



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

On facing one's students: the relevance of Emmanuel Levinas on teaching in times of Covid-19

Berenpas, M.

Citation

Berenpas, M. (2021). On facing one's students: the relevance of Emmanuel Levinas on teaching in times of Covid-19. *Journal Of Philosophy Of Education*, 55(4-5), 649-664. doi:10.1111/1467-9752.12576

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Creative Commons CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3193839>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

On facing one's students: The relevance of Emmanuel Levinas on teaching in times of Covid-19

Martine Berenpas

Centre for Intercultural Philosophy,
Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands

Correspondence

Martine Berenpas, Institute for Philosophy,
Leiden University, Nonnensteeg 1-3, PO Box
9515, 2300 RA Leiden, The Netherlands.
Email: m.berenpas@hum.leidenuniv.nl

Abstract

In this article I show the relevance of Emmanuel Levinas' notion of primordial teaching for understanding why online teaching cannot adequately mimic face-to-face teaching. I will argue that the current Covid-19 pandemic shows us that being in the immediacy of the embodied presence of one's students is intimately intertwined with being responsive to the needs of students, which highlights that teaching is not only the transmission of intellectual knowledge and skills but first and foremost an ethical attunement to the suffering of the Other. Levinas argues that teaching is in its essence a relation between unique individuals; a uniqueness that originates in the individual's unconditional responsibility to each and every other human being. This unconditional responsibility is for Levinas the non-mediated embodied sensitivity to the needs of the Other; an openness that precedes freedom and the conscious choice of a person. In this article I claim this embodied sensitivity is jeopardised in online education, which makes it harder for the teacher to attune to the needs of every student. The risk we run is that the face of the Other remains 'plastic', which makes it more difficult for the teacher to attune to the specific needs of students. I will argue that online teaching should not only concentrate on enabling the transmission of knowledge but should

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/) License, which permits use and distribution in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, the use is non-commercial and no modifications or adaptations are made.

© 2021 The Authors. *Journal of Philosophy of Education* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd on behalf of Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain

also invest in creating an environment of intimacy that enables responsiveness and genuine contact.

KEYWORDS

Covid-19, Emmanuel Levinas, ethics, online education, teaching, teaching relation

INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 crisis has dramatically changed the educational context on a global scale, forcing educators and students worldwide to use and implement a form of online teaching on a very short notice. Without the advances in technology, teaching during the pandemic would not have been able to continue, jeopardising the future of millions of students. The shift to online teaching and learning has been able to, at the least, minimise the damage, offering most students an alternative to face-to-face learning.

Typically, online learning in higher education focusses on pre-recorded lectures, online assignments and live classroom sessions using applications such as Kaltura, Teams and Zoom. Before the Covid crisis, it was found that students generally appreciate online teaching, admittedly giving them more flexibility and freedom to manage their own time (Guest et al., 2018). Giving students the choice to follow courses online instead of attending face-to-face classes helps them in combining education and paid work, lessening the financial burden that rests on students. Studies also showed that students and teachers are generally satisfied with online courses, granting the conclusion that online teaching is an effective pedagogy that can enhance students' and educator's performance (Seok et al., 2010).

Although giving students the choice to participate in online education can be beneficial, the Covid-19 pandemic however sheds a whole new light on online teaching and learning. Given the fact that the crisis has forced nearly every educational institution to replace face-to-face learning with some form of online teaching, students have no other choice than to continue their education online. This forced, sudden shift to online teaching seems to be particularly detrimental to vulnerable students who lack resources and abilities to access online teaching platforms. Elke Weesjes points out, for example that community college students are the one who are struggling more than other college students; not only because they lack resources such as a laptop and a stable Internet connection but also because some of them struggle with precarious living conditions (Weesjes, 2020).

Social contact and experimenting with social relations is an important and vital part of student's lives, a need that hardly can be met during today's crisis where all social facilities such as Universities, Colleges but also bars and student Associations are closed. It is therefore not surprising that students experience more stress and anxiety during the pandemic; a recent survey of more than 3000 students sends an alarming signal that their capacity for learning is severely impaired. Not only are students experiencing boredom and lack of routine, they also report difficulty adapting to the online learning platforms, missing the intimacy of the face-to-face classroom (Tophat, 2020). Students report that they miss the interaction with their classmates, but that they also miss the proximity and closeness with their teachers.

It seems that the need for human contact and interaction cannot be met today by online education. Seeing and communicating with each other on a computer screen does not seem to provide the same intimacy as facing each other in the classroom, which raises the question why online education is not able to create a level of intimacy even when one can see the other's face and hear him or her voice. In this article I would like to explore the importance of the actual, lived encounter between teacher and student; an encounter of intimacy and presence that runs the risk of becoming distant and disengaged when these encounters take place online. I will highlight the importance of the encounter with the other as lived experience by introducing Emmanuel Levinas as the thinker who voices the necessity of the presence of the bodies of others as a moment of genuine contact that enables teaching.

It is a well-known fact that teachers have a profound influence on the learning outcome of students; studies have, for example found that empathy, adequate feedback and trust have a positive impact on student's learning outcomes and satisfaction (Carless, 2013). An engaging and compassionate teaching relation does not only positively affect students but also improves teachers' work satisfaction, affirming the unique contribution of the teacher to the students' learning progress (Woods & Weasmer, 2002). Teachers are the ones who are able to respond to the specific needs to each of his or her students during the teaching process, improving not only the intellectual knowledge and skills of the students but also fostering the students' self-esteem (Blazar, 2016).

Although there are studies that specifically address the student-teacher satisfaction with online learning, there are hardly any studies that address the question if the same level of intimacy and responsiveness between teacher and student can be obtained by online education. This is particularly relevant for creating a classroom where everyone feels safe enough to ask questions and express concerns. Face-to-face encounters have the benefits of perceiving the bodily expressions of persons, not only by seeing their facial expressions but also by sensing their bodily gestures such as shifting around and restlessness. In the classroom, teachers can respond to the needs of students, not only by actively asking for their opinions but also by interpreting their bodies. Facing one's students as a teacher does not only mean transmitting knowledge and teaching skills but also involves being affected by their bodies; a sensibility vital for teaching, but that is more difficult to enable when classes are held online.

The philosopher who grounds his pedagogy on embodied, lived experience is the French Jewish thinker Emmanuel Levinas (1905–1995). Levinas argues that genuine learning is the event of 'being taught by the other *as Other*¹'; an event in which we are confronted with the radical alterity of the Other and receive a teaching that surpasses our own thinking. Genuine learning, argues Levinas, is not so much the transmission of knowledge or skills, but is in the first place a bodily sensibility of being affected by the Other. Primordial teaching is for Levinas the experience of being responsive to the needs of the Other, a responsiveness that precedes freedom and the conscious choice to act on the demand of this other human being.

In this article I want to show the relevance of the Levinasian notion of primordial teaching particularly in the light of the desire for human contact; a contact that is constituted by embodied social presence. I will argue that the Covid-19 pandemic shows us that the embodied sensibility to the needs of the Other is for both teachers and students the focal point for learning to occur. By facing one's students, by affecting and being affected through embodied sensibility, the teacher is able to attune to the unique needs of each students; a gift of teaching that is often overlooked when we think about education. I will argue that online education runs the risk of cutting off this bodily attunement, not only because of not being able to see all students simultaneously but also because seeing the other's bodies on a computer screen remains an image that does not speak to us. I will conclude that embodied sensibility as the immediate experience of being in close contact with other bodies is ethical in nature and affirms the uniqueness of both student and teacher. Although online teaching can be a valuable alternative for face-to-face interaction, I will argue that educators and online teaching platforms should not overlook the importance of bodily contact in the educational context and should concentrate on creating an online environment of intimacy and responsiveness.

A DIFFERENT ACCOUNT OF SUBJECTIVITY

Emmanuel Levinas is primarily known for his ethical theory of the Other; a relation in which infinite responsibility for each and everyone grounds the very being of the subject. Therefore, Levinas himself classified his phenomenology as a 'radical account of subjectivity', offering a different conception of the subject that is freed from being chained to itself, by giving it significance beyond its own death. Levinas' phenomenology attempts to give an account of the uniqueness of the individual; a uniqueness that is affirmed in the embodied relation to other human beings.

Levinas describes two basic types of relationships to the world: an ontological relationship in which human experience is understood in terms of 'being-as-a-totality' and a metaphysical relationship that opens us to the infinite otherness or 'pure exteriority'. The ontological realm is the domain of intentionality; the realm in which consciousness

appropriates every phenomenon by re-presenting it and reducing it to something that can be grasped, cognised and known. Levinas argues that Western metaphysics has neglected the realm of pure exteriority and has reduced all human experience to what can be 'brought into presence' (TI:21; Tel:5). The encounter with another human being is understood from the perspective of the self or is seen as a structure or modality of the self. The Other is in the Western philosophical tradition approached from a common, shared ground; a tendency for universalism that Levinas classifies as 'Greek thinking' (TI:49; Tel:20).

As a survivor of the atrocities of the Holocaust, Levinas criticises the Western metaphysical tradition, arguing that its emphasis on being and knowledge, it has become an 'onto-theology' which has 'the amplitude of an all-encompassing structure or of an ultimate comprehension' (Levinas, 1989, p. 167). Western philosophy, argues Levinas, is 'an ontology of being' in which the other is seen as an extension or modality of the thinking subject. The uniqueness of the other is neutralised to a presence that can be understood as 'as human being just like me'. Levinas' concern is how we can do justice to the otherness of the Other, while at the same time assuring universality. Through a phenomenological account of the subject that enjoys and is nurtured by the world, Levinas stumbles upon a prior dependency on the other that is as a relation 'otherwise than being'; a relation that reveals a primordial bodily sensitivity to the suffering of the Other, a sensitivity which Levinas sees as the very essence of what it means to be a unique subject.

In his early work *De l'Evasion* (1935) and *De l'Existence à l'Existant* (1947), Levinas began to outline an ontological elucidation of the becoming of the subject in which the relation between subject and being is rethought and reshaped. In contrast to Heidegger who argues that the subject (*Dasein*) is always already thrown in a meaningful world (*being-in-the-world*), Levinas reformulates this *being-there* not as something posited, but as an event. The existence, argues Levinas, assumes or takes up existence; in time – by marking a beginning – and in place by taking a stance. Levinas refers to this event as 'hypostasis'; a relation that can be discerned prior to the subject who finds himself in a meaningful world.

Levinas describes here a prior relation to the self and the world that is not yet a conscious, intentional relation, but a corporeal relation between self and the world; a relation that Levinas classifies as 'enjoyment'. This relation between the non-conscious corporeal self and the 'elemental world', is a relation in which the self experiences the world as other than itself, but not yet as a pure negation of it. It is a pure sensible relation; a relation of 'bodily affectivity wherein the egoism of the I pulsates' (TI:135; Tel:142). Bodily affectivity is the pre-intentional quality of the unreflected, although it is beyond mere instinct. A minimal level of consciousness of 'pure enjoyment' characterises the relation; a relation of human life in its egoistic narrowness motivated by being nourished and nurtured by the world.

The experience of enjoyment forms a naïve kind of self-identity; the experience of being nourished and nurtured affirms the 'me' in its corporeal affectivity. Enjoyment in the self-sensing of sensation in an enjoyment not yet inter-iorised – a relation that is not yet constituted by representation and recollection. When the self becomes conscious of the separation between self and the world – an event impelled by the experience that the elemental world is fleeting and the experience that enjoyment can be ruptured – the self will complete the separation between itself and the world and will become a *Dasein* in the Heideggerian sense.

The Heideggerian *Dasein* that always is *in-the-world*, is also immediately *there-with-others* (*mitsein*); the being-thrown into a meaningful world already refers to other human beings. The other is therefore in Heidegger's ontology a modality of the subject itself, a phenomenological inclination that Levinas wants to avoid. Levinas focusses again on the event of the becoming of the subject, or, otherwise said, on 'the subjectification of the subject'. When the self realises that the fleeting world will sometimes rupture the state of enjoyment, the self will be raised to consciousness and will start to become conscious of the world as everything what the self is not. The self becomes an autonomous entity, separated from the world; an event that Levinas refers to as 'the dwelling of the home'. The dwelling of the home provides protection, stability and security and is a necessary step in being able to represent the world (TI:81; Tel:109).

The dwelling is for Levinas the constituting event in which the separation between the subject and the world is completed and the subject becomes an intentional, thinking being. The dwelling is in Levinas' phenomenological analysis based on a strict demarcation between the interiority of the self and the outside world as the negation of the self. To protect itself from the uncertainty of the volatile and chaotic elemental world and to secure the experience of enjoyment, the self will recluse in itself, creating a sharp distinction between itself and the outside world. This withdrawal from the world is at the same time the discovery of autonomy of both body and mind and at the same time the

becoming of 'a sexualized self'². The self is 'at home with itself' and discovers that its body protects it against threats of the elemental world and that it is able to manipulate the outside world in its favour (TI:58; Tel:131).

The being-at-home with oneself in the dwelling is the event in which the self becomes a 'master', by transforming and appropriating the outside world through labour and intentional activity (ibid.). The activity is for Levinas the 'commencement in action' in which the self tries to possess and manipulate the outside world to secure the experience of enjoyment. This activity of the self reveals both the dependency of the self on the outside world and the independency of the self that appropriates and acquires the world for its own gratification (TI: 159; Tel:133).

The creating of a dwelling is the precondition for human activity to arise, because it allows the self to withdraw from the elemental world, securing and getting a hold on the continuation of enjoyment. The shelter of the home as dwelling makes reflective consciousness, recollection, representation and contemplation possible. Dwelling as the separation of the subject who discovers the autonomy of its embodied, thinking existence, makes it possible to bring phenomena to light. Yet the ability to represent, contemplate and recollect does not originate only from this separation of the subject itself from the elemental world but also reveals a prior dependency on a world already human. The dwelling, argues Levinas, does not only accomplish the mastery of the I who is able to endure the experience of enjoyment but also reveal its dependency on others who gave him language and a meaningful world.

PURE HOSPITALITY AND BEING-AT-HOME

Dwelling reveals the duality of the subject: being-at-home refers to the autonomy of the subject as active mastery of the outside world, but also reveals the relation and dependency of other human beings. Dwelling is related to knowledge, contemplation and bringing phenomena to light; it is the Heideggerian ontological relation of intentional consciousness (*Sorge*). The dependency on the world is mastered through labour and recollection; a mastery aimed at the continuation of enjoyment that Levinas calls 'egoistic spontaneity' (TI:63; Tel:104). Levinas' phenomenological analysis however also reveals a prior dependency as the gift of receiving a meaningful world. Dwelling, argues Levinas, is only possible because the world is already inhabited and 'human'; dwelling reveals a dependency on the existence of 'Others' before me. 'The Others' to whom Levinas refers to with the capital 'O' represent here not an empirically defined group of others, but refer to the indebtedness of the self to the whole human history. The meaningful world is given to me and I am initiated in this world by the gift of language, but this gift is in a certain sense 'otherwise than being', because it is not something that originates from the activity of the self. The self receives the world in its passivity and is welcomed by the Other into a meaningful world. Dwelling is thus also the first experience of 'self and other', the first moment in which the self is constituted by the Other. The gift of a meaningful world is a passive relation in which the Other is the master and the world is given to me as an act of pure hospitality.

The being-welcomed in the world as the first experience of the otherwise than being is in *Totality and Infinity* described as the 'welcoming of the feminine'³ (TI:156; Tel:166). The feminine that welcomes the self in the meaningful world by giving him language is an experience that cannot be reduced to the self's own intentional activity, but reveals an experience of 'being self and other'. The welcoming of the feminine is the first lived experience that reveals the radical Otherness of the Other, revealing that the Other transcends the self's intentional activity. The relation to the Other is a relation in which the self is passive, an experience that goes beyond its egoistic spontaneity as the active master but reveals a dependency to the existence of Others beyond him.

Levinas describes the feminine in terms of hospitality, familiarity and intimacy, problematic connotations that Levinas uses to refer to a relation to a transcendent Other that serves as 'a mere metaphor' of what it means to be confronted with radical alterity. The sexualised conception of the egoistic self that is confronted with the transcendence of the other as pure difference is meant to question Heidegger's notion of *Dasein's* modes of being as pure self-referral. Dwelling reveals that the other is not given – is not a mode of being of the subject – but transcends the being of the subject and reveals radical alterity. The feminine Other is in Levinas' phenomenology the necessary precondition for the ethical relation; by welcoming the self in the world and by giving him language, the self becomes *human* and, as a consequence, receives the ability to be affected by the suffering of other human beings.

The welcoming structure of the feminine is a pre-intentional and pre-cognitive relation that affects the self as an embodied being who can become an autonomous, thinking self *because* of his relation to the Other who welcomes him in the world. The feminine captures the experience of 'being both self and other'; she is familiar because she enables the shared experience of the meaningful world, but is also radical Otherness because she precedes the self's existence. The hospitable feminine in the dwelling is at the same time the gift of being affected by Others as the reason why the self is able to master the world through recollection, labour and representation. It is the hospitable feminine that accomplishes the autonomy of the intentional, speaking subject who is able to 'take its place in the sun' and continue his experience of enjoyment. The subject in Levinas is in the end, a subject that 'lacks nothing' and 'has everything to give', as the supreme master of the Spinozean *conatus essendi*. Only this complete subject can be an ethical subject who has something to offer to the Other and as such can become pure responsibility in 'all the gravity of the love of one's fellowman – of love without concupiscence' (EN:181).

Only a separated, independent subject can be affected by the Other; only the enjoying subject who masters the world can be struck by the Otherness of the Other. For Levinas, our responsiveness to the suffering of the Other does not originate in the thinking activity of the cogito, but resides in our passivity; it resides in the vulnerability of the human flesh to the suffering of the Other. Or corporeality prevents the self from the outside world and gives him an interiority where he can recluse in himself. Yet, the flesh is also sensitive to the touch of the Other, a sensitivity that is beyond the activity of the self because the self can never touch its own flesh in the way that the Other can. This is key to understanding the erotic relation as a relation to radical alterity. Levinas unfolds the erotic relation in *Totality and Infinity* as a relation grounded in the sensibility of the caress as the lived experience of being caressed by the other *as Other*. The experience of the caress is an experience of passivity, an experience that reveals an openness or vulnerability of the self to the Other. Eroticism is the being caressed by another human being, an infinite desire to be loved by another human being (TI:262; Tel:292).

The erotic relation reveals the bodily vulnerability of the self to the Other, referring to the Other who affects me in a way that is fundamentally different from the way I affect myself. The caress of the Other is not identical to self-caressing, which is why the erotic relation is for Levinas an opening to the incarnated vulnerability to the Other, a relation that revolves around passivity of the self in which the Other is the master. The erotic relation in the end is however for Levinas not the pure exteriority or difference between self and all other human beings that Levinas calls ethical, but is only an experience of radical difference between to unique individuals. The erotic relation between the male self and the feminine Other 'remains in the intimacy of the home', which means that eroticism admittedly stirs up the desire for the other *as Other*, but is not able to engage in its desire with *all human beings* (TI:213; Tel:188). With other words: Levinas has found in the erotic relation a lived experience of the unique other who is 'beyond the self', but in the end eroticism is an experience between two heterosexual individuals that does not open a genuine future for the self as the trace of the self beyond his own death.

A genuine relation to the Other as pure exteriority is a relation 'beyond being' is an incarnated relation that revolves around the sensibility of being affected by the Other and in which the Other is the master. The asymmetrical between the passive self and the Other is grounded in the vulnerability of the flesh, which is the opening to recognise the genuine otherness of the other. The erotic relation is in the end, however, remains a relation between two unique individuals and is not able to surpass the intimacy of the home. The sexual, argues Levinas, 'is only an accessory of the human' (NTR:170), and does not free man from himself. He continues by rejecting the claim that the accomplishment of the sexual is the real liberation of man, but states that the spiritual liberation of man is grounded in his actions towards other; towards those who do not give anything in return (*ibid.*). Levinas is here struggling between the 'Greek' notion of universality that unifies mankind and the need for the preservation of the uniqueness of every human being as a particularity; a concern that Levinas traces back to the origin of Jewish Talmudic teachings. Levinas reconciles the two traditions by affirming the unique particularity of the self, by revealing the indispensable role he has in the responsibility for Others yet to come. By giving the subject significance beyond his death, by seeing him as an irreplaceable existent in the unfolding of human history, the self receives a 'relation to the infinite'. This 'relation with the infinite' is the ultimate accomplishment of the erotic relation: the birth of the son who gives the self a future beyond himself. The

birth of the son symbolises a separate existence not reducible to the father, yet bears a trace of him. It is the father-son relation that is able to give the self-significance beyond his own death, but this 'surplus' also means that man is transformed into a responsible subject.

FACING THE OTHER AND RESPONSIBILITY

For Levinas, the parent-child relation is, due to its emphasis on asymmetrical responsibility, the symbol of the ethical relation to the Other. A relation that guarantees the uniqueness of the self, by offering a break with the self's egoistic spontaneity of enjoyment in which the self tries to usurp the world entirely for itself. The relation to the Other is a fecund relation, a relation that gives the self a future beyond his own death by cultivating him into an unconditional responsibility. The cultivation into a responsible self is grounded in the encounter with the face of the Other who 'speaks' to the self, commanding him to infinite responsibility for the needs of the Other.

The encounter with the face of the Other is an experience of 'radical exteriority' that reveals that the self is already bodily affected by the Other before he thinks or acts upon the presence of the other. The face is for Levinas 'pure expression' and cannot be reduced to a phenomenon or a noemenon. The encounter with the face of the Other reveals the 'otherness of the Other', a being-affected that is more than the mere manifestation of a nose, eyes and mouth. The encounter with the face of the Other, argues Levinas, reveals the nakedness and vulnerability of this other human being. The face 'speaks to me', not through the communication of verbal words and propositions, but his presence affects me on a bodily level. 'Sensation', says Levinas, 'is the break-up of every system'; the encounter with the face of the Other reveals that prior to the self's thinking and intentions, he is already an openness to the Other (TI:63; Tel:35). This exposedness of the face that speaks to the self translates Levinas as the Biblical command 'Thou shall not kill'.

The immediacy and proximity of the face as pure expression is felt as a command to respond to the Other and to take him or her into account. 'To see a face', says Levinas, 'is already to hear "You shall not kill," it is "social justice"' (DF:8-9/DL:23). Responsiveness to the Other is immediate contact, an embodied sensitivity that precedes conscious activity. It is the experience of shame that one feels when we see a beggar on the street, a shame that reveals that our body is already responsive to the suffering of the Other before we decide to actively help him. The ethical is here thus not the moral decision to help the other, but the primordial sensibility of the skin to the suffering of the other despite one's freedom. It is therefore that Derrida says that Levinas reveals the 'ethics of ethics', a notion referring to the inescapable way in which the vulnerability of the Other is already incarnated in one's embodied existence.

The encounter with the face of the Other is interpreted by Levinas as a surplus, as something that does not originate from the self, but comes from the Other. The response of the self transforms the self into a passive response-ability, an ability of being wounded by the Other that Levinas links to the Hebrew notion of *hineni*. The Biblical 'here I am' expresses the being responsible for the suffering of the Other, an infinite response-ability that is incarnated in my own body and which I cannot escape nor control (OTB:75; AE:120-121). The responsibility of the 'here I am' is a substitution, in which the self is not preoccupied with his egoistic mastery of enjoyment of the world, but becomes a 'pure being-there for the Other'.

Levinas' whole phenomenology can be understood as revealing the lived experience of embodied responsiveness to the Other. The embodied vulnerability as non-mediated responsiveness is in his later work symbolised by the lived experience of the maternal body. In *Autrement qu'être*, Levinas sees the maternal body as the archetype of what it means to be embodied responsiveness to the needs of the Other. Actual maternity, argues Levinas, is 'the complete being for the Other' as embodied vulnerability (OTB:109; AE: 155). The maternal body responds to the needs of the infant prior to the intentional choices that the mother makes to care for her unborn child. Ethical responsibility is compared in AE to the maternal body who bears the Other - the stranger - without assimilating him. The bodily responsibility to the needs of the unborn child is exactly what it means to be responsive to the needs of the Other as substitution.

Embodied sensitivity to the suffering of the Other is described by Levinas as immediate contact, a responsiveness that is not dependent on any conscious or wilful activity. It is as such a vulnerability of the skin that cannot be redeemed

or avoided. Facing the widow, the orphan or the stranger affects the subject in an original, non-mediated way, which implies that before the subject consciously thinks about his situation, his body is already ethically affected by their suffering. This reveals that the subject is first an ethical relation to the other (*being-there-for-others*) and only after an autonomous egoistic spontaneity (*a being-for-itself*). The relation to the Other – the responsibility to the suffering of the Other – is the essence of what it means to be a ‘me’, what it means to be a particular, unique human being.

Coming back to the father–child relation, we see again why Levinas uses fecundity as the lived experience of what it means to bear infinite responsibility to the Other. The erotic relation that leads to the birth of the son transforms the self into a father, making him responsible for the existence of his son, a responsibility that is not reciprocated by the son and which can also not be passed on to somebody else. The birth of the son cultivates the self into a father who bears the burden of being infinite responsible for the existence of the Other, an event that gives him a unique signification in the unfolding of human history.

For Levinas, it is the being raised to consciousness by the son – the experience of being-there-for-the-other prior to freedom and thinking – which affirms the particularity of each individual while guaranteeing universalism. Infinite responsibility to the Other is an election that summons every self to take the Other into account, an event in which the self is transformed from an egoistic *conatus essendi* to a response-ability for each and every human being. The event of being raised to consciousness by the Other is particularly interesting to the philosophy of education because Levinas classifies this event as a ‘moment of teaching’. The spontaneous self that masters the world in an ultimate attempt to endure the experience of enjoyment is taught by the face of the Other to take him or her into account and to give up his ‘place in the sun.’⁴

Classifying the teacher as the father does not however dispel the importance of the feminine. As Derrida has already noted in *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* (1998), the feminine has an indisputable privilege as the necessary welcome before all welcoming that makes the ethical relation possible (Derrida, 1999, p. 44). Levinas’ choice for the feminine as the gentleness and intimacy of the home, as a safe place from the cruelty of the outside world, is based on the many heroic example of Biblical women who with their ‘watchful lucidity, the firmness of their determination, and their cunning and spirit of sacrifice’ were able to save the world from violence (DF:31). Furthermore, we see that in the case of the child, Levinas privileges the experience of the maternal body as the lived experience of the mother who is always already infinite responsibility for her child. Levinas subsequently does justice to the equality of the mother and the father by referring to the event of becoming a father as the same lived experience of infinite responsibility. The child thus teaches both the mother and the father that they are in their essence always already a *being-there-for-the-other*.

TEACHING OTHERWISE THAN BEING

For Levinas, teaching is an asymmetrical relation that reveals the bodily sensitivity to the needs of the Other. Embodied contact is the questioning of the subject by the Other on a pre-reflective level, revealing the vulnerability of the flesh to the suffering of the Other. Facing the Other is already being affected by his or her suffering and is it due to this immediately being affected by the Other that ‘ethics is first philosophy’. Embodied contact is also particularly important to the teaching context, particularly because teaching is dependent on the social relation between teacher and student and teaching always involves the moulding or the cultivation of the subject(s). Being present in the classroom and seeing the bodily gestures and expressions of the students, helps the teacher to be responsive to problems and challenges, but also creates a level of intimacy that stimulates the desire to learn. By facing our students in the classroom, we directly sense if a student has understood the content, if he or she feels safe and at home in the classroom and we are able to detect subtle changes in bodily gestures that indicate boredom, frustration or the need for a break.

Although most of the time we see teaching as an assimilation process concentrated on the transmission of knowledge and skills in order to cultivate the student’s autonomy and critical reasoning, Levinas shows that as a teacher, we are first and foremost in an ethical relation with our students. Teaching is more than the mere transmission of knowledge and skills, there is something at stake in education that is translated as ‘the risk of education’. Real education,

argues educational theorist Gert Biesta, always involves a risk; a risk that students turn out differently from the educational objectives envisioned. Education is a risk because teaching is not like 'filling a bucket' but 'about lightning a fire'; education should be aimed at stirring the infinite thirst for learning (Biesta, 2013). As Levinas shows, this thirst for learning is a desire for the Other, a desire that never can be redeemed nor fulfilled. The Other always remains *other*, which does not only mean that there is always something more to learn but is also a reminder that the culturally, historically or empirically other can never be fully understood. Epistemology is in Levinas thus aligned with the relation to infinity, which is translated for educational purposes as the infinite responsibility to continue to learn without ever attaining a finish line. Being a teacher myself, it is the humble experience that our students sometimes teach us more than we teach them.

The ethical relation to the Other as the teaching relation in which the teacher is summoned to give up 'his or her place in the sun' is a relation of infinite responsibility to the needs of each and every student. Levinas shows furthermore that the actual outcome of the teaching process cannot be entirely captured by the standardisation of education. We can assess if our students have mastered the learning objectives of a particular course and if they show to be skilful enough to pass, but we cannot fully measure the impact of teaching. Teaching transforms the individual in a positive or negative way; it can transform the student into a critical thinking individual who justifies his or her beliefs with solid reasoning, but it can also limit other perspectives – alternatives that are dismissed in the classroom. This is the risk of education and the vulnerable aspect of teaching that Levinas refers to; teaching is the opening of a future beyond the teacher, a future that the teacher affects but does not control. Teaching is a relation in whom the teacher becomes bodily attuned to the needs of his or her students but without having the guarantee that certain goals are going to be met. Teaching is at the same time, however, a 'beautiful risk' as Biesta calls it, because it stirs up the metaphysical desire for the Other, a desire that cannot be fulfilled but always remains an openness. The teaching relation is not a mere cognitive relation, but a sensible relation, which is why scholars such as Todd (2003) and Gallop (1992) argue that *eros* is central to effective teaching.

The *eros* that accomplishes the ethical relation is characterised by a desire for the other *as Other*, it is a desire for genuine contact with the other as stranger. The relation is analogous to the father–child relation or the maternal body in which the parent is summoned to bear responsibility for his or her child prior to his or her conscious choice. To become a subject is for Levinas the burden of being infinite responsible for the needs of the Other, it is a 'difficult freedom' that inspires all my conscious decisions and actions. The infinite responsiveness to the needs of Others is incarnated in the flesh, which teaches the subject that he is not the first in the world for himself, but that he is indebted to the Other. The Other is in Levinas the locus of all signification, the Other is the master who teaches the self the infinite goodness of being the chosen one to bear responsibility for the needy Other (TI:68; Tel:41). Levinas thus reverses the roles of teacher and student as we traditionally understand it in the educational context; it is not the teacher who is the absolute master, but the student who raises the teacher to consciousness. The 'gift of teaching' that Levinas refers to is the indispensable and unique role of the teacher who is not a mere facilitator but who deeply transforms the student and participates in a future beyond the teacher's own power. The very essence of what it means to teach is the being able to affect our students in an existential way, which also reveals the vulnerability of the teacher who has to come to terms with the fact that the student may not turn out as we want them to.

But it is also this 'gift of teaching' as the vulnerable role of the teacher who participates in a future that is not his or her own, that constitutes the joy of teaching and gives the teacher a 'surplus'. Facing one's students is for Levinas the very constituting event of becoming a teacher, an experience that most teachers will relate to. There is a world of difference between 'being a teacher' as having a certain academic degree and knowing effective didactic methods and the actual experience of facing one's students and teaching them. Being in the classroom and facing one's students bears the full weight of what it means to be the teacher who is responsible for their education. Becoming a teacher as the event of facing one's students highlights the ethical nature of the teaching relation, a vulnerable relation in which the teacher is not only responsible for what he or she teaches but also for how his or her very presence affects the future of these students.

It is the intimacy of the classroom as the place of dwelling or as the place of *being-at-home* that is needed for the ethical relation to flourish. Teachers and students need to feel at home, they need to feel welcome and accepted, which is why inclusive education is not a mere point on the agenda, but the constitutive event of teaching. The intimacy that the classroom creates is synonym with pure hospitality, the need for every unique individual to feel accepted and valued by his or her presence. The intimacy of the classroom as the dwelling is the condition and the commencement of education, but this welcoming feature is highly dependent on the embodied presence of the Other. Looking students in the eye, hearing them talk and observing their body language affects the teacher on a precognitive level. Even before the teacher consciously assesses if his or her students have understood the content that is being taught or are distracted and in need of a break, the skin is already attuned to subtle gestures and expressions such as yawning and looking away.

Facing one's students is feeling the proximity of their bodies, a form of communication that is immediate contact and cannot be measured or controlled. Embodied sensitivity is being exposed to the Other, which is probably why teachers immediately agree with Palmer's observation that teaching is a 'daily exercise in vulnerability' (Palmer, 1998, p. 17). Sharon Todd also takes up this topic from a specific Levinasian reading and argues that education is as much on transmitting of knowledge as about facing the 'live-subject' that refers to feelings of vulnerability, discomfort, excitement and other bodily sensations that emerge from being in close contact with the bodies of other persons (Todd, 2016, p. 408). Being in close contact with one's students – being in their very presence – raises the teacher to consciousness, it places the full ethical weight on him or her of what it means to be an educator. Feeling vulnerable and exposed when all eyes are set on you is an ethical experience that remind us that teaching is always dependent on social relations and beings responsive to the other.

Levinas shows that teaching does not originate in the transmission of knowledge, but in the presence of the Other as interlocutor; the Other who is absolutely beyond the teacher both in time and place. Teaching means opening an unforeseeable future; a future of the students that is radically different from the teacher's, yet to which the teacher bears responsibility. To give priority to the ethical relation with students means for Levinas being responsive to the other as a unique particularity, which Levinas translates as valuing discourse over comprehension. Responding to the needs of our students means in the educational context that teachers listen to their students and assess what they need in order to grow. Listening to one's students in their radical alterity is the discourse of plurality and difference, awakened by the desire for the other as Other. It is the desire to participate in a future that is not the teacher's own, yet in which the teacher plays an indispensable and unique role by taking his or her social responsibilities. Levinas' conception of primordial teaching aligns here with Dewey's pedagogical framework, especially in the way both thinkers plea for a student-centred learning orientation. Teaching is as such not a mere job but a vocation that arises from the desire for radical alterity, an experience that sweeps away the egoistic intentions to make room for genuine learning as an exposure to heterogeneity and difference. Primordial teaching is to give 'authority to the teaching we receive', argues Biesta, marking a shift from knowledge and contemplation to being hospitable to the Other (Biesta, 2013, p. 458). Being hospitable to the other is however dependent on feeling at home with oneself, the dwelling that marks both the becoming of the subject and the being-welcomed by the other. This experience of intimacy emerges in the classroom as the natural place where educators and students meet, the classroom is thus the natural habitat for learning. The concern I wanted to raise in this article is if online teaching is able to mimic the same experience, and more specifically, if online teaching does not jeopardise our embodied sensitivity to the needs of others.

ONLINE TEACHING AND THE ETHICAL DEMAND

Teaching is not only the mere transmission of knowledge but is also dependent on the specific relation between the teacher and the student, a relation that has an ethical nature and highlights that teaching is not an abstract concept, but is a practical, real-life relation between two (or more) unique individuals. Pedagogy is for Levinas an embodied sensitivity of becoming a freedom invested as responsibility; only after being affected by the needs of the Other can

we respond to this unconditional responsibility by affirming or denying it (Sthran, 2012, p. 170). The egoistic self-involvement is ruptured by the encounter with the face of the Other who summons to take him or her into account. Levinas' pedagogy is the experience of 'losing one's place in the sun', the experience of being affected by the Other in his or her difference by *facing* the Other. In Levinas, it is not the self that teaches the Other, but the Other who teaches the self to give up his egoistic desire and assume responsibility for the needs of the Other.

Zymbylas argues that this pedagogy practically implies that teachers need to abandon their epistemological attitude as 'knowers' and should adopt a position of openness to the needs of each and every student (Zymbylas, 2005, p. 65). Teachers should assess the needs of his or her students and should attune his or her teaching content to the specific situation of the students. Although in practice it is not feasible to mould the content entirely to the unique needs of each student, it does favour an educational context that uses different teaching methods and forms of assessment to facilitate the growth of each student. The unique contribution of Levinas' conception of primordial teaching is that he recognises that the desire to attune to the needs of one's students is dependent on facing one's students.

Furthermore, Levinas recognises that the ethical inspiration of all our thinking and actions is not always heard or taken into account. Like any other unique human we are the sole ones responsible for the needs of each and every person, but this sensitivity can be cut off or not acted upon by multiple reasons, such as stress, a preoccupation with our own concerns or environmental factors such as, in the case of online education, a failing Internet connection. For Levinas, the ethical relation is the background or the inspiration of all our conscious activity, but it is always responsibility that remains open and that always remains a vulnerable relation. Although the relation to the Other is a relation that defines us and which is always the locus of our existence, it does not mean that our actions and thinking is always attuned to the needs of the other.

The current crisis has however limited the very cornerstone of the educational context: not only are we no longer welcomed in the familiarity and intimacy of the classroom but we are also no longer able to be in the immediate embodied presence of others. Although online education can be a good alternative for students who want to combine an education with other activities, there is something that is risked or diminished in online education and which we have to acknowledge for the future of digital education. The presence of the teacher and students in the classroom, the facing of the other, is the relation that precedes and facilitates teaching. Talking to students, it becomes even more pressing today that the lack of human contact significantly interferes with their ability to learn and more particularly diminishes their enjoyment of learning. My students, for example report that online education relies too much on self-study, they miss learning from their fellow students and teachers and they report that online education is less engaging than real-life teaching. Being in the classroom and having the possibility to study in the University study rooms, all create opportunities for students and teachers to meet each other and to actually learn from each other. It is striking that even though teachers and students see each other on a computer screen, they do not tend to experience these teaching moments as genuine contact.

The need for teachers to ethically attune to the needs of their students rather than acting upon their position as 'knowers' becomes therefore more pressing today. As embodied contact is reduced to a minimum as teachers and students mostly interact with each other through online platforms and through email, it becomes harder to attune to the specific needs of each student. Facing one' students through Kaltura, Zoom or Teams might sometimes create an intimate environment, especially when few students are present and discussions can run freely, online teaching is far more at risk to block genuine contact and cut off the encounter of the face as pure expression. Failing Internet connections, students who do or cannot turn on their video camera and a classroom where each student is muted, do most of the times not create the intimacy of the face-to-face classroom. Although some students might find online education less intimidating and less demanding and therefore more pleasant, most students struggle to find their voice in an online classroom; partly due to the lack of intimacy, partly due to technological challenges. Furthermore, it seems that especially the vulnerable students such as students from lower socio-economic factors or students with low self-esteem, who run the risk of not being seen and heard. Being present in the classroom is not the same as being present in an online classroom, in the actual classroom there is 'no escape' from the presenting oneself to the others, which means, for example in the case of timid students or students with low self-esteem that we as teachers sense most of

time by facing them that they need attention. In an online platform this sensing is less immediate because it is more difficult to attune to the students who we cannot face.

Both students and teachers struggle to attune to each other and report dissatisfaction with online education, which highlights that the ethical relation to the other – the particular relation between teacher and student of embodied responsiveness – is in fact the gift that makes teaching so valuable. Online platforms such as Kaltura, Teams or Zoom are not able to create the specific intimacy of the classroom, not only because these platforms do not always enable classroom view but also because a certain Internet bandwidth is required and because it is dependent on other technological requirements such as a laptop or computer. Philosophical discussions are, for example more difficult to realise because the sound of the microphone of some students are not good enough, because Internet connections are not stable or because sound and image are delayed. All these factors diminish the enjoyment for learning, it makes it harder for both students and teachers to feel at home.

As Levinas has shown, the dwelling of the home that creates a sense of self-mastery by being welcomed by the feminine Other is the absolute prerequisite for teaching to occur. In Levinas' account of the subject, the self will only be able to be cultivated into a responsible self when facing the Other and when the self is welcomed and feels at home. This means that teaching will only occur when one feels safe, welcome and at home with oneself. The current Covid crisis that has forced teachers and students to interact through online platforms that they are hardly acquainted with and of which the successfulness of the encounter does not only depend on the being present but also on technological and environmental factors, makes it more difficult for teachers and students to feel welcome and at home.

The ethical relation to the Other is a relation of embodied contact, a teaching that requires us to see the face of the Other so the other can speak to us. The risk we run with online education is that the face of the Other remains 'plastic', remains an image that lacks pure expression. The unfigurable human body is captured as an image presented on a screen and is reduced to something than be seen and not sensed. The unrepresentable expression of the human face becomes in online platforms a re-presentation of the face, which raises the question if this separation between the face as pure embodied expression and the capturing of the face of the other as an image is why persons experience a loss of genuine contact in online education.

The problems that arise when we represent the face is that the face becomes 'plastic', robbed from its proximity and intimacy the face is reduced to a mere moving image that does not speak to us. Although we must take into account that as a Jewish thinker, Levinas is against idolatry and is, for example very critical of art which robs things and persons of their face and shows the 'monstrosity of pure being' that is devoid of human responsibility (EE:26), today's crisis does show that embodied contact is very important for human well-being. The face of the Other that is captured on a computer screen is not equal to the lived experience of being in the proximity of a person; the image is in a way a 'silent face' that, to quote Levinas himself: 'becomes a form, a mortuary mask; it is shown instead of letting see – but precisely thus no longer appears as a face' (TI:262).

The absence of the embodied presence of students who do not or cannot turn on their camera and the representation of the face that remains in a way 'plastic' on a computer screen, impairs our ability to attune to our vocation as infinite responsible beings. In the absence of real-life contact, the online classroom runs the risk of losing its ethical significance; it runs the risk that we are no longer affected by the other on a sensual level, but only on a cognitive level. Thinking about the reasons why students struggle with online education and assessing what they need by asking them is a very important step towards the improvement of online education, but we should as teachers acknowledge that fixing these problems and overcoming technological challenges will not substitute the need for genuine contact. As teachers, we should acknowledge this desire to be in each other's proximity by listening to our students and giving them the opportunity to vent their concerns and feelings.

Although teachers and educators should be concerned about the student's learning progress and should ensure that they can access the intellectual content of a course and are able to master the required skills, teachers should also address their emotional well-being in the light of the absence of genuine contact. I would even say that the current crisis shows us more than ever that the role of teachers has shifted from being the masters who transmit knowledge and skills to the ones who are responsible for the needs of each unique student. This means that teachers are not mere

instruments in the student's learning process, but are unique, irreplaceable individuals who in their being present for their students play an indispensable role in the lives of the students. In today's crisis, where genuine contact and being in the presence of each other is jeopardised, the ethical responsibility to attune to the needs of students, is more than ever a heavy burden on the shoulders of teachers. Not only students but also teachers themselves have lost their natural 'teaching habitat', making them feel less at home and less welcome in the educational environment. Teachers should know that their natural ability to attune to each student is diminished in the online environment and should try to reach out to particularly those students who are not heard during online sessions or who are not present. Reaching out to these vulnerable students is more difficult when we cannot face them directly, particularly because the reaching out is dependent, once again, on technological mediums such as email or telephone calls. Levinas' conception of primordial teaching shows that a holistic approach is needed in the educational context, but due to lack of genuine contact and technological challenges, the students' sense of belonging and self-worth is greatly diminished. Particularly, students from a low socio-economic background or with low self-esteem are less likely to be heard in online education and to receive the help they need.

Levinas' conception of primordial teaching shows that being present in an online meeting is different from 'being present' as the lived experience of being in close contact with other bodies. The presence of a teacher in online education is recognised as an important aspect for optimal learning and shows to be particularly important for 'the gift of teaching' as the desire to learn is the crucial aspect of primordial teaching. Presence as a moment of genuine contact is an encounter between unique individuals that is more than seeing the person with one's eyes, being present is also a being-affected by the bodily expression of the other. Presence is more than 'being presented' and has several connotations such as social presence, teaching presence and cognitive presence (Garrison & Archer, 2003). Social presence refers to the affective, interactive and cohesive responses of the teacher to create a safe and trusting teaching environment. Teaching presence refers to the facilitation and design of cognitive and social processes to accomplish certain learning outcomes. Cognitive presence refers to the teaching being able to engage in a critical dialogue with students and to give them adequate feedback (Garrison et al., 2000; Garrison & Archer, 2003). Within the Levinasian framework, we can see that these different forms of teacher's presence depends on the ethical relation and the ability of the teacher to 'hear' what his or her students need. Although I do not wish to claim that online education blocks all these forms of teacher's presence, I do think that it is much harder and in some cases impossible for teachers to attune to the needs of each student.

Although face-to-face education might sometimes be more distracting and can sometimes lead to more social uneasiness than online education, which has the benefit of being more flexible and allowing students to access the classroom from any location of their choice, it will always mimic the face-to-face classroom due to the fact that facing the other on a computer screen lacks the genuine contact of the immediate sensing of the presence of others. It is a strong reminder that embodied presence as the being affected by the bodies of others is an important aspect of our relation to others. Education is not only about the transmission of knowledge and skills but should also be aimed at fostering the ethical relation as genuine contact and attuning to the needs of the other. Being in the presence of the bodies of others and being present in the classroom is an aspect of ethical life that is just as important for teaching as the actual content that is taught.

The face-to-face encounter is, as a moment of genuine contact, an *inspiration*, an *eros* denoting not sexual attraction but the desire to teach and learn from the other as other. Although we are nowadays as instructors reluctant to associate teaching with *eros*, Sharon Todd argues convincingly that *eros* does and should have a place in teaching. She points to the fact that the Platonic sense of *eros* has a much broader communication in Greek thinking than only sexual pleasure. *Eros* in the educational context means nothing more than the infinite desire to teach and the infinite responsibility to take the Other into account. The best teachers are the ones who put their heart and soul into teaching, they see teaching not as a mere job but as a vocation, an inspiration to contribute to a future that is beyond the teacher's own future. As this article has shown, the desire to learn is dependent on sensing the proximity and intimacy of the embodied presence of others in the welcoming space of the classroom. I think that the Covid crisis has shown that most teachers are passionate about teaching and are tremendously motivated to facilitate and guarantee

the learning process of each student. But because of the lack of the intimacy of the face-to-face encounter whether it is due to technological problems or student-specific challenges, it is for teachers far more difficult to attune to the needs to each and every student and to guarantee that every student receives the support that he or she needs.

Even in the face-to-face encounter, the infinite demand to respond to the Other is no guarantee that the teacher will always be in the position to respond to the unique needs of every student, nor will the teachers always be at home enough to substitute himself or herself for the other. Even in the immediate presence of others, the ethical relation is fragile, in the sense that our embodied responsiveness to Others does not always lead to adequately taking this 'call for justice' into account. We can dodge our being-affected by the Other by ignoring it, by deeming it not of importance or simply because we are too much preoccupied by our own projects and concerns. Although humans carry the weight of being infinite responsible for Others, it does not mean that their actions and thinking will always reflect this responsibility.

But precisely because human-lived experience is ambiguous and unfigurable, we should be cautious when we are in a situation in which genuine contact is reduced to its minimum and we solely see the face of the other as an image. We should be aware of the fact that online education is not able to mimic the unpredictable contact with other bodies and runs the risk of 'becoming plastic'. Even if this image seems closer and more detailed on a computer screen, it remains a snapshot; a fragile representation that lacks the pure expression of being in the immediate presence of the bodies of Others. This does not mean that we are never able to become bodily affected by the face of the Other through technology; we do experience moments of genuine contact with our students when teaching in an online environment and we sometimes can be affected by the suffering of them, particularly when listening to how they struggle with the current crisis. Knowing that online education cuts off our sensitivity to the needs of others because of the lack of embodied contact, teachers can adopt a holistic teaching style that is not only aimed at securing the intellectual growth of the student but also at trying to alleviate their lack of moments of genuine contact. A possible way to establish a moment of genuine contact is by scheduling one-to-one instruction in which a student interacts with the teacher individually. This approach is however time-consuming and places a heavy workload on teachers who are already struggling with finding their way in online education. The current crisis however can deepen our knowledge of what it means to teach and can transform the way we envision the role of the teaching relation as the ethical encounter of the face of the other.

CONCLUSION

Online teaching can be a valuable tool for education, particularly when it is presented as an alternative option to face-to-face teaching. By pointing to the relevance of the work of Emmanuel Levinas, I have shown that being in the immediate presence of the face of the Other affects us on a bodily level and cultivates us into a subject who is an infinite responsibility to the Other. I outlined in this article that this ethical relation of embodied contact plays a vital role in education, as the face as pure expression teaches us to take the other as other into account. Genuine contact is in the educational context established as the being present of teacher and students in the intimate space of the classroom. During the pandemic, technology has shown that we still are in contact with everyone around the world and that education can continue no matter where the students and teachers are. Although online education preferred to having no contact at all, seeing the other on a screen is not the same as the face-to face encounter in the classroom. Levinas' conception of primordial teaching as the ethical relation of genuine embodied contact is able to show why students and teachers struggle with online education even when the intellectual content of a course is guaranteed. Teaching in its essence is a being bodily affected by the needs of the Other and is grounded in the sensibility of our skin rather than in our conscious activity. The desire for the Other – the desire to give everything to the Other – is what Levinas calls 'primordial teaching'.

Genuine contact is more than seeing the other, but is grounded in the way our bodies are attuned to each other and the immediate way bodily gestures, smell and expressions 'speak' to us. Recognising the other as Other resides

primarily in this infinite responsibility of our skin to the suffering of the Other, a responsiveness that informs all our actions and thinking. Facing one's students, seeing and sensing their bodily expressions as well as hearing the tone of their voice is essential for a good teaching relation and is profoundly important to stimulate the desire to learn from the other. Lacking this essential need for genuine contact, as well as lacking the natural intimacy of the classroom, teachers and students are less able to secure the teaching process, which harms particularly vulnerable students who do not have the resources to enter the online classroom, or who have difficulty expression themselves and suffer from low self-esteem. Because these vulnerable students are less present in the online classroom, the risk is that teachers are not able to attune to their specific needs, resulting in them not receiving the attention that they need.

The Covid-19 pandemic shows us that teacher is not only the transmission of knowledge and skills but also involves a moment of genuine contact between teacher and students, a moment of embodied sensitivity that is just as important. Although the unpredictable and unfigurable lived conditions of bodily contact can sometimes be a source of distraction and uneasiness in the classroom, it does contribute to the teaching process by informing us on the need of the other on a more sensual level. Genuine teaching is, I would claim, a moment of immediate contact in which I am affected by the needs of the other as the genuine desire to be taught by him or her. Teaching is as such an awakening of the uniqueness of the subject, 'a being raised to consciousness' by the ethical relation to the Other. This being raised to consciousness originates in the encounter of the face of the Other, an experience that is reduced or diminished when education is given solely online. Although moments of genuine contact are possible in an online environment, it most of the time remains 'plastic' and cannot adequately mimic the face-to-face encounter of the real-life classroom. Teachers should be aware of the fact that learning is dependent on this 'being present' and should adopt a holistic approach to their students in which the unique needs of every student is taken into account. This is however a challenging task for instructors who cannot always reach all students, nor have the time to establish one-to-one moment of contact.

In order for online education to be able to attune better to the face of the Other as pure expression, we should think about possible ways to improve online platforms as well as providing individual instruction moments and resources to students who struggle to participate. We should invest in creating a safe and welcoming online environment, which means investing in platforms that are easy to use and facilitate features such as 'classroom view' as well as investing in teaching tools that demand less bandwidth. Smaller classes and more moments of contact between teacher and students, such as individual tutoring sessions, or discussion sessions in smaller groups, might also help to provide moments of genuine contact and fostering the ethical relation.

The joy of teaching means the joy of transmitting knowledge and learning from our students in the same way as the students learn from us. As the infinite desire to learn from the other, teaching is intimately intertwined with *eros*, a sensation that originates in the being exposed to the faces of our students in the intimate, welcoming space of the classroom. Although technology has been able to save us from an educational disaster, it does come with its costs and cannot replace the face-to-face encounter that is needed for optimal learning. Being human means being exposed to the immediate presence of others, being in the presence of their bodies as a moment of genuine contact and is precisely these moments of genuine contact that we at this moment miss the most.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Levinas chooses to describe the Other with a capital 'O' when he speaks about the 'who-ness' of a person, a 'who-ness that always remains a mystery. The other uses Levinas to describe the 'what-ness' of a person, the specific qualities of the person that we can know and see.
- ² In this final step of the becoming of the subject, the subject is an intentional being with a distinctive 'me-ness'. In contrast to Heidegger who conceptualises *Dasein* as a sexual neutral being, Levinas conceptualises radical alterity in *Totality and Infinity* as sexual difference. The egoistic, autonomous self is for Levinas the male self; the identification of the master who in its spontaneous enjoyment of the world reduces and neutralises all alterity to something re-presentable. Because the subject is male in the Levinasian framework, the self will be from now on referred to as 'he'.
- ³ The encounter with the feminine Other is an essential structure to make the self-receptive to the relation to the Other. The feminine, as Levinas remarks in *Totality and Infinity*, is not the Other of the ethical relation. While Levinas wants to 'sexualise' the subject to challenge the identity of the egoistic self, his thinking about the feminine also seems to rely on a normative framework in which the feminine receives the qualities of 'hospitality', 'tenderness' and 'intimacy in the home'. It is not

surprising that Levinas' conception of the feminine has received criticism from feminist philosophers, claiming that Levinas affirms a patriarchal language of male privilege. A thorough discussion of these critiques falls outside the scope of this article, although I do hope to show that, although Levinas' conception of the feminine is underdeveloped, the feminine plays an important and indispensable role for the embodied sensitivity that constitutes the ethical relation. The feminine serves as a metaphor for a rethinking of the absolute Other, although I do agree that it is very difficult to interpret the feminine as a 'mere metaphor' when the ethical relation is so obviously grounded in the fecundity of the woman and the birth of male offspring.

⁴ Levinas says in 'Ethics as first philosophy' that 'My being-in-the-world or my "place in the sun," my being at home, have these not also been the usurpation of spaces belonging to the other man whom I have already oppressed or starved, or driven out into a third world; are they not acts of repulsing, excluding, exiling, stripping, killing?' (Levinas, 1989, p. 82).

REFERENCES

- Biesta, G. (2013) Receiving the gift of teaching: from 'learning from' to 'being taught by'. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 32(5), 449–461.
- Blazar, D. (2016) *Teacher and teaching effects on student's academic performance, attitudes and behaviors*. Doctoral Dissertation, Harvard University.
- Carless, D. (2013) Trust and its role in facilitating dialogic feedback. In: Boud, D. and Molloy, E. (Eds.) *Feedback in higher and professional education: understanding it and doing it well*. New York: Routledge.
- Derrida, J. (1999) *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* (Brault, P.-A. & Naas, M., Trans.). Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Gallop, J. (1992) Knot a love story. *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 5(3), 209–219.
- Garrison, R. & Archer, W. (2003) A community of enquiry framework for online learning. In: Moore, M. (Ed.) *Handbook of distance education*. New York: Erlbaum.
- Garrison, R., Anderson, T. & Archer, W. (2000) Critical inquiry in a text-based environment: computer conferencing in higher education. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 2(2–3), 87–105.
- Guest, R., Rohde, N., Selvanathan, S. & Soesmanto, T. (2018) Student satisfaction and online teaching. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 43(7), 1084–1093.
- Levinas, E. (1989) Ethics as first philosophy. In: Hand, S. (Ed.) *The Levinas Reader*. Basil: Blackwell, pp. 75–88.
- Levinas, E. (1997) *Difficult freedom* (Hand, S., Trans.). Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Levinas, E. (1998) *Otherwise than being* (Lingis, A., Trans.). Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.
- Palmer, P. (1998) *The courage to teach*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Seok, S., DaCosta, B., Kinsell, C. & Tung, C.K. (2010) Comparison of instructors' and students' perceptions of the effectiveness of online courses. *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, 11(1), 25–36.
- Strhan, A. (2012) *Levinas, subjectivity, education: towards an ethics of radical responsibility*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Todd, S. (2003) A fine risk to run? The ambiguity of eros and teacher responsibility. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 22, 31–44.
- Todd, S. (2016) Education incarnate. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 48(4), 405–417.
- Tophat (2020) *Adrift in a pandemic: survey of 3089 students finds uncertainty about returning to college*. Available at: <https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20200501005433/en/Adrift-Pandemic-Survey-3089-Students-Finds-Uncertainty> [Accessed 14 June].
- Weesjes, E. (2020) *Community college students are disproportionately struggling right now. As one of their professors, here's my advice for faculty on how to best help them*. Available at: <https://www.businessinsider.nl/community-college-students-hit-hardest-by-coronavirus-pandemic-2020-6?international=true&r=US> [Accessed 14 July].
- Woods Mays, A. & Weasner, J. (2002) Maintaining job satisfaction: engaging professionals as active participants. *The Clearing House*, 75(4), 186–189.
- Zembylas, M. (2005) A pedagogy of unknowing: witnessing unknowability in teaching and learning. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 24, 139–160.

How to cite this article: Martine Berenpas. On facing one's students: The relevance of Emmanuel Levinas on teaching in times of Covid-19. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*. 2021;1-16.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.12576>