

Education Incarnate

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Abstract

For the past 15 years, scholars in education have focused on Levinas's work largely in terms of his understanding of alterity, of the self-Other relation, of ethics as 'first philosophy' and the significance these concepts have on rethinking educational theory and practice. What I do in this paper, by way of method, is to start from a slightly different place, from the assertion that there is indeed something 'new' to be explored in Levinas's philosophy – both in terms of ideas to be found within his work, and also in terms of the demands educational ideas and practices place on his work from without. That is, how does the actual, lived specificity of educational encounters occasion a different set of questions than one would otherwise pose if thinking only from within the discipline of philosophy, or from a purely theoretical point of view? In light of this, this paper explores Levinas's ideas of sensibility, materiality, and embodiment. I see these not simply as supports for his ethical thought, but as the very core of incarnation without which his ethics makes no sense. I propose that these ideas are quintessentially pedagogical aspects of his thought – that is, they are always already rooted in a relational context of change and alteration of the subject.

Keywords: Levinas, embodiment, sensibility, pedagogy, bodies, transcendence

Sensation is the break-up of every system.

Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 63

For the past 15 years, scholars in education have focused on Levinas's work largely in terms of his understanding of alterity, of the self-Other relation, of ethics as 'first philosophy' and the significance these concepts have on rethinking educational theory and practice (Biesta, 2006; Chinnery, 2003; Egéa-Kuehne, 2008; Todd, 2003, 2008). Although some have focused explicitly on teacher-student relations (Joldersma, 2002; Säfström, 2003), others put his work into relation with curriculum (Standish, 2008; Winter, 2014) and counter the educational aim of autonomy with his notion of heteronomy (Kodelja, 2008; Strhan, 2009). Given the extent to which Levinas's philosophy is no longer a stranger to educational audiences, it is difficult to see, perhaps, what more could be said, said differently, or said with different purposes in mind without rehashing some well-known territory. This is particularly the case if we, as

both Levinas scholars and educationalists, continue to think of his primary—or sole—contribution to education as resting in what has in fact already been said. Indeed, what more is there to say about or do with his work?

In a recent collection, entitled *Radicalising Levinas* (2010), the editors discuss precisely this question. They identify Levinasian scholarship in terms of three waves: the first being commentary and exposition from the 1970s and 1980s; the second one concerned with contextualising Levinas's work in poststructuralism and deconstruction; and the current, third wave can be seen as a revitalisation of his scholarship in placing his ideas in relation to 'the most pressing socio-political issues of our time' (p. x). Levinas's work, in this third wave, offers itself to the forging of new connections with, for example, world hunger (Bernasconi, 2010); animals (Atterton, 2012; Calarco, 2010; Perpich, 2008); climate change (Edelglass, 2012; Simmons, 2012); and ecology (Llewelyn, 2010). In line with this, the educational reception of Levinas's philosophy in the past primarily falls within the first and second waves. The third wave would now seem to be on the horizon. However, what all three 'waves' assume, I contend, is that 'Levinas's philosophy' itself is a relatively stable entity and that it is mainly in conversation with contemporary problems that it can begin to take on new significance. While I think that his work does indeed speak to contemporary educational concerns, I nonetheless want to suggest that there are elements of his work that have remained somewhat overshadowed by the weightier concepts of the Face and the Other, for which he is best known.

What I do in this article, by way of method, is to start from a slightly different place, from the assertion that there is indeed something 'new' to be explored in Levinas's philosophy—both in terms of ideas to be found *within* his work, and also in terms of the demands educational ideas and practices place on his work from *without*. From the perspective of exploring something new within his philosophy, I do not mean to suggest that we can 'find' or 'excavate' a concept that no one has before seen; as though there were some secret treasure buried in the Levinasian archives just waiting to be dug out, which, once discovered, will turn our traditional frameworks of interpretation on their head. Instead, it consists in a far more modest gesture of displacing and repositioning his thought in such a way that new life is breathed into it. Concepts, such as the Face or the Other, can thereby take on new nuances once they are untethered from tightly constrained systems of meaning. Thus, newness, as I see it here, is not about 'discovering' or 'uncovering' a hidden truth, but about allowing ideas to circulate in a novel relationship to other ideas that might not have been previously high up on the Levinasian agenda. This displacement and repositioning shifts the grounds upon which an idea or concept has come to be comprehended and thereby shifts our own relationship to it. Although such newness can arise from philosophical reflection on Levinas's work, it is not through philosophy alone that such newness comes about. Rather, I suggest that newness arises out of the very demands that the lived conditions of education place on his ideas and concepts. By this I mean that rather than see educational contexts as sites of application for Levinas's philosophy, newness emerges in reading his ideas through the specificity of teaching and learning encounters. That is, how does the actual, lived specificity of those encounters

occasion a different set of questions than one would otherwise pose if thinking only from within the discipline of philosophy, or from a purely theoretical point of view? For me, such specificity—the design of the classroom, the mode of instruction, the vulnerability of teachers, the fear of students, the absorption in a topic, the specific smells and sounds and touches of other bodies—places a certain demand on Levinas's ethical philosophy that, I argue, is not entirely out of joint with the very trajectory of his thought.

In light of this, this article explores that which, in my view, is not focused on enough in both the philosophical and educational literatures on Levinas—that is, his ideas of sensibility, materiality and embodiment. I see these not simply as supports for his ethical thought, but as the very core of incarnation without which his ethics makes no sense. Tom Sparrow's (2013) recent examination of the materialist and metaphysical as well as the phenomenological aspects of Levinas's ethics will be my point of departure for displacing and resituating key ideas within the educational reception of Levinas, namely, the Face and the Other. Through this, I propose that his views of sensibility and embodiment are quintessentially pedagogical aspects of his thought—that is, they are always already rooted in a relational context of change and alteration of the subject—a process through which one becomes someone 'beyond' the limits of one's previous incarnation.¹ In conclusion, I turn to a discussion of how embodiment and sensibility are ethical features of educational life, insofar as educational settings are indeed concerned with the pedagogical transformation of the self. However, before doing so, I turn now to situate the question of embodiment within an educational context.

Situating the Pedagogical Question of Embodiment

Questions of embodiment and materiality have recently been the theme of much contemporary discussion in educational practice, research methodology and theorising (e.g. Davies, 2009; Lenz Taguchi, 2011; Special Issue of Gender and Education, 2013). This body of literature has largely, although not exclusively, grown out of a feminist and Deleuzian orientation to education, seeing the active transformation of subjectivity in terms that radically admit of the agentic aspects of materiality. Human bodies are put on par with the objects with which they interact.² That is, embodiment and materiality are not so much woven together as they are mutually constitutive, each change calling forth new possibilities for subjectivity. There is here an emphasis on activity and movement, materiality itself being seen not in terms of substance, but as a constellation of processes. Human bodies are therefore not seen to be merely the physical counterpart to a self, but part of the very materiality that comprises any space. This literature opens up important questions for education regarding its production of spaces of materiality as necessary conditions for teaching, and indeed, for the kinds of subject transformation that projects such as feminism are particularly eager to engage. However, what is not so much in focus in this rendering of educational space, are the *sensible* aspects of human materiality as this materiality in the form of human bodies is generated through the unpredictable

contact with the non-human materiality within its environment. That is, in these moments of contact between things, how do the sensations produced in classrooms—the touch of the keyboard, the sweatiness of a hand I am holding, the smell of perfume, the grooves of the desk—matter to the constitution of the body, its surfaces and borders?

Elsbeth Probyn (2004), in an article discussing the place of affect and bodies in teaching, suggests that the body in particular has been elided (perhaps surprisingly so) within critical and feminist pedagogies. Her claim is largely based on what she sees as an abstraction of the ‘live body’ into complex theory.³ That is, while there is a plethora of theories about how the body is constituted through power dynamics, normative discourses and systems of discrimination, little attention is paid to the role played by singular affect. For Probyn, there seems to be a ‘retreat from the experiential body’ (p. 23) in these pedagogies. Instead, drawing in part, although not exclusively, on Deleuze, she notes the significance of affect and sensibility in the concrete constitution of the form of materiality known as the human body. She sees Deleuze’s notion of ethology as particularly inviting. He describes it thus: ‘a body affects other bodies, or is affected by other bodies; it is this capacity for affecting and being affected that also defines a body in its individuality’ (Deleuze quoted in Probyn, 2004, p. 37). As such, ‘ethology studies the compositions of relations or capacities between different things’ (ibid).

As one such relation, a relation that encapsulates the experiential dimensions of the body, Probyn seeks to bring to the attention of her students what she calls “‘the goose bump effect’”—that moment when a text sets off a frisson of feelings, remembrances, thoughts, and the bodily actions that accompany them’ (p. 29). In fact, by inviting students to explore an effect of reading that is ‘wild, diffuse and hard to properly name’ (ibid), Probyn also invites the body into direct contact with what is going on in classrooms, without, however, suggesting that experiential and sensible aspects of bodies are unrelated to previous circumstances. ‘What constitutes an affective response is hugely complex, and is in part the result of an embodied history to which and with which the body reacts, including how the classroom is conceived and practiced’ (p. 29). For Probyn, education is about facing the ‘live subject’, complete with discomforts, embarrassments and excitements that close contact with other bodies, and with texts, generate. Unlike previous ‘transgressive’ theories of the body that have played a role in feminist discussions of pedagogy, such as that developed by Jane Gallop (1995, 1997), Probyn seeks to move beyond the body as being ‘engulfed in the sexual’ (p. 34). This strikes me as a highly significant move, not in order to deny the desirous and sometimes rapturous effects of bodies in classroom situations, but to open up the terrain for investigating a plethora of sensibilities and affects that constitute the lived experience of classroom education.

What Probyn’s work brings to the fore is a combination of the new materialism, which sees bodies as ‘modes not substances’, and a rigorous attention to the unpredictable arrangement of affect and sensibility that is involved in constituting these modes.

How better to explain that always quirky, always unknowable combination that is the classroom? Why is it, we ask either in elation or depression, that the same material will work so differently in different situations? The magic or chemistry that seems so elusive to any systemization may well be the necessary result of the moving arrangement of particles, histories and affects that are the bodies of teaching and learning. (p. 37)

If changes in bodies are occasioned by these unpredictable and unknowable relations between things, then the transformative potential of feminist or critical pedagogies is equally uncertain, and no longer tied to the effects of a particular discourse, theory or practice. Rather, the pedagogical transformation of the subject is more in line with what Luce Irigaray would call the ‘alchemy’ of subjectivity and less dependent upon what critical and feminist pedagogues would call consciousness-raising. Introducing this unpredictably, however, into our educational discussions should not be seen as some nihilist defeat of pedagogical purpose, but instead as the generative potential for moving beyond the systemisation and organisation of teaching and learning into discrete elements. That is, this rather anarchic sensibility challenges the assumption that the ‘right’ kind of teaching will produce the ‘right’ learning outcomes. As such, it offers a powerful critique against the types of managerialism and performativity-based frameworks for systemising teaching and learning we are finding on a global scale. As Levinas (1969) himself acknowledges in the epigraph to this article, ‘sensibility is the break-up of every system’; sensibility is precisely that which cannot be contained, directed or enforced by tightly defined procedures and institutional arrangements. Probyn’s call for exposing the centrality of the ‘live subject’ for classroom contexts, thereby opens up a way of thinking pedagogical transformation that necessarily takes into account the way bodies also transcend (and are not merely products of) structure and system. Moreover, paying serious attention to the ‘live subject’ means acknowledging the sensible body, without which words such as ‘encounters’, ‘teaching’ and ‘learning’ make little sense. What Probyn in effect exposes (although this is not her primary purpose) is that you cannot have an educational *practice*—or any practice for that matter—without ‘live subjects’ in the first place.

It might seem as though we have come a long way from the Levinasian understanding of self and Other that has heretofore dominated discussions within education. However, as I explore below, there is a profound attunement to sensibility and the experiential, embodied subject in Levinas’s thought that complements Probyn’s call for exposing the corporeal dimensions of the classroom. What Levinas’s work brings to the table that is not suggested by the new materialism is how bodily sensibility opens up deeper questions of transcendence and the transformation of bodies that this entails. My task for the rest of the article is to discuss how such embodied transcendence is central to the pedagogical project of transformation.

Embodiment, Materiality and Transcendence

I often get a sense when reading Levinas’s depiction of subjectivity, especially in *Otherwise than Being*, of a subject who is cast into a winter desert, cold and unprotected from the winds, alone with others and burdened with the inevitability of the

death of oneself and all beings. The subject is at once vulnerable and sacrificial, wounded and bound, defenceless and subordinate. Out of all this, the subject rises to respond (responsibly) to the command of the Other, in a relation of physical proximity, of nearness, of facing. Images of almost unbearable poignancy are brought to mind: the subject is naked, skinless, helpless and exposed. They are strikingly bleak images. And while they are no strangers to the landscape of existentialism, haunted as that landscape is with the approaching horizon of death towards which the subject is borne without choice or consent, they do seem rather ill-suited to the scene of a classroom.

However, these images of the subject invoked by Levinas are also striking, I think, because they call forth a radical sense of embodiment. That is, these images are not merely metaphors for a subject whose naked skin is vulnerable to the elements and the passing of human time. Rather, such images of embodiment call forth a ‘reality’ insofar as they seek to approach through language, the pulsing sensibilities that arise in experiencing the vicissitudes of life. As Bergo (2014) puts it: ‘The central wager of *Otherwise than Being* is to express affectivity in its immediacy, with minimal conceptualisation’. Yet, these images also call forth a ‘transcendence’ insofar as it is through an inarticulate embodied relation to the Other that one’s ego surpasses its limitations. On the surface of things, this way of casting embodiment, in terms of both sensibility and transcendence, would seem to be contradictory, and perhaps somewhat removed from the notion of the body I discussed above in relation to education. However, as Sparrow (2013) points out, it is at the intersection of embodiment, materiality and metaphysics where Levinas’s work gets really interesting. Indeed, here we find how sensibility and transcendence strangely meet. My intention here is to explore Levinasian embodiment in order to get a sense of how his work actually helps to extend and illuminate the question of the sensible body as an eminently pedagogical one.

Sparrow, with a fresh and irreverent tone, begins his adventure into Levinas’s philosophy by exposing him as ‘someone explicitly engaged in the establishment of a materialist account of subjectivity’ (p. 3), and one that is committed to ‘thinking the insubstantiality of the subject’ (p. 55). His oblique way of reading Levinas as a philosopher of materiality opens up the question as to how, if embodiment is indeed paramount, we assume the emergence of subjectivity through our contact with others who are radically different from our selves. To do this, Levinas takes recourse through sensation. As a philosopher heavily influenced by phenomenology, the experiential dimensions of subjectivity remain at the heart of the self–Other relation. However, what Sparrow (2013) notes is that ‘logic of sensation identified by Levinas is not something disclosed phenomenologically. It is, as Deleuze says, invisible’ (p. 23). As Levinas (1987) himself explains:

It is a relationship with the In-visible, where invisibility results not from some incapacity of human knowledge, but from the inaptitude of knowledge as such—from its in-adequation—to the Infinity of the absolutely other, and from the absurdity that an event such as coincidence would have here.
(p. 32)

That is, when Levinas discusses the encounter with the Other, he does not suggest that the Other ‘appears’ to me, and then can be read and understood through my sensations and perceptions. Quite the opposite. It is the mystery and unknowability of the Other that ‘reveal’ themselves. This ‘invisibility’ is precisely what is suggested when Levinas claims that when we truly face the Other, we do not even notice the colour of her eyes.⁴ That is, as a gestalt, the embodied Other remains independent of the intentionality of the self, or the grasping of the self, as one who seeks to know the Other through concepts, categories and distinctions. Sparrow (2013) suggests, I think rightly, that ‘the body lives a time that is out of step with the ego. It signals a reality that belongs to the sensible dimension of any spectacle, and which Levinas can only describe as a kind of magical evasion of presence’ (p. 27). What happens through sensation is that we are ‘directly’ brought into the relation; it occasions ‘a submersion of oneself’ in the ‘vitality of sensation’ (p. 33). Indeed, Levinas (1998) claims that it is not our knowledge of sensation, but the act of sensing that matters to his ethics.

The sensible qualities—sounds, colors, hardness, softness—are attributes of things; but they also seem to be lived in time in the form of psychic life, stretching out or dividing in the succession of temporal phases, and not only lasting or being altered in the measurable time of physicists. (p. 31)

What is important to keep in mind here is that such directness lies outside the field of concepts and categories. Sensation is not a ‘phenomenon’ or an ‘appearance’, but a rhythm or vibration experienced directly through contact. Sparrow (2013) writes, ‘Sensation does not need to be communicated through a sign, symbol, or concept. It is the body that comprehends, or rather accommodates, the power of sensation’ (p. 33).

Now, this raises some interesting questions for education, and for understanding embodied forms of affect more generally. As Ahmed (2004) has written, affect circulates as a form of social currency, and perhaps cannot simply be read so ‘directly’ as Sparrow is implying. For example, how might cultural practices function to sculpt a particularly bodily response to a given set of stimuli? How might a Muslim student experience bodily sensations of fear or pride or resolve in learning that she is not allowed to wear her hijab in her non-Muslim school? Are such bodily reactions not always already culturally or socially coded? My response is that following Levinas, and his move to transcendence, the *kind* of sensation one experiences may indeed be read, named and interpreted, but that the experience of sensation itself lies in a state prior to language. That is, embodied responses, such as Probyn’s ‘goose-bump effect’, are not first about meaning or content (e.g. goose-bumps can *mean* many things: fear, pleasure, eroticism and anxiety), but are first corporeal processes upon which we lay over our concepts and categories, after the fact as it were. What this suggests is how to think of the transformative aspects of education as embodying untheorised experience as opposed to already assuming we know what students ‘feel’ when they ‘sense’ goose-bumps. This is definitely not to suggest that affects cannot or should not be analysed, but that there also needs to be some room made for untheorised experience in our classrooms if we are going, paradoxically, to ‘understand’ the specifically ethical dimensions of teaching and the transformation implied therein. I return to this

idea more fully in the conclusion. Suffice for now to say that what is at stake in viewing embodied sensibility as a direct effect of contact with others (human and non-human alike) is that it opens the subject up to a plurality of possibilities that are based on not knowing, on something prior to naming experience.

The unknowability of the Other is not merely a trope for suggesting that the other is an object that appears to me beyond my current frames of cognition, and with other, better lenses I can come to ‘know’ her better; it is, rather, that the Other is that which disturbs my sense of knowing, my ego and my identity. And this is where the phenomenological approach to sensibility hits its limits. That is, Levinas cannot fully follow through on the idea that the Other, who occasions sensation, is only something (or someone) who ‘appears’ to me. Instead, there is something of the Other hidden from view because she ‘is’ more than an appearance. This logic suggests that my sensations of the Other can never fully capture her limits, since those limits exceed my very perception. ‘Sensation allows his [Levinas’s] other to “escape closure”, precisely because sensation is what allows us to make contact with exteriority without subjecting that exteriority to our representational devices’ (Sparrow, 2013, p. 109). To embrace phenomenology too closely would mean that the sensations invoked in relation to the Other remain confined within the ego’s purview and this risks becoming a self-sustaining system, where the other becomes reduced to what *I* can know and perceive. But since the Other breaks up the totality of my identity (Levinas, 1969), breaks up systems (Levinas, 1969, p. 63) and breaks up essence (Levinas, 1998, p. 14), it needs to exist as a body in its own right, and not merely present itself as an object of my perception. As Perpich (2008) writes in countering the phenomenological critique against Levinas:

the problem of transcendence that is the spur to Levinas’s philosophy is precisely the problem of whether these [phenomenological] categories and modes of evaluation exhaust the whole of what is, or whether there is not in human experience a moment of transcendence when the sway of our relation to the world is pierced by another order, a sociality in which the other ‘appears’ not only as a thing among things or a force ranged against us but as a singular being who ‘counts as such’ and whose meaning, therefore, is not a function of a larger system or whole but signifies outside of every horizon or context. (pp. 48–49)

However, another problem of transcendence is the kind of generalisation it introduces into the field of sensibility. That is, if sensation and affect are central to the ethical relation between I and the Other, which Levinas claims it is, then how can sensation ever be about the ‘absolute unknowability’ and ‘enigma’ of the Other? Would this not entail a shift away from the Other’s concrete face, her smell, her voice, her touch? Sparrow (2013) expresses his worry thus:

But it could be argued that enigmas are practically unsatisfactory and leave too much to presumption, a loyal ally of discrimination. To allow the Other to remain enigmatic and absolutely beyond recognition—as Levinas must, since this is what makes his philosophy innovative—is to claim that the

imperative the Other commands issues from elsewhere, from some unmarked locale. That is, some place where my body cannot be and therefore cannot hear. How do I even begin to respond appropriately to such a call? When the alterity of the Other is deemed absolute, we overlook the fact that racism often thrives on such a disregard for the phenomenality of the face ... It seems to me that Levinas ought to have made the color of the Other's eyes—along with the rest of his/her phenomenal features—an essential feature of the Other's singularity. Even if he doesn't completely dismiss such features, Levinas does not attribute enough significance to the phenomenal in his account of faciality. (p. 93)

While one can wish that Levinas articulated things differently, I do think that his decision to move beyond the phenomenal positions bodily sensation on a different register. That is, although sensations occur in the 'immediacy of the sensible' (1998, p. 62), they also are tied to a response to the Other that cannot, for Levinas, be 'determined' by thought or categories of the sensible. Instead, it is both affecting and being affected by that constitute the responsible subject. This means that there is both vulnerability and suffering on the one hand, and nourishment, enjoyment and giving, on the other. 'This immediacy [of the sensible] is first of all the ease of enjoyment, more immediate than drinking, the sinking into the depths of the element, into its incomparable freshness, a plenitude and a fulfilment' (Levinas, 1998, p. 64). As Sparrow (2013) himself notes:

Although in the final analysis vulnerability is the defining feature of sensibility for Levinas, it is also a site of what he calls *alimentation*. Sensations are not only what threaten to break up identities, they are also what nourish identities. Our bodies metabolize sensations and thereby incorporate them into their constitution. Conversely, bodies excrete sensations back into the environment. (p. 51)

This back-and-forthness of the body is therefore at once both concrete and transcendent. It is concrete at the pure, bodily level of sensation and it is transcendent in two senses: on the one hand, such sensation lies prior to the naming of experience and therefore becomes a 'transcendental condition of practical life' (Sparrow, 2013, p. 52), and on the other hand, sensation is precisely that which paradoxically enables a movement beyond the ego, the self and one's identity. This reading corresponds, I think, to the two kinds of transcendence Bergo (2014) has discussed in relation to Levinas's early and later work. As to the former, she writes: 'Levinas's early project approached transcendence in light of humans' irreducible urge to get past the limits of their physical and social situations. His transcendence is less transcendence-in-the-world than transcendence through and because of sensibility'. With respect to the later work, she notes that in *Otherwise in Being*, 'transcendence becomes transcendence-in-immanence before it is transcendence toward the other as untotalizable exteriority'. What I wish to suggest here is that reading Levinas as a philosopher of materiality allows us to posit the centrality of sensibility *both* in moving towards the Other in an act of transformation through which one becomes a responsible subject

and in giving weight to the importance of unnamed (unnameable) experience as a condition for that movement to take place. Moreover, what focusing on sensibility and the body offer to both philosophy and education are a way of conceiving subjectivity in terms of its pliability and plasticity as it comes into contact with its environment.

Education Incarnate

What I have outlined here briefly in these pages is first that the newness of Levinas's philosophy emerges from reading him as a philosopher of materiality, which to my mind is a response not only to contemporary directions within philosophy, but also with the pedagogical concerns of transformation that we find within education. To theorise and practise education as though bodies were either incidental to its purpose or merely effects of the discourses that inform our teaching, is to dismiss too easily the ways in which bodies exceed the limits (we think) we are putting upon them. As Probyn suggests, bodies are not so readily contained, they seem to have their own 'logic' in responding to and in being immersed in their environments. Bodies perspire, blush, sneeze, sigh and breathe, and the skin tingles, twitches, pulses and produces even goose bumps. The sensational response to the environment is what constitutes our living flesh; the 'live subject' is one who is affecting and affected by its encounters with other material things. As such, subjects are plastic. 'The plastic subject is a dispositional subject, transitory and mutable. Its disposition is informed by its sensory environments and discernible in the sensations it can endure and produce at any given moment ...' (Sparrow, 2013, p. 56). And as we have seen it is this malleability occasioned by a vulnerability to the Other that enables the ethical subject to emerge in Levinas's work. It is precisely our susceptibility to the Other, and our capacity to respond to the Other as someone in her own right, outside of my perception of her, where Levinas locates ethics. The ethical subject is a responsible subject, transcending the 'givenness' of the ego, allowing the immediacy of sensibility to be experienced, without being named or categorised. Plasticity, it seems to me, is the very nature of the Levinasian ethical subject.

Plasticity, and the significance of the immediacy of sensibility on Levinas's terms, is also what I would call eminently pedagogical. For me, it is the alteration of the self in an act of 'sensible transcendence' that captures what it is we are talking about when we talk about the transformative possibilities of education. That is, whatever kind of change we are advocating through our educational projects (better citizens, freer persons, critical thinkers, empathic and caring individuals) is reliant upon the actual sensations experienced by bodies in encounters with their ever-changing environment. There is no citizen, person, thinker or individual that is not a living entity made of flesh and blood. Transformations, whether they occur through an engagement with ideas or gestures or things, are never purely cognitive events, but always accompanied by concrete effects which in turn condition the lived environment we then experience anew.⁵ Levinas's bold move was to turn this pedagogical (transformative) moment of subjectivity, with all its sensations, into the very condition of responsibility.

But what are we to do with a view of education that is incarnate at the level of the sensate body? It is one thing to theorise sensations and affects, analysing how they come into being, seeking to understand the place they have in our personal stories or cultural narratives, but it is wholly other thing to simply ‘let’ them exist and see that existence as valuable in its own right. That is, while there is a need for analysing the guilt white students might feel in confronting their own privilege or the rage that women experience in the face of continued discrimination, there is also a need for accepting that the bodily sensations of guilt and rage are nonetheless living experiences that without our intention circulate in, around and through us. This is not a call for anti-intellectualism—quite the opposite in fact. Instead, it is a plea for acknowledging the significance of the unnameable, uncategorisable aspects of sensation that Levinas was at pains to articulate through his poetic renderings of subjectivity. By making room for the directness of experience and the immediacy of sensibility as central aspect of classroom life, could we not then begin to practise a kind of attunement, an orientation to the unpredictable qualities of bodily responses? After all, if we follow the spirit of Levinas, is it not in and through my body that my responsibility begins?

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

1. See Todd (2014) for a depiction of pedagogy as that which involves the transformation of the self—a transformation which involves both the body and spirit.
2. Some authors draw on Karen Barad’s work in physics to speak about intra-action and not only interaction. For a discussion of the differences, see Hekman (2010), pp. 72–78.
3. One notable exception she makes is O’Farrell *et al.*’s edited volume entitled, *Taught Bodies* (2000).
4. Indeed, Sparrow takes Levinas to task for failing to adequately account for the phenomenological encounter with the face in all its specificity and links this failure to systems of racial discrimination. Although I am sympathetic to many of his points, I do think that there is a broader issue at stake that Sparrow does not fully address. This is the issue of singularity itself. From the critique raised against Levinas by feminists such as Luce Irigaray and Adriana Caverero, the point is that Levinas’s subject dissolves too easily into a generalisation of the other, as one who has no (sexual) specificity to contend with. Indeed, these critiques fit the work of other philosophers of uniqueness, such as Jean-Luc Nancy, who are also depicted as missing out on the radical singularity of a unique being in making claims about ‘beings’ and ‘others’ in general.
5. For an interesting discussion of this recursion and the emergence of consciousness as an interactive relation, see Noë (2010) and Thompson (2007). Both authors write at the intersection of philosophy, cognitive science and neuroscience and examine the plasticity of human organisms and their environments.

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