherness. Based on Levinas' understanding of subjectivity, Critchley (1999) has proposed a post-deconstructive subjectivity. Zhao takes a different stance, proposing a post-humanist subjectivity: a singular and unique subject, which is responsible to the other (Zhao, 2015, p. 960). We follow Levinas' own words and see ethical subjectivity as the subjectivity of a being-in-question, a flexible and constantly moulding subjectivity, which characterises both the student and the teacher.

Re-reading Levinas' major works *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being* along with the collection of his unedited notes *Carnets de Captivité* (2009) makes it possible to follow Levinas' formulation of ethics as *mise en question* applied to the pedagogical relationship. We argue that ethics as calling into question is a fruitful addition to the reformulation of the pedagogical relationship. Levinas' ethical stance emerges from questions arising from various sides within the pedagogical relationship. Both the teachers' and students' questions are integral to conserving the dignity of teaching. Without questioning, there is no dialogue, only monologue based on the known. Therefore, ethical questioning breaks the pattern of thought and introduces a new challenge, which requires a reformulation of the subject's understanding of the world. Ethics through *mise en question* as a first philosophy is a prerequisite for the subject's ontological search.

The examination of the ethical experience/relation as exposure to questioning reveals that it plays out as a constant movement from the known towards the unknown, a movement towards the truth. The ethical relation is not a point

of resting, being at ease or at peace with the world. Questioning is the natural initiation to movement, which calls the being out of the comfort of home or of dwelling. *Mise en question* leads to a place of encounter (Todd, 2015; Koskela & Siljander, 2014), to the borderlines of perceived subjectivity and otherness. These borderlines are not clear and are not places for resting, for being at home. It is in this borderline where questioning works as a means to begin a conversation. Educational institutions face a challenge to remain as places of questioning, where subjects are called out from the comfort of their homes to respond to others. The pedagogical relationship pertains to the core of education because the dignity of teaching is conserved when teachers and students embrace the ethical challenge of questioning not the other but themselves.

The *mise en question* of subjectivity signifies an openness to come, to be and to remain in question, an openness that both students and teachers embrace. In education, the teacher-in-question is aware of her or his responsibilities to the students and to the others brought to the classroom in the processes of teaching. The student-in-question is challenged as well, and it becomes possible to think of the educational interaction as a clearing of space for teaching, where the teacher brings to the pedagogical encounter the past and present world, and the student brings the possibility of the future. Underneath the teacher–student relationship lies a manifold understanding of subjectivity, where subjectivity is formed as a constant questioning of being, as an intersubjective and intergenerational process of making meaning of the world.

There is a need to investigate in greater detail how the Levinasian understanding of the pedagogical relation will challenge educational institutions. As Michael Bonnett states, ‘True education is not a comfortable business. It is not about indulging the proclivities of some pre-existing fixed self’ (2009, p. 363). This is the core of ethics as *mise en question*: it sets the relationship between I and the Other to movement, shakes the self to the core (Koskela & Siljander, 2014) and finally moves the self to a position of exposure. Through *mise en question*, the Other calls me from the comfort of my dwelling into the world, and even forces me to enter into dialogue with the other. This nonviolent violence is crucial to ethics: the face of the other summons me to responsibility, where my reactions are not predetermined but open-ended. The being-in-question becomes aware of and can be prepared for the many unexpected turns the future may hold. Could this be the core of the ethical subjectivity of a subject, a being-in-question?

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ ‘C’est par la question de l’élève interrogeant le maître et non seulement par la question du maître accouchant l’esprit de l’élève que l’enseignement écrit peut conserver sa dignité d’enseignement, c’est-à-dire d’une oeuvre spirituelle’ (Levinas, 2009, p. 253).
- ² Asymmetry is an important part of *mise en question*. Anna Strhan summarises Levinas’ work in terms of totality and infinity: if the relation to the other is based on an intention to comprehend or to search for equality, reciprocity or correlation, then that relation is bound to be totalising towards the other as it intends to bring the other to reach ‘my understanding, my knowing, and my control’ (Strhan, 2012, p. 6). Reciprocity reduces the other to the realm of the same while asymmetrical relation is ‘imposed upon the I beyond violence by a violence that calls it entirely into question’ (Levinas, 1969, p. 47). This resounds with Critchley’s (1999, p. 65) interpretation of Levinas’ rejection of the ethical relation as being like a handshake between two people, meeting at the same level as equals, which is meant as a critique to the Buberian understanding of dialogue. Through Levinas, we conclude that the meeting of the I and the other emerges as asymmetrical.
- ³ Western subjectivity is, according to Levinas, based largely on the notion of intellectual activity as ‘a way of doing something, which consists precisely of thinking through knowing, of seizing something and making it one’s own, of reducing to presence

and representing the difference of being, an activity that appropriates and grasps the otherness of the known' (Levinas, 1989, p. 76). Levinas criticises the idea that through contemplative knowledge the being gains a good consciousness, a right to exist in the world, or even more, a right to the sovereignty of one's being, the freedom to define one's place in the world. This way of relating to difference does not do justice to the other or to the self. In its core, it is not interested in the unknown but in what can be known. Therefore, this subjectivity based on rationality and knowledge is bound to itself, unable to move beyond the same.

- ⁴ 'Il existe une institution qui est au-delà des institutions: là où on apprend à lire les écrits et où le rapport oral apparaît comme la condition des écrits: l'École. C'est là que le monde de histoire est suspendu au logos. C'est là que se réalise la condition transcendante de toute histoire—la lumière où je vois la lumière—la parole du maître à l'élève' (Levinas, 2009, p. 316).
- ⁵ Receiving the gift of teaching is among the many images that Biesta has used in his extensive work on the important role of the teacher (see Biesta, 2012, 2015, 2017). It challenges the current focus of educational language on learning and the learner. Biesta argues that education cannot be reduced to mere processes of learning. To receive the gift of teaching and to be taught by someone creates the space for the teacher to be the other to the student, to be different from the student. As an other, the teacher is also able to give to students something outside the students' present lifeworld.
- ⁶ We note that truth for Levinas is always in relation to the other; it is revealed to the subject through testimony (Levinas, 1969, pp. 73, 77). Levinas is critical of Plato's idealism and the Heideggerian conception of truth. Through Levinas' criticism, we understand that the search for knowledge is meant to be a shared process, a continuing conversation between the self and the other.

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