

TEACHING FOR THE POSSIBILITY OF BEING TAUGHT: WORLD-CENTRED EDUCATION IN AN AGE OF LEARNING

Gert Biesta

(Brunel University London, UK & University of Humanistic Studies, The Netherlands)

1. Introduction: The need for a recovery of teaching

Over the past twenty years a rather common critique of teaching has emerged in many research publications and policy documents. Again and again we hear that so-called ‘traditional’ teaching – where the teacher speaks and students are supposed to listen and absorb information – is bad and outdated, and where something allegedly more modern, focused on the facilitation of students’ learning is seen as good, desirable and ‘of the future.’ While the opposition between ‘traditional’ and ‘contemporary’ is itself already a bit stale, we should also not forget how traditional the critique of traditional teaching itself actually is. John Dewey already made the point, as did many educators in many countries around the world before and after him. The critique of traditional teaching is also not entirely valid, because even in classrooms where teachers speak, and students sit quietly, a lot of things are actually happening. In this regard I agree with Virginia Richardson’s observation that “students also make meaning from activities encountered in a transmission model of teaching” (Richardson, 2003, p. 1628).

It is also ironic that some of the most popular technology-mediated forms of education – such as TED talks, MOOCs and the numerous professional and amateur instructional videos on YouTube – are all staged in traditional ways, with someone talking and explaining so that others can watch, listen and learn. This begins to suggest that there actually may be something wrong with the *critique* of traditional teaching rather than with traditional teaching itself. Yet making this point and trying to establish a more general case for the recovery of teaching is fraught with difficulties because nowadays the most vocal arguments in favour of teaching come from the conservative end of the political spectrum, aimed at re-establishing the kind of order and control that apparently is lacking in modern society and modern education (for a different take on this issue see Meirieu, 2007). This seems to suggest that the only *progressive* alternative lies in the demise of the teacher and a turn towards learning; a turn where the

teacher only exists as a facilitator of otherwise ‘autonomous’ learning processes.¹

The problem here has to do with the binary construction of options, that is, with the idea that the only meaningful response to authoritarian forms of teaching – teaching as an act of control – lies in the abolition of teaching and a turn towards learning. What remains remarkably absent is the exploration of a third option that focuses on the reconstruction of our understanding of teaching along progressive lines. Yet it is in such an option – which relies on the idea that freedom is not an escape from external influences but rather has to do with establishing a ‘grown up’ relationship with what may have authority in our lives – that we can see the beginnings of an entirely different response to authoritarian forms of teaching.

In my book *The Rediscovery of Teaching* (Biesta 2017) I have tried to make the case for such a third option, beyond teaching as control and beyond learning as freedom. This has involved discussion of a range of topics, including the question what it means to exist as subject in and with the world; how much learning education actually needs; what teaching may have to do in emancipatory education; and what all this means for the work of the teacher. In this presentation I will focus on one particular thread of the bigger argument that brings together two key questions of the wider discussion, namely the question whether teaching is necessarily a limitation of the student’s freedom and whether learning is automatically an expression of this freedom.

In what follows I start from the contention that to the extent to which the critique of traditional teaching is a critique of teaching as control, this critique is valid as it highlights that under such conditions the student can only appear as object of the teacher’s intentions and interventions, but not as a subject in its own right. (This is also the central point in Paulo Freire’s critique of ‘banking education’ – see Freire 1993, pp.52-53.) I then argue that the suggestion that we can overcome this problem by turning to students and their learning and, more specifically, their acts of sense making and comprehension, is not really a way out, because such acts of sense making emanate from the self and return to the self and thus run the risk that the self remains to itself rather than that it is drawn out of itself, towards the world. In more philosophical terms I suggest, pursuing a line of thought from Emmanuel Levinas, that our subject-ness is precisely *not* constituted through acts of signification but is rather called forth from the

¹ I use ‘autonomous’ here to refer to the idea that these processes are supposed to be going on anyway, irrespective of the presence of the teacher.

'outside,' in response, so we might say, to the event of 'being addressed.' It is in this event that a different meaning of teaching manifests itself and it is this meaning that I seek to recover in this presentation.

2. Education and the ego-logical worldview

Central to Levinas's work is his attempt to overcome what, after Levinas (1969, p. 35), we might call the ego-logical view of the world, that is, the way of thinking that starts from the assumption of the existence of the self, in order *then* to thematise everything outside of the self. Levinas's thought is, however, not a simple reversal of this gesture but comes closer to what elsewhere (Biesta 2008) I have referred to as an "ethics of subjectivity." This expression indicates that Levinas seeks to approach the question of human subjectivity through ethics rather than through knowledge. In his work there is, in other words, no theory about the subject, no truth-claim about what the subject *is*, but rather an attempt to identify the situation where the self begins to *matter*, or, more precisely, where *I* matter, where it matters that I am I and not just anyone.

When Levinas writes that he "describe[s] subjectivity in ethical terms" (Levinas, 1985, p.95) he seeks to highlight that he sees responsibility as "the essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity" (ibid.). He emphasises, however, that responsibility here "does not supplement a preceding existential base" (ibid.). It is not that the subject first exists – as a self-sufficient ego or subject – and only *then* encounters a responsibility or decides to take on a responsibility or to become responsible. It is rather, as Levinas puts it, that "the very node of the subjective is knotted in ethics understood as responsibility" (ibid.). Responsibility, in the helpful formulation from Zygmunt Bauman (1993, p.13) is thus to be understood as "the first reality of the self," the first 'moment,' the first 'situation' where the self begins to matter.

To suggest that responsibility is the first reality of the self – or more precisely: that the *encounter* with responsibility is the moment where the self is called to be a self – is very different from how contemporary educational theories and practices conceive of the student. In such theories and practices the student is depicted crucially as a learner, that is, as someone who is trying to 'make sense' of the situations he or she encounters. The turn from teaching to learning, and the encompassing 'learnification' of educational discourse and practice (for the latter term see Biesta 2010), rejects the idea that it is possible for teachers to give anything to their students – and it particularly rejects the idea of teaching as the transmission of knowledge from the teacher to the student. It argues, instead, that students are continuously engaged in processes of sense making

and interpretation, and that the task of teachers is to construct learning environments in which such sense making can take place and, through, facilitate students' learning in and through such environments.

In my book I have used the image of the robot vacuum cleaner to show what such a learner-centred approach to education entails, also in order to make clear what is fundamentally *lacking* in this set up. Robot vacuum cleaners are indeed able to perform their task – cleaning the floor – autonomously, that is, without the need for help from the outside. What is even more interesting is that, over time, robot vacuum cleaners can become more efficient at performing their task. If at first the pattern they follow is guided by the particular algorithm they were programmed with, over time they become more adjusted to the environment in which they are operating, moving around tables, chairs and other objects, rather than bumping into them. This shows that robot vacuum cleaners can learn or, more precisely, that they can adapt to their environment in an intelligent way. While their learning is autonomous in that it occurs without any intervention from the outside – without any direct intervention from a teacher, so we might say – this does not mean that their learning cannot be influenced. The way to do this is by putting the machine in a different environment so that it needs to adapt to differing environmental conditions. While such learning remains a lifelong task – each new situation requires adjustment and adaptation – the machines may nonetheless become more skilled and efficient at adapting to new situations.²

I believe that the way in which robot vacuum cleaners work, provides us with a remarkably accurate picture of *a*, and perhaps even *the* prevailing contemporary educational imaginary. This is an imaginary that sees education as a learner-centred endeavour, where it is ultimately for learners to construct their own understandings and build up their own skills, and where the main task of teachers is to provide arrangements in and through which such processes can happen. In this situation the teacher does, indeed, no longer transmit anything but designs learning environments for students in order to facilitate their learning. Similarly, students are not engaged in passive absorption but in active adaptive construction, and it is through this that they acquire the skills and competences that make them more able at adapting to future situations. This also shifts the meaning and position of the curriculum, which no longer exists as the content to be transmitted and acquired but becomes redefined as a set of

² The idea that the very aim of education is to become more effective at adaptation to changing situations is, for example, the key premise of so-called 21st century skills.

‘learning opportunities’ in and through which students, in a flexible and personalised way, pursue their own unique learning trajectories.³

If I were to characterise the underlying view about the human being and its relationship to the world, I would suggest calling this a hermeneutical approach and, more generally, a hermeneutical worldview.⁴ The reason for this lies in the fact that the human being is depicted here first and foremost as a sense-making being, that is, as a being who is in relationship with the world – natural and social – through acts of interpretation and meaning-making. Such acts are issued from the self and return to the self ‘via’ the world. In such acts the world thus appears as an object of our sense making.

Now one could argue that this is simply how things are. One could argue, in other words, that this worldview is *true*, that human beings are basically sense-making beings capable of intelligent adaptation to every changing circumstances, and that we should therefore build our understanding of knowledge and communication, but also of ethics, politics, and education upon this premise.⁵ But one could, of course, also pause for a moment and ponder whether this worldview is as inevitable as it would seem, perhaps by asking what is *not* conceivable within the confines of this worldview.

There are two questions I would like to raise in this regard. One is whether in this worldview the world, natural and social, *can speak* – and whether it can do so in its own terms and on its own terms. The second is whether in this

³ It is perhaps important to note that while this imaginary is contemporary – by which I intend to say that it is shaping contemporary educational practice in many contexts and settings – its theoretical frame is not new. We can find it, for example, in the theory of autopoietic systems, that is, of systems that are able to regenerate themselves in constant interaction with their environment – an idea that was developed in biology by Humberto Maturana and Francis Varela (see, for example, Maturana, Varela & Uribe, 1974; Maturana & Varela, 1980) and that was further developed by Niklas Luhmann in his theory of social systems (Luhmann, 1984; 1995). A key insight of Luhmann’s work is that autopoietic systems (such as, for example, human individuals) cannot participate in each other’s autopoiesis – which means, for example, that they cannot take part in each other’s adaptive activities or cognitive constructions – but that they can be in each other’s environments so as to have an indirect effect on each other’s autopoiesis. Perhaps the most famous example of the way of thinking that underlies the ideas outlined above can be found in the work of John Dewey, whose understanding of action, communication and learning is indeed based on a view of the human organism as being in constant transaction with its environment, constantly trying to establish a dynamic equilibrium through processes of doing and undergoing, to use Dewey’s phrase (see, for example, Biesta & Burbules, 2003; Biesta, 2009; and for Dewey’s philosophical account Dewey, 1925). And in Dewey’s work we can indeed find the claim that “we never educate directly, but indirectly by means of the environment” (Dewey, 1966, p.19).

⁴ The reference to hermeneutics does not ‘cover’ all positions and views that go under this heading. As I will make clear later in this chapter, the use of this notion is particularly inspired by Levinas.

⁵ I am inclined to say that pragmatism – particularly in the work of Dewey and Mead – provides one of the most developed examples of this ‘programme.’ This presentation can therefore also be read as an exploration of the limits of the pragmatic worldview and everything that has emerged from this worldview, including a theory and practice of education.

worldview we can be *spoken to*, that is, whether we can be *addressed* (which actually is the question about the very possibility of teaching). The hermeneutical worldview – or if one wishes: the worldview of intelligent adaptation – seems to preclude these two options. The reason for this lies in the fact that the hermeneutical worldview depicts a universe that is *immanent* to my understanding, that is *immanent* to my acts of comprehension, acts that always aim to bring the world ‘out there’ back to *me*. While such acts of comprehension do have an object – hermeneutics is not phantasy or pure construction – this object always appears as an object of *my* sense making and, in this sense, remains dependent on *my* acts of signification. It is in relation to these very questions – the question of immanence and the question of signification – that Levinas provides a rather different point of view. In the next two steps of my presentation I will briefly discuss some of Levinas’s key ideas with regard to these issues.

3. An opening in an opening: Levinas on signification and sense

In his essay ‘Signification and Sense’ (Levinas 2006⁶), Levinas explores the conditions of possibility of signification, broadly conceived as acts of sense making or interpretation. One line in the argument he puts forward concerns what he refers to as the “anti-Platonism in contemporary philosophy of signification” (Levinas, 2006, p. 18). This anti-Platonism entails the claim that “the intelligible is *inconceivable* outside the becoming that suggests it” (ibid; emph. added.). It is the idea that “(t)here does not exist any *signification in itself* that a thought could reach by hopping over the reflections ... that lead to it” (ibid.; emph. in original). Or in slightly more concrete language, it is the idea that “all the different cultures, are no longer obstacles that separate us from the essential and the Intelligible (but are) the only possible paths, irreplaceable, and consequently implicated in the intelligible itself” (ibid.).

Levinas thus describes a situation of total *immanence* where all our meaning making, all our signification, occurs *inside* culture and history and derives its meaning from such cultural and historical contexts. He characterises this as anti-Platonic because for Plato “the world of significations *precedes* the language and culture that express it” so that it remains “indifferent to the system of signs that can be invented to make this world present to thought” (ibid.) Plato, so Levinas argues, believed in the existence of “a privileged culture (that) can understand the transitory and seemingly childish nature of historical cultures” (ibid., pp. 18-19); a privileged culture that, so we might say, could give sense *to* signification

⁶ A different English translation was called ‘Meaning and Sense, see Levinas, 2008; the original French version was published in 1964 under the title ‘La Signification et le Sens’.

and make sense *of* signification. Levinas suggests that in contemporary philosophy of signification this option is no longer considered to be possible. What we find instead is a “*subordination* of intellect to expression” (p.19; emphasis added), that is, a situation where everything we can say or express has to be expressed in and through existing cultural and historical discourses and contexts and gains its meaning from such discourses and contexts.

For Levinas this not only poses a *philosophical* problem, which has to do with the question where signification actually gets its meaning from. It also poses a *practical* problem, which has to do with the question how communication is actually possible if it is supposed to happen entirely ‘inside’ existing cultural and historical frameworks. And it poses an urgent *political* problem, because, as Levinas puts it, this “most recent, most daring and influential anthropology keeps multiple cultures on the same level” (ibid., p.20). According to Levinas the contemporary philosophy of signification thus amounts to cultural and historical *relativism*. Because of its total immanence, contemporary philosophy of signification lacks a criterion that would allow us to make a judgement about the ‘quality’ of differing interpretations, so as to be able to distinguish between those that ‘make sense’ and those that do not ‘make sense,’ to put it bluntly. According to Levinas contemporary philosophy of signification simply “takes satisfaction [*se complaint*] in the multiplicity of cultural significations” (ibid., pp. 25-26), which – and this is important for my line of argument – manifests itself as a “refusal of engagement in the Other” (ibid., p.26). Yet it is precisely in the latter ‘movement’ that Levinas sees an ‘opening,’ that is, a way out of the predicament he sees.

There are two dimensions to how Levinas constructs his argument here, and along both lines he seeks to establish two points. The first point is that signification “is situated *before* Culture” and the second point that it is “situated *in* Ethics,” which, taken together, means that ethics is the “presupposition of all Culture and all signification” (ibid., p. 36; emph. added; capitals in original). Rather than refusing engagement in the Other it is precisely this engagement which, according to Levinas, is the origin of sense in that it provides an “orientation” (ibid., p. 26). In a first step Levinas characterises this orientation “as a motion from the identical toward an Other that is absolutely other” (ibid.). This orientation which “goes freely from Same to Other” is what he refers to as “a Work” (ibid.; capitals in original). Yet for the Work to be radically Other-centred it “must not be thought as an apparent agitation of a stock that afterward remains identical to itself” – which is Levinas’s way of saying that engagement in the Other should not leave the self unaffected or unchanged –

nor must it be thought “as similar to the technique that ... transforms a strange world into a world whose otherness is converted to my idea” (ibid.) – which I read as another way of describing what, above, I have called the hermeneutical ‘gesture,’ bringing what is other into *my* understanding. That is why Levinas insists that the Work needs to be understood as “*a movement of the Same toward the Other that never returns to the Same*” (ibid., emphasis in original).

If the Work is really done without any returns, without anything coming back to us, then it is also important, so Levinas argues, that we do not think of it as something that fulfils some kind of need we would have – such as the need to do good or the need to care for the other – as in such cases the fulfilment of the need would be the ‘return’ we receive. In this context Levinas introduces the notion of desire (see ibid.). Yet here desire is not to be understood as desire for fulfilment, which is why Levinas writes that “(t)he Desire for Others – sociality – arises in a being who lacks nothing or, more exactly, arises beyond all that could be lacking or satisfying to him” (ibid.). In desire the ego goes out to the Other “in a way that compromises the sovereign identification of the Ego with oneself” (ibid.). Desire so conceived is therefore non-egological. But how should we ‘approach’ this “desire for Others that,” according to Levinas, “we feel in the most common social experience” (ibid., p.30)? Levinas observes that “(a)ll analysis of language in contemporary philosophy emphasizes, and rightfully so, its hermeneutic structure” (ibid.), that is, that our approach to the other is to be understood as an act of signification, an act through which we try to understand and make sense of the other. Levinas, however, is after a “third option” where the other is neither “collaborator and neighbour of our cultural work of expression [nor] client of our artistic production, but *interlocutor*; the one to whom expression expresses” (ibid., emphasis added).

Precisely here we find a first and crucial ‘opening,’ in that Levinas suggests that signification is precisely *not* an egological act. It is not a gesture through which the ego generates meaning, it is not self-generated expression ‘onto’ a world. Signification, in other words, is *not* hermeneutics because, as Levinas writes, “before it is a celebration of being, *expression is a relation* with the one to whom I express the expression” (ibid.; emph. added). The Other “who faces me” is precisely for this reason “not included in the totality of being that is expressed,” because in that case – and this is the crucial step in the argument – the other would only be a ‘product’ of my signification; the Other would be my construction. The Other rather arises “behind all collection of being, as the one to whom I express what I express” (ibid.). That this is so, Levinas argues, is because it is only through the presence of the Other as *interlocutor* that “a

phenomenon such as signification [can] introduce itself, of itself, into being” (ibid.).

That is why, as interlocutor, as the one to whom I express the expression “and whose presence is already required so that my cultural gesture of expression can be produced,” the Other is “neither a cultural signification nor a simple given” but rather “primordially, *sense*” (ibid., emphasis in original). Here we have to remember that ‘sense’ for Levinas is precisely that which gives our signification meaning and, going on from this, gives our life direction. Levinas emphasises that this ‘turn’ “means returning in a new way to Platonism” (ibid., p.38) because it allows to go beyond “this saraband of countless equivalent cultures, each one justifying itself in its own context” (ibid., p.37).

What Levinas is beginning to suggest, therefore, is that signification is *not* the ‘first reality of the self,’ which means that we should not think of ourselves as sense-making beings, but that sense-making only ‘makes sense’ in the encounter with the Other – an encounter which Levinas characterises as fundamentally of an ethical ‘nature.’

4 A second opening: The question of communication

Before I draw this discussion to a close there is one more aspect of Levinas’s line of thought that needs to be brought in, a line which responds to the point raised above about the question how communication – or with Levinas’s term: interlocution – is actually possible. It has to do with the question how the Other actually can be an interlocutor, and it is here that I would suggest that a second ‘opening’ occurs.

While Levinas acknowledges that the manifestation of the Other is produced “in the way all signification is produced,” that is, through an act of my “comprehension of the Other” which, as Levinas emphasises, is “a hermeneutic, an exegesis” (ibid., pp. 30-31), the Other does not just come to me as a ‘product’ of my signification. After all, if that were the case then signification would remain the original event even if this signification would have an ethical ‘quality,’ for example, arising from my intention to want to do good to the other or care for the other. In addition to the appearance of the Other as *phenomenon*, as product of my signification, there is therefore also what Levinas refers to as the “epiphany of the Other” – an epiphany that bears its own significance, “independent of the signification received from the world” (ibid., p. 31), as he puts it. The Other “not only comes to us from a context but signifies itself, without that mediation” (ibid.). It is this unmediated presence which Levinas

refers as 'face' and it is to the epiphany of the face that Levinas refers as 'visitation' (see *ibid.*). Face, so we might say, 'breaks through' its signification, that is, through its image. This is a process of 'deformalization' (Cohen, 2006, p. xxxi) where the face speaks and where this speaking "is first and foremost this way of coming from behind one's appearance, behind one's form; an opening in the opening" (Levinas, 2006, p. 31).

But the face does not speak in general – its speaking is not "the unveiling of the world" (*ibid.*). Rather the face speaks to *me*; the face addresses me, the face summons me. It is precisely here, so Levinas argues, that "(c)onsciousness loses its first place" (*ibid.*) because "the presence of the face signifies an irrefutable order – a commandment – that arrests the availability of consciousness" (*ibid.*). Levinas emphasises that in this moment of interruption consciousness is challenged by the face, but that it is crucial to see that this challenge "does not come from awareness of that challenge" (*ibid.*) because in that case, again, signification would come *before* the address. That is why Levinas emphasises that it is "a challenge of consciousness, not a consciousness of the challenge." (*ibid.*, p. 33) This visitation is therefore "the upset of the very egoism of the Ego" (*ibid.*). It is important to see, however, that this does not amount to the destruction of the Ego but rather to what we might call a decentring; a decentring through which the ego gains its unique significance. As Levinas explains, the responsibility "that empties the Ego of its imperialism [rather] confirms the uniqueness of the Ego," a uniqueness which lies in the fact "that no one can answer in my stead" (*ibid.*). And discovering "such an orientation for the Ego means identifying Ego and morality" (*ibid.*) – and hence the moral 'origin' of the Ego-as-subject, which is precisely what I have tried to express in the idea of an ethics of subjectivity.

5. The criterion, communication, and the origin of signification

I have followed Levinas's argument in detail in order to show how this line of thought addresses the problems with the contemporary philosophy of signification, which were the question of *sense* – Where does signification get its meaning from? – the question of *communication* – How is communication possible in a radically plural universe? – and the question of the *criterion* – What makes it possible for us to evaluate systems and traditions of signification? Levinas's line of thought provides an answer to these three questions, not so much to each of the questions separately but more in an overlapping and interlocking way.

One key insight is the observation that signification is not an egological act or accomplishment but consists of a relation with the one to whom I express an expression, the one to whom expression expresses, as Levinas puts it. Signification thus derives its sense from this particular 'event' or an 'encounter' with another being. In this relation the Other does not appear as object of my signification, but as interlocutor. That is why the 'appearance' of the Other is a matter of epiphany. And what appears is not an image of the Other – which again would make the Other into the 'product' of my signification – but what Levinas refers to as its face.

It is important to see that just as the face is not the product of *my* signification, the epiphany of the face is also not a matter of the other's signification of me. The face does not thematise me; the face does not make me into an object of its signification. Rather the face *speaks to me*. This speech – and this is crucial as well – is not a revelation of the Other that I am just to receive.⁷ The key idea here is that the face speaks to *me* or, to be more precise: the speech of the face addresses me (and here we need to emphasise both the fact that the face *addresses* and that the face addresses *me*, in the singular, and not just anyone, which means that this is a first person matter and not a general theory or truth).

It is an address in which my 'imperialism,' my being with myself, is interrupted, where my consciousness is challenged – "(t)he face disorients the intentionality that sights it" (ibid., p.33) – and where I am called to respond, albeit that I always have the freedom *not* to respond to this call, because the call is not an obligation but a call. It is precisely in this moment, in this ethical event, that the Ego gains its significance, precisely because it appears beyond/before/outside of any signification.

In short, then, the criterion that Levinas has been searching for appears here as ethics; communication is not a matter of the exchange of meaning(s) but has its

⁷ I do not have the time in this presentation to engage in detail with the distance between Levinas and Heidegger, but this is one point where this distance appears and where, in my view, Levinas crucially moves beyond Heidegger. Whereas, to put it briefly and crudely, Heidegger and Levinas both see a similar problem with signification – namely that signification is egological, that it is driven by the self and always returns to the self – Heidegger proposes that the alternative to signification is reception, where we receive what speaks to us and care for it, whereas Levinas proposes that the alternative to self-enclosed signification lies in the fact that what speaks to us addresses us, singles us out, and summons a response. Whereas pure receptivity is ultimately criterion-less – it has no criterion to 'select' or judge what it should care for – Levinas 'moves' us from receptivity to responsibility, where the question for me is not how to receive and hold, but to ask what is being asked from me (with the emphasis, once more, on me in the singular, not on anyone in general). The distance between Heidegger and Levinas is also the reason why, earlier in this presentation I identified two different problems with the hermeneutical worldview – not only the problem how the world can speak in its own terms but also how we can be spoken to.

origin in the address, in the being-spoken-to; and it is in the ethical event of being addressed that signification acquires its sense, that significant becomes possible or, with the more precise formulation Levinas offers: that signification introduces itself into being.

6. Teaching for the possibility of being taught

I started this presentation with critical questions about the all too common critique of traditional teaching – a critique that seems to have become the new dogma of contemporary education. I showed how this critique has led to a demise of teaching and the teacher and a turn towards learning; a turn where the teacher can only exist as a facilitator of otherwise autonomous learning processes.

The reason for the emergence of the turn towards learning seems to lie in the fact that ‘traditional’ teaching is perceived as an act of *control*. The key problem with the idea of teaching as control is that in such a relationship the student can never appear as a subject but remains an object of the teacher’s intentions and interventions. Yet what emerges from the ideas put forward in this presentation, is that the option that is proposed as a response to the idea of teaching-as-control, namely the idea of learning as meaning making or signification, suffers from the same problem in that in acts of signification the learner also cannot appear as subject.

One way to understand why this is so has to do with the fact that acts of signification are issued from the self and return – ‘via’ the world as I have put it – to the self. Signification, so we might say, keeps the self to the self; to its own frameworks of interpretation and sense-making. Another way of looking at this, is to say that in its ongoing attempts to adapt and adjust to always changing envioning conditions the self remains an object vis-à-vis the environment it is trying to adapt to. While such acts of creative adaptation may help the self to *survive*, it never results in a possibility for the self to *exist*. The question that never arises, to put it differently, is whether the environment to which the self is trying to adapt is an environment one ought to adapt to, an environment worth adapting to. The self – and perhaps we should say: the adjusting or adaptive self – can never out of its own generate a criterion with which to evaluate that which it is adjusting to. It is thus ‘caught,’ as an object,’ by that to which it is adjusting – an issue I tried to make clear with the image of the robot vacuum cleaner.

This is where the 'opening' Levinas establishes has its significance, as it shows that our subject-ness is *not* constituted from the inside-out through acts of interpretation and adaptation, but is called into being from the outside, as an interruption of my immanence, an interruption of my being-with-myself, of my consciousness. This, as I have tried to show, is neither the moment where I interpret the other, nor the moment where I listen to the other, and it is also not the moment where the other makes sense of me, and in this regard, it is entirely outside of the realm of signification. It rather is *the moment where I am addressed* by the other, where the other, to use Levinas's words, "[calls] upon the unique within me."

Here we encounter an altogether different account of the 'event' of teaching, one that is precisely *not* aimed at control, at the exercise of power and the establishment of an order in which the student can only exist as object, but rather one that calls forth the subject-ness of the student by interrupting its egocentrism, its being-with-itself and for-itself. This is not only a teaching that puts us very differently in the world. We could even say that this teaching puts us in the world in the first place. It is (a) teaching that draws us out of ourselves, as it interrupts our 'needs,' to use Levinas's term, and in this sense frees us from the ways in which we are bound to or even determined by our needs and desires.

A final question this raises is whether the teacher appears in this set up as the interrupter, as the one who addresses the student, calls the student to be a self, calls upon the unique in the student – in order to uses phrases that, by now, have hopefully become a little more familiar. While this *may* occur in teacher-student relationships, there are two problems we should be mindful of. One is the risk that if we task teachers with the work of interruption, we may very quickly return them to the very place from which we tried to release them – where the teacher ends up as the 'power figure' who 'provokes' the subject-ness of the student. The other problem when we think that the teacher is the one who addresses the student is the suggestion that the address can only come from the teacher which, obviously, is not true.

This is why I wish to suggest that key for the work of teachers is not to see themselves as interrupters or 'addressers' but rather as those who try to turn students away from their being-with-themselves and try to turn them towards 'the world,' that is towards what may address them. Such a world-centred approach to education can never guarantee that students will encounter an address, nor can it predict where the address may come from. But it is a teaching

that at least tries to keep the possibility of the occurrence of the experience of 'being taught' open.

7. The return of teaching

We have arrived, then, at the option that seems to be absent in the current way in which the critique of traditional teaching is being formulated, where the critique of teaching-as-control immediately ends up with the idea of learning-as-freedom. In this presentation I have not only tried to argue that a different alternative *is* possible. I have also suggested that a different alternative *ought to be* possible. These ideas, then, begin to outline a non-egological approach to teaching, an approach that is not aimed at strengthening the ego, but at interrupting the *ego-object*, at turning it towards the world, so that it can become a *self-subject*.

References

- Bauman, Z. (1993). *Postmodern ethics*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Biesta, G.J.J. (2008). Pedagogy with empty hands: Levinas, education and the question of being human. In D. Egéa-Kuehne (ed), *Levinas and education: At the intersection of faith and reason* (pp. 198-210). London/New York: Routledge.
- Biesta, G.J.J. (2009). Pragmatism's contribution to understanding learning-in-context. In R. Edwards, G.J.J. Biesta & M. Thorpe (eds), *Rethinking contexts for teaching and learning*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Biesta, G.J.J. (2010). *Good education in an age of measurement: Ethics, politics, democracy*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.
- Biesta, G.J.J. (2017). *The rediscovery of teaching*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Cohen, R.A. (2006). Introduction. In E. Levinas, *Humanism of the other*. Urbana and Chicago: Illinois University Press.
- Dewey, J. (1925) *Experience and nature*. In Jo Ann Boydston (ed), *John Dewey. The later works (1925-1953), Volume 1*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Dewey, J. (1966[1916]). *Democracy and education*. New York: The Free Press.
- Freire, P. (1993[1972]). *Pedagogy of the oppressed. New, revised 20th anniversary edition*. New York: Continuum.
- Levinas, E. (1969[1961]). *Totality and infinity: An essay on exteriority*. Pittsburgh, PA & The Hague: Duquesne University Press & Martinus Nijhoff.
- Levinas, E. (1985). *Ethics and infinity. Conversations with Philippe Nemo*. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.
- Levinas, E. (2006). *Humanism of the other. Translated by Nidra Poller With an introduction by Richard A. Cohen*. Urbana and Chicago: Illinois University Press.

- Levinas, E. (2008). Meaning and sense. In A.T. Peperzak, S. Critchley & R. Bernasconi (eds), *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic philosophical writings*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Luhmann, N. (1984). *Soziale Systeme: Grundriß einer allgemeinen Theorie*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Luhman, N. (1995). *Social systems*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Maturana, H. R. & Varela, F. J. (1980). *Autopoiesis and cognition: The realization of the living*. Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company.
- Meirieu, P. (2007). *Pédagogie: Le devoir de résister*. Issy-les-Moulineaux: ESF éditeur.
- Richardson, V. (2003). Constructivist pedagogy. *Teachers College Record* 105(9), 1623–1640.
- Varela, F.J., Maturana, H.R. & Uribe, R. (1974). Autopoiesis: The organization of living systems, its characterization and a model. *Biosystems* 5(4), 187-196.