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Levinas, Durkheim and the Everyday Ethics of Education

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ABSTRACT *This article explores the influence of Émile Durkheim on the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas in order both to open up the political significance of Levinas's thought and to develop more expansive meanings of moral and political community within education. Education was a central preoccupation for both thinkers: Durkheim saw secular education as the site for promoting the values of organic solidarity, while Levinas was throughout his professional life engaged in debates on Jewish education, and conceptualized ethical subjectivity as a condition of being taught. Durkheim has been accused of dissolving the moral into the social, and his view of education as a means of imparting a sense of civic republican values is sometimes seen as conservative, while Levinas's argument for an 'unfounded foundation' for morality is sometimes seen as paralysing the impetus for concrete political action. Against these interpretations, I argue that their approaches present provocative challenges for conceptualizing the nature of the social, offering theoretical resources to deepen understanding of education as the site of an everyday ethics and a prophetic politics opening onto more compelling ideals for education than those dominant within standard educational discourses.*

In January 2011, the UK education minister at the time, Michael Gove, launched a review of the national curriculum for primary and secondary schools in England, provoking unease from teachers. His draft proposals for a new history curriculum were especially controversial. The issue, as Gurminder Bhambra (2013) notes, was the use of an 'Our Island Story' narrative. This recalls a history book for children written in 1905, examining British history only within the nation's geographical borders and neglecting the fact that at the time, the UK governed at least a quarter of the earth's land and over a

fifth of its population. The resistance of schoolteachers and historians to these proposals reflects a moral awareness that the representation of our collective past in education is central to the politics of the present, as a narrow vision of history can be associated with exclusionary social policies. Bhambra notes that this parochial vision of British history was being formulated at the same time as migrants are being increasingly scapegoated in British political discourse, citing a statement by a Liberal Democrat MP from the General Election campaign of 2010:

We're in danger of a lost generation – parents and grandparents worry about a future where their children can't repay student loans, can't find a decent job and don't have a sniff of a chance at getting on the housing ladder. Their concern about the knock-on effects of immigration is genuine and isn't racist (cited in *ibid.*).

The suggestion in these words is that immigrants are the cause of these problems. What is not being said is that 'it was a British government that brought in tuition fees and undercut access to higher education; it was a British government that undermined the unions and deregulated the labour market; and it was a British government that sold off council houses, didn't build any more, and thus allowed the pool of social housing to contract' (Bhambra 2013).

The political offensive against immigration can be seen as the thin end of a wedge undermining a cosmopolitan welcoming of plurality. Bhambra notes that prominent members of the Coalition government (the Justice Secretary, Chris Grayling, and the Home Secretary, Theresa May), for example, sought to challenge a central pillar of cosmopolitanism – the commitment to human rights demonstrated by participation in the European Court of Human Rights and the Human Rights Act – through lobbying for the UK to pull out of the court and the convention, in a move which members of their own party, such as the former justice secretary, Kenneth Clarke, described as undermining fundamental freedoms that are 'at the heart of the idea of European civilisation' (Bhambra 2013).

This debate about how the teaching of history can be implicated in perpetuating an exclusionary politics raises fundamental moral questions about how we talk about and

enact the meaning of community and society within education. Bhambra argues that while any political community has to express itself as a 'we', that 'we' can be imagined as including the 'waves of immigrants' attacked by the coalition government: this 'more expansive and inclusive "we"' might 'also be conscious of the widening social and economic inequalities brought about by the abstractions of neoliberal policy. Our problem is not the disruption of the social fabric by immigrants and by the exercise of human rights, but the separation from common problems of a distant political class and their active denial of an inclusive public interest' (Bhambra 2013).

How might we express and enact this more expansive 'we' within education? Much contemporary debate about education is framed in terms of economic utility, with questions about 'the good' evacuated from public discourse. Yet this debate demonstrates an ethical concern about the exclusionary effects of a narrow-minded narrative of British history, and raises the importance of attending to the ways particular political and moral ideals are folded into the everyday language and contents of the curriculum. Reflection on the ethics of education has always been central to philosophy of education, but in the past decade, there has been a growing interest in 'the ethical' from across the humanities and social sciences, and in broader public discourse. There are good reasons for this. In privileging private individual success and fulfilment, modern Western culture has shifted questions about what it means to live a good life out of public debate, so that within education, policy discussions are mostly framed around neoliberal logics of the marketplace, utility, competitiveness and efficiency. The financial crisis and subsequent years of economic scarcity have returned ethical questions to the forefront of public and academic agendas, forcing reflection on fundamental moral questions such as how seemingly scarce resources are to be allocated, and what forms of justice we hope for in our lives together.

Specific attention to the ethical has been something of a blindspot in social scientific theorizing. This may seem surprising, given that the founding theorists of the social sciences were preoccupied with exploring the nature of moral facts and values. Anthropologists have argued that it was in part Durkheim's identification of the moral law with society that inhibited examination of the ethical dimensions of society in anthropology (Laidlaw, 2002; Zigon, 2007). At the same time, although Emmanuel

Levinas's focus on ethics has influenced educational philosophy (e.g. Standish, 2007; Todd, 2008; Strhan, 2012) and other humanities disciplines, it has yet to fully permeate social scientific debates to deepen understanding of the ethical within everyday life.

This article speculates on Durkheim's influence on Levinas to open up reflection on how we understand the moral nature of social life and human subjectivity, and the political challenge of this. Most scholarship on Levinas has located his work too exclusively within the phenomenological tradition, and, as Howard Caygill argues,¹ the price has been a loss of the political significance of his work. Durkheim has been accused of dissolving the moral into the social, and his educational focus on imparting civic republican values is sometimes seen as conservative. Against such interpretations, I will argue that reading their work together offers resources for deepening understanding of how we conceptualize social life and of education as the site of ethics.

Levinas, Durkheim and Republican Modernity

In his interviews with Philip Nemo, Levinas said of his education at Strasbourg that it was an 'initiation into the great philosophers', but that 'it was Durkheim and Bergson who seemed to me especially alive in the instruction and attention of the students. It was they whom one cited, and whom one opposed' (*EI*, p. 26). The university at that time was marked by the 'principles of '89'² – a radical republicanism, which meant that even in the most abstract philosophical analyses, attention to the relation between the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity were never far below the surface (Caygill, 2002, p. 7). This climate played an important part in determining Levinas's later engagements with phenomenology. Following the Dreyfus Affair,³ debates on the relations between these

¹ My interpretation of the relation between Levinas and Durkheim throughout this article is significantly influenced by Caygill's brilliant *Levinas and the Political* (2002).

² These principles refer to the tradition of radical republicanism bequeathed by the French Revolution of 1789 (Caygill, 2002, p. 7).

³ This refers to the public upheaval over the case of Captain Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish French military officer who was unjustly convicted of treason by a military tribunal, and imprisoned on Devil's Island in French Guiana, where he spent five years. By 1898, the case had become a famous public affair, and many believed France's future as a democracy rested on the acquittal of Captain Dreyfus.

revolutionary principles had taken on a new intensity, provoking arguments on the Republican ideals which were still reverberating when Levinas arrived at Strasbourg in 1923 (Caygill, 2002, p. 7). The Affair had a profound effect in shaping Levinas's politics, stimulating an ongoing desire to reinvigorate the secular trinity of French revolutionary values, especially in relation to fraternity.⁴ This was necessary after the anti-Dreyfusard *Action Française* and the Catholic Church had defined fraternity in narrow terms of national, religious and racial identifications: any new conceptualization had to protect against those excluded through such categorizations (p. 9). Rather than interpreting fraternity in its Jacobin formulation as an armed male nation, or through categories of identification such as race, class, or religion, Levinas was inspired by his teachers at Strasbourg to develop 'an ethical concept of fraternity framed in terms of solidarity with the victim of injustice' (p. 8).

As site of struggle for the meaning of French Republicanism, the Dreyfus Affair played an important role in Levinas's intellectual formation, and had decisively shaped Durkheim's sociological and political trajectory. Prior to the Affair, Durkheim had been developing a critique of classical liberalism's assumptions that society is comprised of disparate individuals pursuing private concerns. At the height of the Affair, as people took to the streets, waving flags and expressing creeds, he perceived a shared faith in civic republicanism or 'moral individualism' being affirmed and deepened, and saw this as affirming a faith that people do not live for themselves alone, but for others (Cladis, 2001, p. xv). In 'Individualism and the Intellectuals', Durkheim argued that the moral individualism associated with liberalism is inseparable from fraternity, or 'organic solidarity', which inspires a feeling of sacredness: 'whoever makes an attempt on a man's life, on a man's liberty ... inspires in us a feeling of horror analogous in every way to that which the believer experiences when he sees his idol profaned. Such an ethic ... is a religion in which man is at once the worshipper and the god' (1973, p. 46).

Durkheim's conception of 'the social' was also to be a significant influence on Levinas. Levinas described the work of Durkheim as

⁴ The term 'fraternity' is vulnerable to critique as a patriarchal idiom, however, as I will elaborate, Levinas's use of the term gestures more towards ideas of political friendship and community beginning in my responsibility, rather than necessarily signifying ideas of patriarchy.

an elaboration of the fundamental categories of the social, ... beginning with the idea that the social does not reduce to the sum of individual psychologies.

Durkheim, a metaphysician! The idea that the social is the very order of the spiritual, a new plot in being above the animal and human psychism; the level of 'collective representations' defined with vigor and which opens up the dimension of spirit in the individual life itself, where the individual alone comes to be recognized and even redeemed. In Durkheim there is, in a sense, a theory of 'levels of being,' of the irreducibility of these levels to one another (*EI*, p. 26-7).

For Levinas, Durkheim's understanding of the 'social' opened up ontological difference, revealing the irreducibility of modes of being to each other. Against the view of his reducing the moral to the social, Durkheim, for Levinas, revealed the social precisely *as* the site of transcendence, elevating the very meaning of 'society'. Levinas's desire to reconceptualize human subjectivity as beginning in ethical responsibility takes up elements of this moral orientation of Durkheim's work. Human life, for both, begins from the social fact of our being-*for*-others, and this determines the nature of subjectivity as ethical.

Durkheim's argument that, in Levinas's words, 'the social is the order of the spiritual', and that it is society that is venerated in religious rituals, is still, despite its familiarity, provocative. Society, Durkheim writes, 'arouses in us a sensation of perpetual dependence', and we feel society as both 'other' than but also working through us, as it 'compels us to become its servants, forgetting our own interests, and compels us to endure all sorts of hardships, privations, and sacrifice without which social life would be impossible' (2001, pp.154-5). This sensation of society as sacred shapes human subjectivity as fundamentally *dividual*. Durkheim argues that in our social condition of obligation towards others, we feel a moral call as expressing 'something inside us other than ourselves' (p. 193-4). Durkheim argued that with processes of modernization, as societies 'expand over vaster territories, traditions and practices' (1973, p. 51), only a sense of the dignity of the human could be a primary source of solidarity, emerging not

from any sense of sameness of persons or categories of identity, but in the sacredness of humanity and the sense of solidarity for the other who is the victim of injustice.

Durkheim saw education as the sphere where this moral solidarity could be deepened, and his 1902 lectures on moral education articulated a vision of the ethical as permeating the whole of education: ‘it is implicated in every moment. It must be mingled in the whole of school life, as morality itself is involved in the whole web of collective life... There is no formula that can contain and express it adequately’ (cited in Cladis, 1998, p. 21). Durkheim had in mind a new secular ethics of education, based on a sense of respect for the innate dignity of the human individual as the core value of modern society. While he saw the idea of the nation as important in citizenship education, the nation should also always be open to scrutiny, for example, in respect to the extent to which it promoted justice for those outside. The nation, for Durkheim, could enjoy moral primacy only on condition that its actions were constantly open to moral question, that it was not understood ‘as an unscrupulous self-centered being, solely preoccupied with expansion and self-aggrandizement to the detriment of similar entities; but as one of many agencies that must collaborate for the progressive realization of the conception of mankind’ (cited in Bellah, 1973, p. xli).

In this brief sketch, we see that rather than reducing the moral to the social, Durkheim elevates the social to the moral, and develops a vision of modern societies as underpinned by a solidarity beginning not in conditions of sameness, but in recognition of the dignity of the other human, starting from compassion for the victim of injustice. How then do these ideas relate to Levinas’s understanding of social life, and to his thinking on education? In the following section, let us consider how these ideas find expression in Levinas’s thought.

Justice, Society and Prophetic Politics

Levinas’s work is dominated by one far-reaching theme: that ethics is first philosophy. In *Difficult Freedom*, Levinas described his life as ‘a disparate inventory ... dominated by the presentiment and memory of the Nazi horror’ (*DF*, p. 291): his conceptualization of human subjectivity, language and knowledge as beginning with ethics was determined by

his experience of National Socialism, both feared and mourned. Levinas's two major works - *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being* - are works of mourning, reflected in the dedication of *Otherwise than Being*, in 'memory of those who were closest among the six million assassinated by the National Socialists, and of the millions on millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man, the same anti-semitism'. The trajectory of Levinas's work was significantly shaped by his engagement with Heidegger. After Strasbourg, Levinas went to study with Husserl in Freiburg, but the approach he discovered in Husserl was, he stated, 'transfigured by Heidegger' (*RB*, p. 32).⁵ Although his attraction to Heidegger's work was ended by Heidegger's commitment to National Socialism, this initial influence played a significant part in orientating the direction of Levinas's work, subsequently governed by 'the profound desire to leave the climate of that [Heidegger's] philosophy' (*EE*, p. 4).

The urgency of leaving Heideggerian philosophy is evident in Levinas's presentiments of the Nazi horror. His 'Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism', published in 1934, described the Heideggerian ontology of the self as a precondition of National Socialism. Levinas described the article as motivated by the belief that 'the source of the bloody barbarism of National Socialism lies not in some contingent anomaly within human reasoning, nor in some accidental ideological misunderstanding' (*RPH*, p. 63). He summarized the article as identifying the source of '*elemental Evil* into which we can be led by logic and against which Western philosophy had not sufficiently insured itself' as 'inscribed within the ontology of a being concerned with being' (p. 63). In this early writing, we see already the future direction of Levinas's work in this idea that the self-positing subject, concerned with its own being, 'the famous subject of a transcendental idealism that before all else wishes to be free and thinks itself free' (p. 63), leads to the possibility of political violence.

This article reveals how Levinas's critique of Heidegger was influenced by Durkheim. As Caygill notes, Levinas's analysis of Hitlerism as an elaboration of an 'elementary form' of evil, was informed by Durkheim's method of studying the 'elementary forms' of religion a means of understanding the sacred in more complex modernized societies (Caygill, 2002, p. 31). Here, Levinas brings this approach together

⁵ See Strhan, 2012, pp. 4-20.

with phenomenology to explore the ‘elementary forms’ and temporal structures of experience shaping Nazism and its oppositions in Christianity and liberalism. Levinas argues that in Nazism, as an ‘elementary form’ of pagan religion, the past is a *fait accompli* that weighs heavily on human destiny, as both present and future repeat a past that can only be endured (Caygill, 2002, p. 33). Levinas argues that true freedom requires a true present, offered by Jewish and Christian temporalities with their dramas of repentance and redemption, in which there is ‘a continuous opening on to the future’ (p. 33).

Responsibility is intrinsic to this understanding of freedom, and equality here is rooted in the liberatory potential of monotheism. Levinas’s primary concern is to derive equality from freedom, in order to defend it from fascist conceptions of racial inequality. This, as Caygill notes, is a thread Levinas develops in later writings, using the notion of freedom both to criticize any notion of fate (whether rooted in racial philosophies of history or natural history) and then to justify equality. In absolute freedom, the individual is ‘liberated ... from any determination be it natural (racial) or historical (political or confessional)’ (Caygill, 2002, p. 34), so that the equal dignity of each human, as emphasized by Durkheim, is justified not through material or social conditions, but through ‘the power given to the soul to free itself from *what has been*, from everything that linked it with something or engaged it with something’ (*RPH*, p. 66).

Levinas criticizes liberalism as unable to protect the dignity of the human subject, since it depends on a self-positing, autonomous subject. As Durkheim had earlier challenged individualistic conceptions of liberalism through showing human subjectivity as shaped through a primary *moral* obligation, so Levinas questions whether liberalism ‘is all we need’ to ‘achieve an authentic dignity for the human subject. Does the subject arrive at the human condition prior to assuming responsibility for the other man ...?’ (*RPH*, p. 63). Levinas describes liberalism as accepting a radical concept of freedom, with reason the source of freedom, located ‘outside the brutal world and the implacable history of concrete existence’ (p. 66). This reign of reason, beginning in the Enlightenment, displaces the redemptive time of Christianity, so that ‘in place of liberation through grace, there is autonomy’ (p. 66). Levinas argues that this autonomy, without a shared drama of repentance and redemption, fails to offer a basis for

community or social life, making liberalism vulnerable to suggestions for ‘community’ or ‘fraternity’ opposed to freedom or equality, ‘such as the national, confessional, class and, more ominously, racial fraternities that pervade modernity and are able through their own dramatic narratives of repentance and redemption to exploit the deficit of liberal rationalism’ (Caygill, 2002, p. 35).

‘Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism’ reveals how Levinas’s approach was influenced by Durkheim from this early period. Developing this, in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas’s critique extends beyond Heidegger to interrogate the entire Western philosophical tradition. The terms ‘totality’ and ‘infinity’ draw a contrast between a totalizing ontological approach and an ethical relation of infinitude. Levinas’s central argument is that if our relations with others are conceived in terms of comprehension, recognition or equality, then insofar as this mode of relationality aims to bring the other within the domain of *my* understanding, it is totalizing. This idea of taking over the other, and the endless capacities of Western thought to do this, is central to Levinas’s philosophy, and has relevance beyond the horizons he identified. Robert Eaglestone notes that colonial projects have been based on this logic of ‘annexation, of conquering, which means consuming otherness and revising it as “sameness” (2010, p. 64). As today such exploitative modes of relationality continue by other means, Levinas’s thought ‘is a way of exposing, from within, the colonial and “omnivorous” powers of Western thought’ (Eaglestone, 2010, p. 64). Today, this totalizing impulse can also be seen in dehumanizing discourses of accumulation, performativity and productivity that pervade education, in which the singularity of the other is subsumed as they are measured according to their capacity for production.

Levinas describes the relation between self and other that interrupts this totalizing relation as taking place in language: the site of totality *and* infinity. Describing responsibility (as responsivity) as a precondition of language, Levinas anchors the structure of logical thought in this ethical relation to the other, even if this always carries with it the possibility of totalization. Levinas uses an image of a teacher to evoke this ethical relation between self and other: to be taught is to be summoned into a non-violent relation with the other, who remains beyond my knowing in a position of magisterial height: ‘The height from which language comes we designate with the term teaching...

This voice coming from another shore teaches transcendence itself. Teaching signifies the whole infinity of exteriority' (*TI*, p. 271).

For Levinas, it is only in being taught that meaning, truth and subjectivity are possible, and these come to me from beyond – even as they are within - myself and shape the conditions of my subjectivity as *dividual*, as Durkheim had earlier argued. Through this teaching, a common social world is created: '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). This teaching founds objectivity and reason, which is the result of putting things in question between self and other. As Alphonso Lingis puts this:

The other turns 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. (1994, pp. 130-1).

As for Durkheim, society and rationality are possible through a condition of moral obligation, Levinas likewise opens up the ethical conditions of subjectivity, society, and reason.

Levinas, however, deepens the nature of this responsibility. For Durkheim, it is possible to understand the subject's obligation towards others as what Stanley Cavell describes as a 'horizontal form of life' (1996). Cavell uses this phrase to allude to an interpretation of Wittgenstein's use of the phrase 'form of life' in a conventionalist sense, to refer to human beings agreeing with each other in the language they use, as 'some kind of contract or an implicitly or explicitly agreed upon set of rules' (Cavell, 1996, p. 328). For Durkheim, the subject's sense of moral obligation towards others might be seen in such terms, as a reciprocal responsibility, rooted in the experience of being part of a social collective. For Levinas, the ethical *dividualism* of the subject might be seen instead in terms of a 'vertical form of life' (Cavell, 1996, p. 328). In this, what is at issue are 'not alone differences between promising and fully intending, or between coronations and

inaugurations, or between barter and a credit system...; these are differences within the plane, the horizon, of the social, of human society' (p. 329). While Levinas saw Durkheim's conception of 'the social' as opening up ontological difference, his own work deepens this, with subjectivity and society beginning not in a reciprocal form of life, but in the verticality of human responsibility.

Cavell suggests that our becoming disappointed with criteria, indeed with language as such, is a consequence of this vertical form of life, of the singularity and separateness of *my* experience, which is the condition of human subjectivity: 'not a particular fact or power but the fact that I am a man, therefore of *this* (range or scale of) capacity for work, for pleasure, for endurance, for appeal, for command, for understanding, for wish, for will, for teaching, for suffering' (p. 330). For Levinas, it is the responsibility of subjectivity that confirms the singularity of the subject, and the vertiginous height of this orientation towards the other interrupts and leaves us disappointed with categories of identification. This takes us somewhat beyond Durkheim's organic solidarity. Levinas emphasizes that this inescapable responsibility deepens the more I choose to answer it, and while I may ignore it, I cannot escape the call by which I am singularly addressed: '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' (*TI*, p. 245).

Although Levinas focuses on the relationship between I and other to draw attention to the nature of singularity (the responsibility that begins in *me*, that confirms *my* uniqueness), within everyday social life, this is not a party of two. The third party is always present in the other's address, demanding justice and justification for how I respond to many others. The ethical is therefore always already inseparable from the political, as the third interrupts the asymmetry of responsibility, demanding justice (*TI*, p. 213). Levinas develops this line of thought in *Otherwise than Being*, with society founded not on equality or commonality, but on a community of others, each unique and resisting reduction to classification. This deepens Durkheim's understanding of the social as founded in the experience of obligation for others, but resisting Durkheim's emphasis on fusion in the ecstatic moment of worship. Levinas's emphasis on the singularity and

separateness of the subject indexes the unknowability of the other, allowing a more expansive understanding of community and society beginning in this fundamental condition of difference and *ethical* responsibility for the other.

Levinas posits this notion of justice associated with the third as maintaining the self's infinite responsibility, but balanced against working out the conditions of justice for all the others. Caygill argues that this position is limited: Levinas ends up unexpectedly insisting on the priority of the relation to the other over the third, to prevent the other's absorption into the totality (Caygill, 2002, p. 142), leaving the possibility of violence against the third party in the name of the other. Caygill however considers the possibility of the reverse of this position, in which all thirds become others, and suggests that this more compelling vision for justice is provided through the concepts of fraternity and illeity (p. 143).

Levinas uses the concept 'illeity' to signify 'the Infinite that escapes the objectification of thematization and of dialogue ... in the third person' (*OB*, p. 150). Illeity is not only a third between self and neighbor, but a third between immanence and transcendence that hollows out the distance between self and neighbor while always exceeding the terms of any relation (Caygill, 2002, p. 147; Strhan, 2012, p. 154). With illeity, Levinas refuses Durkheimian fusion and deepens the ethical possibilities of subjectivity through instead emphasizing the space of separation between self and other. In a dense passage, Levinas describes how the self finds within itself the infinite demand addressed to me by the other, in having already been obedient to their order:

The inscription of the order in the for-the-other of obedience is an anarchic being affected, which slips into me 'like a thief' through the outstretched nets of consciousness. This trauma has surprised me completely; the order has never been presented ... to the point that it is I that only says, and after the event, this unheard-of obligation. This ambivalence is the exception and subjectivity of the subject, its very psyche, a possibility of inspiration. It is the possibility of being the author of what had been breathed in unbeknownst to me, of having received, one knows not from where, that of which I am author. In the responsibility for the other we are at the heart of the ambiguity of inspiration. The unheard-of saying is enigmatically in

the anarchic response, in my responsibility for the other. The trace of infinity is this ambiguity in the subject, in turns beginning and makeshift, a diachronic ambivalence which ethics makes possible. (*OB*, p. 148-9)

Caygill suggests that this voice heard in the command might be the voice of the third, overturning the priority of the other. This gestures towards a ‘prophetic politics’, rooted in fraternity:

Prophetic politics opens the possibility for a notion of justice as perpetual interruption, of the self by the other and of the other by the third. The third in question here, and the justice to which it gives rise, is not the third of the state and its justice thought of in terms of equivalence and measure, but the third thought of in terms of divinity and in the divine approbation of human fraternity. (Caygill, 2002, p. 150).

Levinas describes the other as also my brother, and states that it is impossible to deny fraternity (*OB*, p. 150), suggesting a prophetic understanding of community beginning with the condition of fraternity conceived in terms of responsibility, rather than sameness or fusion. This fraternity is bound up with the separation of illeity: ‘It is not because the neighbor would be recognized as belonging to the same genus as me that he concerns me. He is precisely *other*. The community with him begins in my obligation to him... A fraternity that cannot be abrogated, an unimpeachable assignation’ (p. 87).

For Levinas, this responsibility to the other and all the others is found first of all in my condition of being taught by the other, through whom I receive language and the uniqueness of my subjectivity. This responsibility, deepening the more I attend to it, is always there, and Levinas prophetically invites his reader to attend to it, to bring about a more just society, rooted in responsibility for *all* the others, in which my obligations to those close by are structured by my relations to all the others.

Durkheim’s focus on the ritualization of the sacred emphasizes the experiential qualities through which moral sensibilities are inculcated, yet Levinas draws this intuition into the realm of the everyday: this is not a matter of peak experiences, or of ‘experience’

at all, but a condition of responsibility that is present as a possibility to be realized in every interaction. As Standish questions, what do we 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 (2007, pp. 79-80). Although this responsibility extends to our responsibilities for *all*, it is there in the most mundane of interactions, ‘even the simple, “After you, sir” ... [This is] not the limit case of solidarity, but the condition for all solidarity’ (*OB*, p. 117). For Levinas, society depends not on any notion of truth or knowledge, but on this. Criticizing the Platonic subordination of justice to truth, he argues, ‘Society does not proceed from the contemplation of the true; truth is made possible by relation with the Other... Truth is thus bound up with the social relation, which is justice’ (*TI*, p. 72).

As Durkheim was engaged in debates about French education, so Levinas spent most of his professional life as a school administrator and teacher. From 1945-1979, Levinas was Director of the École Normale Israélite Orientale, a work he described as ‘a calling’, in a school training teachers to work in the Mediterranean region, working ‘for the emancipation of Jews in those countries where they still did not have the right to citizenship’ (*RB*, p. 38). Although sometimes criticized as relegating ethics to an otherworldly order, Levinas’s conception of responsibility as working for an always better justice was something he was concretely working out in his own life in the domain of education. His comments on pedagogical demands he experienced at the ENIO can be connected with his conceptualization of subjectivity as a deepening responsibility:

Will my life have been spent between the incessant presentiment of Hitlerism and the Hitlerism that refuses itself to any forgetting? Not everything related in my thoughts to the destiny of Judaism, but my activity at the Alliance kept me in contact with the Jewish ordeal, bringing me back to the concrete social and political problems which concerned it everywhere. In Europe, outside of the Mediterranean region of the schools of the Alliance: notably in Poland, where the proximity of a hostile Germany nevertheless remained anti-Semitic instincts barely put to sleep. Concrete problems with spiritual repercussions. Facts that are always enormous.

Thoughts coming back to ancient and venerable texts, always enigmatic, always disproportionate to the exegeses of a school. Here you have, in administrative and pedagogical problems, invitations to a deepening, to a becoming conscience, that is, to Scripture. (*RB*, p. 39)

However, although this deepening responsibility invites concrete action to work towards a better justice, this does not mean that any programmatic application of his thought to education follows (Todd, 2008, p. 182). While Durkheim developed an approach to moral education for schools to deepen social solidarity, Levinas leaves radically open the question of *how* to deepen the ethical possibilities that are already implied in our everyday educational worlds.

Discussion: Towards an Everyday Ethics of Education

Reading Levinas with Durkheim shows the extent to which Levinas was concerned with taking up the challenge he had encountered in Durkheim's thought to revitalize political principles. It also invites us to reconsider Durkheim's metaphysics of the social, in which the social is elevated to the transcendent rather than the moral dissolved into the social. There are significant differences between their approaches, most pointedly in relation to the singularity of subjectivity. Yet their conceptions of education - rooted in a sense of social life as beginning with ethics - demonstrates the narrowness of totalizing educational discourses in which, for example, education is treated as a service that can be delivered to consumers in an educational marketplace, a domain of increasingly conceived in terms of privatized choice rather than public good.

There are limitations to their approaches. Durkheim's patriotism sounds a paternalistic note, and his duality of sacred and profane and desire to create a moral community always run the risk of exclusion. The contemporary resonance of this was powerfully suggested in responses to the attack on the French magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in January 2015, as the sacralizing of 'free speech' symbolized in the 'Je Suis Charlie' slogans reverberating on social media and on demonstrators' placards were experienced by many as perpetuating an exclusionary logic against those unable to express solidarity

with the satirical magazine.⁶ Levinas's own political refusals of responsibility and justice are also well documented (Strhan, 2012, p. 164). But these risks of exclusion and totalization should invite our attention to *our* own need for vigilance against becoming immunized against others' needs and to work to resist deafness to the address of those both within and beyond our communities. Responsibility is to those nearby. But it is also for those far away who are affected by our actions in an increasingly globalized world, and the notions of 'I' and 'we' that we voice within education might enable a more expansive political imaginary and deepen desire for educational communities that are bound together with an orientation of responsibility towards those within and beyond them, a desire to welcome and to protect the other that challenges the exclusionary logics that are today increasingly sounding again, as far-right political parties grow in prominence across Europe and elsewhere.

Levinas shows us how the resources for a more ethical thinking are already present in our engagements with others in education, and shows us that dehumanizing logics of productivity, or historical narratives perpetuating an exclusionary political vision of 'community' are never the whole story. Students and teachers in responding to each other with responses that *are* responsible, or in the curriculum choices they make about which stories they tell about the possibilities of a more just society, are already showing how our practices and words can bear witness to an everyday ethics that *is* also achieved, even if that achievement is also always fragile, threatened by the risk of refusal to acknowledge some part of the community (for example, minority groups) as an integral part of it.

Levinas and Durkheim both invite us to be more attentive to the moral possibilities that are already implied in everyday educational practices, inviting a prophetic politics of radical inclusion. Their commitments to the human and to education as fundamentally moral are imbued with a hopefulness in the possibility of change. Vaclav Havel describes how he was influenced by Levinas's notion of responsibility, this

⁶ See, for example, discussion in <https://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/cas-mudde/no-we-are-not-all-charlie-and-that%E2%80%99s-problem> (accessed 16 February 2015).

idea that ‘something must begin’, that we should have greater faith in the potential significance of our everyday actions:

You have certainly heard of the ‘butterfly effect’. It is a belief that everything in the world is so mysteriously and completely interconnected that a slight, seemingly insignificant wave of a butterfly’s wings in a single spot on this planet can unleash a typhoon thousands of miles away.

I think we must believe in this effect for politics. We cannot assume that our microscopic yet truly unique everyday actions are of no consequence simply because they cannot resolve the immense problems of today. That would be an *a priori* nihilistic assertion, and an expression of the arrogant, modern rationality that believes it knows how the world works. (cited in Edgoose, 2008, p. 111)

Levinas and Durkheim encourage us to attend to the everyday moral landscapes of education that we exist within, and to be aware that it is through our actions that such landscapes are re-created. We may *feel* subjected to social forces beyond our control, but that social realm is *also* shaped and made possible through our words and responses to each other. We *can* hope that our actions and words matter in the work of creating a better justice. We *can* find ways of resisting unjust words, practices, and the colonization of our thinking about education in totalizing rhetorics, whether in dehumanizing logics of efficiency, or in terms of social exclusion. Our actions and the words we speak, as teachers and students, have a political and ethical power that exceeds our intentions or knowledge, and Levinas and Durkheim witness to that fact, encouraging us to be vigilant that our educational practices enact a more humane society.

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Abbreviations

DF Difficult Freedom
EI Ethics and Infinity

OB Otherwise than Being
RB Is It Righteous to Be?
RPH Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism
TI Totality and Infinity

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