

From maieutics to metanoia: Levinas's understanding of the philosophical task

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"The knowing whose essence is critique cannot be reduced to objective cognition; it leads to the Other (Autrui). To welcome the Other is to put in question my freedom."¹

1.

In the teacher-student relation a number of crucial philosophical issues come into focus. Among these two of the most significant are the nature of philosophical exploration and the question of limits to potential claims for knowledge. If knowledge is readily available or easily had, presupposing with Descartes that potential knowers need only the proper method, then it is clear that the role of the teacher will be rather minimal – teachers must step aside after the method is understood so that the student can proceed to full knowledge. In this democratic view each person has equal access to the means whereby true and false judgments can be distinguished.

The situation, however, might be very different. It is also possible that the ascent to truth may be fraught with difficulties that are not easily overcome. Viewed this way the role of a teacher must be understood differently. Suddenly the teacher assumes special significance as the one who leads the learner through unfamiliar terrain. It is quite possible, as Kierkegaard suggested, that I as a potential knower am in a state of untruth, am perhaps even hostile to the truth, and therefore need the help of another to redirect me. Without a teacher, in other words, my claims to knowledge would appear either dogmatic or naive.

In *Totality and Infinity* and other texts Emmanuel Levinas has given us a trenchant description of the philosophical journey that brings the teacher-student relation to the fore. Put quite simply, without the Other (*Autrui* – Levinas's term for the human other) who teaches me, claims to critical knowledge

would be without basis. Levinas is not suggesting that the Other becomes the sure foundation for knowledge, as when Descartes claims such a foundation for the “I” who thinks. Rather, the Other can be my teacher only to the extent that he or she is transcendent with respect to me, overflows the categories by which I would make sense of him or her. The Other as teacher, then, does not leave me comfortable and secure with myself. Instead, another person redirects my path, introduces me to vistas previously unknown.

Levinas’s 1957 essay “La philosophie et l’idée de l’Infini”² schematized the teacher-student relation in terms of the difference between autonomy and heteronomy. Autonomy bespeaks the confident relation I have with the world such that I can appropriate and integrate it in terms of the difference between autonomy and heteronomy. Autonomy bespeaks the confident relation I have with the world such that I can appropriate and integrate it in terms conformable and comfortable³ to myself. In the autonomous view there are no teachers, no occasions for the radical questioning of my appropriation and integration of the world. As examples of this autonomous conception Levinas frequently refers to Socratic maieutics and Descartes’s description of the self-secure cogito. Heteronomy, however, presupposes one who has a relation with the “absolutely other,” one who has an experience that “transports us beyond what constitutes our nature.” Here teachers are of paramount importance because they are the condition for the possibility of my being opened beyond myself. Descartes caught sight of the formal structure of this teaching in his idea of the infinite. Levinas’s own unique contribution, however, lies in his description of the “ethical relation” as the condition for the realization of this formal possibility.

In this essay I will lay out in some detail how the categories of autonomy and heteronomy play into a reconception of the teacher-student relation. Having completed this I will conclude with a discussion of how teaching is crucial for what Levinas calls critical knowledge. Critical knowing entails a movement from maieutics (autonomy) to the redirection of my freedom (metanoia) in the teaching of the Other.

2.

The classical, and also the most enduring, expression of autonomy is Socratic maieutics. In various dialogues Socrates is explicit about the fact that he is not a teacher. He is at best a spiritual midwife (*maia*), a helper who, as in the *Meno*, facilitates another’s attempts to bring to light knowledge that was buried deep within. The *Theaetetus* gave programmatic expression to maieutics in the following:

I am so far like the midwife that I cannot myself give birth to wisdom . . . Those who frequent my company at first appear, some of them, quite unintelligent, but, as we go further with our discussions, all who are favored by heaven make progress at a rate that seems surprising to others as well as to themselves, although it is clear that *they have never learned anything from me*. The many admirable truths they bring to birth have been discovered by themselves from within (150b-d – my emphasis).

Socrates does not desire disciples. Instead he refers all who come to him back to themselves, for it is within themselves that each will find what they are looking for.

In order to better understand maieutics we must link it with its twin doctrine, the doctrine of anamnesis.⁴ It only makes sense to turn prospective learners back to themselves if they do indeed have the resources and the means already at their disposal. This is what anamnesis suggests. In the *Meno* (81c-e) Socrates says there is nothing that the soul, because immortal, has not already learned. Unfortunately, much of what the soul once knew, though in a pre-existent state, is now forgotten. The coming to knowledge would thus amount to a recovery of what is deep within me, an anamnesis or recollection.

What is decisive for Levinas about this picture of learning is the absence of teaching: “there is no teaching but recollection” (*Meno* 82a). The student engaged in philosophical exploration is finally alone, is a law unto him or herself (*autos-nomos*). To be sure, such a student is not alone in a physical sense – Socrates and other discussion partners may be in the vicinity, may even be asking questions. But, as Socrates himself says, the learner does not receive anything essential from anyone else, is not ever put into question. Being questioned and being put into question are not the same thing.

From this brief description of maieutics and anamnesis we can see the self-referential nature of autonomy. All claims to knowledge and truth must pass through the self, even if these claims are not finally reducible to that self. When engaged in conversation with others (Socrates’s mode of philosophical exploration) we quickly come to the realization that any conversation is successful to the extent that its elements conform to my own understanding. As my understanding changes, perhaps as the result of my being questioned, it does so only with reference to my prior understanding (when I say, “Now I understand” or “Now I see your point” it is a case of my seeing an aspect that I did not previously see but now can see because it has fallen within my frame of reference). If I could not rely on this prior understanding I would lose the ability to participate in a conversation altogether. Philosophical exploration, on the autonomous model, thus depends on the possibility of reality conforming to a pre-established frame of reference.

The doctrines of maieutics and anamnesis have imbued modern sensibilities to a remarkable degree. The “flight from authority” clearly evident since the time of Descartes, and entrenched by an Enlightenment ethos, presupposes that in matters of truth and knowledge we need not turn to any external sources. We are beholden only to ourselves because we are, in a most fundamental way, familiar with the goals of our searches and our activities. T.S. Eliot, writing at the highpoint of modernism, expresses this familiarity well in his poem *Little Gidding*.

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.⁵

These lines express considerable confidence in the self as an explorer. This confidence may not be in the fruits that may result from the search – hence the distrust and critique evident in modernist writers. It resides, rather, in the unmistakable conviction that any possible success will bring the explorer back to him or herself.

Further confirmation of the vitality of the Socratic legacy can be found in contemporary hermeneutics. Heidegger, for instance, makes this clear in his comments on the “hermeneutic circle” – every interpretation already understands in some sense what is to be interpreted. The roots of this conception relate directly to his description of Dasein as a being (*Seiendes*) that “always already” has a pre-understanding (*Vorverständnis*) of Being (*Sein*). Gadamer continues and develops this conception when he notes that to ask a question is already to have a sense for the answer, even if this “sense” is subject to the dialectic of the yes and the no made possible by conversation.⁶ What descriptions of the philosophical journey such as these have in common is a view of the self as central and autonomous, a law unto itself.

What, in Levinas’s view, is central to an autonomous perspective? It is the presupposition that the thinking being understand itself as free. Levinas notes that since its origin philosophy has attempted to free itself from the tyranny of opinion (*PII*, 74/92). The danger of opinion is that it chains the philosophical traveler to the claims of others, to sophists who might actually claim to teach us something. Opinion necessitates attention to exteriority. Socrates’s mission, on the other hand, can be viewed as the medicinal art (spiritual midwifery) that will purify the soul of opinions that poison it. The path to *episteme* will not be a path via sophists but rather a journey through the self, through maieutic self-awakening.

In the *Phaedo* we see a clear indication of the thinker’s freedom. Socrates says, “I once heard someone reading from a book . . . asserting that it is mind

that produces order and is the cause of everything. This explanation pleased me. Somehow it seemed right that mind should be the cause of everything” (97b-c). Later on he continues: “I first lay down the theory which I judge to be soundest, and then whatever seems to agree with it – with regard either to causes or to anything else – I assume to be true, and whatever does not I assume not to be true” (100a). In these lines the thinker is not beholden to an exteriority which might put into question the *theoria* held to be true. Thought is “the inward dialogue carried on by the mind with itself” (*Sophist* 263e), or better yet, the monologue that insures the autonomy of the thinking self.

Autonomy is a prime example of what Levinas calls the philosophy of the “Same.” Constitutive of all such philosophies is the attempt to integrate reality in terms of predetermined categories or concepts. These are the *theoria* Socrates spoke about. The intelligibility of the world, its being what it is, comes to rest upon whether or not it conforms to the monologue of the thinking soul. Whatever does not submit to this standard (self-imposed or self-validated) is rendered unintelligible and thus no longer worthy of concern. And since it is of no concern it need not trouble us. Autonomy, because it eliminates fear and worry, thus leaves us free. Levinas summarizes these tendencies in the following: “The ‘I think,’ thought in the first person, the soul conversing with itself or, qua reminiscence, rediscovering the teachings it receives, thus promote freedom” (*PII*, 75/94). And again: “This is Socrates’ teaching when he leaves to the master only the exercise of maieutics: every lesson introduced into the soul was already in it. The I’s identification, its marvelous autarchy, is the natural crucible of this transmutation of the Other (*Autre*) into the Same (*Même*)” (*PII*, 76/96).

As a philosophy of the Same autonomy seeks to identify the world, make it intelligible, via the mediating activity of self-referential thought. The thinking being, however, does not simply dismiss exteriority out of hand. Thought is always thought “about something.” But what has happened in this thought is that the strangeness of exteriority has been dissimulated. Exteriority does not signify on its own. It awaits the arrival of the thinking self to give it meaning. Hence autonomy does not entail the elimination of otherness, but rather its muting via the activity of mediation.

Levinas acknowledges that mediation sits at the core of western philosophy (*TI*, 34/44). Without this activity philosophy would not be possible, for in order that something be thought at all it must be thought in terms of meaningful categories and concepts. Concepts and categories are the tools the philosopher uses to approach a reality that would otherwise be completely foreign. “The foreign being, instead of maintaining itself in the impregnable fortress of its singularity, instead of facing, becomes a theme and an object. It fits under a

concept already or dissolves into relations. It falls into the network of a priori ideas, which I bring to bear so as to capture it" (*PII*, 76/97).

We can see in this description that Levinas cannot be wholly opposed to the activity of mediation. If he were, then he would be reduced to silence.⁷ Levinas's complaint, however, resides elsewhere. It lies in the uncritical adoption of mediation as a sufficient tool for philosophical exploration. When philosophers assume an autonomous position they are suggesting that the activity of mediation cannot be put into question. Because the thinking being cannot be taught, it is impossible that the categories or concepts through which that being integrates the world can ever be challenged. Because the unintelligible is of no concern it cannot seriously trouble intelligibility.

By highlighting the self-referential nature of mediation we are now prepared to see what Levinas finds objectionable in autonomous approaches to knowledge and truth, namely their violence and their naiveté. Autonomy is violent because reality is forced to play a role, assume a position, within a conceptual schema not derivable from itself (*PII*, 76/98). The world, in the activity of mediation, is recast in a mold not of its own making. In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas noted that the "mode of depriving the known being of its alterity can be accomplished only if it is aimed at through a third term, a neutral term, *which itself is not a being*; in it the shock of the encounter of the same with the other is deadened. This third term may appear as a concept thought" (*TI*, 32/42 – my emphasis). Third terms provide the interpretive keys that allow us to transform unintelligibility into intelligibility, allow us to identify the world as part of a meaningful whole. What is to be noted, however, is Levinas's contention that the formation of third terms or concepts corresponds to the freedom of an autonomous being. This is why he says third terms are not themselves beings. Concepts are not part of the world that we comprehend. They are, rather, the means through which the world can be comprehended. And since they do not come from the world, they must be supplied by the thinking being. Hence the thinking being's autonomy with respect to the world.

It is not difficult to see how this account of mediation leads to an intelligibility that is open to the charge of naiveté. Since the world has been subdued, made comprehensible, by the free activity of the thinking being, there is little room for the means of comprehension itself to be put into question. The radically other, as we have seen, has been dissimulated via a sometimes benign violence and thus cannot speak for itself. If the world depends on mediation for its intelligibility, how can mediation itself ever be brought into question? Would not unintelligibility have to "register" in some way such that the security of intelligibility would be shaken? Put another way, how can the framework of autonomy be put into question if the conditions for a mean-

ingful reality are established solely through the activity of a self-referential being? Perhaps we are now better able to understand why Socrates, after searching high and low, could not find a single teacher (*Meno* 89e, 96b-c).

3.

It is tempting to view Levinas's description of heteronomy as the mere opposite of autonomy. If autonomy is the law of the self, and heteronomy is the law of the other, is this not a clear case of binary opposition in which self is pitted against other? When gone at it this way we come to see, as John Caputo has, the self and other as representing "sides" of a position, perhaps the sides of alterity and altruism.⁸ A closer reading of Levinas, however, reveals that talk about sides with respect to the self and the Other is entirely inappropriate. In part this stems from Levinas's refusal to understand the Other in objectivist terms. In *Totality and Infinity* he writes: "the sense of our whole effort is contest the ineradicable conviction of every philosophy that objective knowledge is the ultimate relation of transcendence, that the Other (though he be different from the things) must be known objectively . . ." (*TI*, 89/89). Heteronomy is not the opposite of autonomy, not even its outright rejection. We do better if we understand it as the interruption, the putting into question, or the teaching of autonomy.

If we are to entertain the possibility of a genuine heteronomy then it must also be the case that Socrates was mistaken in his claim that there is no teaching but only recollection. How is teaching possible? For starters we will need to appreciate that teaching depends on a conception of transcendence, a conception of alterity which somehow exceeds the self-referential nature of maieutics. Levinas finds an instance of this possibility in a surprising text, namely Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy*. It is surprising because Descartes gives autonomy one of its most powerful modern formulations in the self-certainty of the *cogito*.

Descartes's path of methodic doubt is well-known. Having secured himself as a thinking thing he next inquires into the veracity of other ideas. All other ideas, he notes, may simply be the product of an inventive mind, part of the soul's dialogue with itself. Except one. In the third *Meditation* Descartes comes upon the idea of God, the idea of the infinite, and concludes that this is an idea that could not have sprung from himself. Indeed, it cannot be made sense of in terms of self-reference. Though he himself is a finite substance, "this would not account for my having the idea of an infinite substance, when I am finite, unless this idea proceeded from some substance which really was infinite."⁹ By saying that the idea does not proceed from himself but from the infinite Descartes suggests that he cannot account for the idea, either in terms

of its source or its legitimacy, by himself. As Levinas puts it: "It has been *put (mise)* into us. It is not a reminiscence" (*PII*, 81/107).

Unlike Descartes, Levinas is not interested in proving the existence of God. What interests him about this argument is the structure of thought it reveals. Descartes suggests that in the idea of the infinite we find a thought which, as Levinas puts it, "thinks more than it thinks (*pense plus qu'elle ne pense*)" (*TI*, 56/62). In thinking the idea of the infinite thought thinks an overflow or an excess which itself does not fall within a thought (understood self-referentially). The failure of self-referential thought to comprehend the infinite does not stem from weakness or a lack within the thinking being. Rather, comprehension is out of place from the start because the infinite is not an object to be comprehended. The transcendence of the infinite, its exceeding the powers of self-referential thought, must be understood as the distance that separates idea and ideatum. "The distance that separates *ideatum* and idea here constitutes the content of the *ideatum* itself" (*TI*, 41/49).

Normally the distance between an idea and its ideatum, that which the idea is about, is overcome via the mediation of concepts and categories. In the idea of the infinite, however, the distance remains as the non-adequation or the disproportionality of idea and ideatum. As soon as one thinks one has understood the infinite, i.e., mediated it in terms that make sense to me, then one has failed to understand. This is why Levinas refers to the infinite in terms of its "infinition." "The idea of infinity is the mode of being, the *infinition*, of infinity. Infinity does not first exist, and *then* reveal itself. Its infinition is produced as revelation, as a positing of its idea in *me*" (*TI*, 12/26). The infinite is not an object, but is the mode of non-adequation between idea and ideatum. The focus here is plainly on the way of thinking rather than what thinking may be about. This "way" Levinas calls desire without need, desire that intensifies as the distance between idea and ideatum increases. Levinas calls this mode of thinking "transcendence" (*TI*, 24/35).

In the idea of the infinite Descartes came upon a thinking that, while steeped in the structures of autonomy, can be described as heteronomous. The *cogito* is not the secure foundation it was first made out to be. It is not sufficient unto itself with respect to all ideas. "The *cogito* in Descartes rests on the other who has put the idea of infinity in the soul, who had taught it, and has not, like the Platonic master, simply aroused the reminiscence of former visions" (*TI*, 85/86). The idea of the infinite, rather than it being the mere opposite or negation of the finite, is an idea defined by distance. As such it cannot enter my familiar world, become a part of my frame of reference. It exceeds my autonomous powers.

Levinas finds in the "ethical relation" the realization of what in Descartes is only a formal possibility. "The idea of the infinite is the social relationship"

(*PII*, 81/108). The other person is the condition for the possibility of heteronomy because people, unlike other things, can resist the “ruses of thought” and put into question the freedom of autonomy. How is it, however, that people should be capable of this? Is it not plainly the case that people often do submit to the pre-established structures of an alien thought? Obviously people do succumb to the dictates of others. Hegel’s account of the master-slave relationship gives a powerful description of precisely this sort of domination. But if we understand Levinas’s account of the Other along these lines we shall surely miss his point. The Other is not an alter-ego against whom I might take up arms. To understand the relation between self and Other this way is to view the Other as an object and not as transcendent, as my teacher.

Heteronomy and teaching do not come to pass via the kind of resistance constituted by an objective understanding of the world. The Other does not teach me because the Other is somehow a force I must reckon with (if that were all teaching amounted to I would not find my autonomy seriously questioned — it would at best be challenged and prompted to greater strength). Rather, the Other presents me with a different kind of resistance, a resistance Levinas calls ethical. “The infinite paralyzes power by its infinite resistance to murder, which, firm and insurmountable, gleams in the face of the Other, in the total nudity of his defenceless eye, in the nudity of the absolute openness to the Transcendent. There is here a relation not with a very great resistance, but with something absolutely *other*: the resistance of what has no resistance — the ethical resistance” (*TI*, 217/199). To understand this passage we must recall earlier comments about transascendence, the structure of a thought characterized as desire. The Other is not an object but a distance revealed in the non-adequation between my idea of the Other and the Other itself. Levinas refers to the Other as naked and destitute because none of the attributes I would ascribe to him or her stick. The Other is a “gaping whole,” an openness that is absolute. As absolute the Other “absolves” him or herself from the *Sinngebungen* I would employ to comprehend.

Obviously, and in most cases, the meaning I bestow on another person is not ever challenged. As I live with others I make sense of them in terms or categories that make sense to me. Levinas’s point, however, is that the Other is not finally reducible to these categories. The Other exceeds what I say of him or her as the disengagement of every form or representation I may have in place to comprehend him or her. This disengagement Levinas calls “denuding” and serves as the formal parallel to the infinity we spoke of earlier. In the “ethical relation” I encounter a distance between myself and the Other, rather than an alter-ego.¹⁰

If we are to speak of a distance here then it must be possible for the Other to signify apart from my representation of him or her. The Other must have a

meaning by itself, signify *kath hautō* as Levinas likes to say (*TI*, 72/74). “The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me, the idea existing to my own measure and to the measure of the *ideatum* – the adequate idea. It does not manifest itself by these qualities, but *kath hautō* [sic]. It *expresses itself*” (*TI*, 43/50–51). This self-expression or self-presentation of the Other does not make an appearance as a phenomenon or object (*TI*, 237/215), but as the retreat from my meaning-structures. In later essays Levinas refers to this strange appearance as the “trace” of the Other.

A trace is not a trace of something. The trace of the Other refers to the hole or openness created by the distance of the Other. We can speak of openness here because my intentional grasp, the categories by which I would make sense of the Other, have been undone, have come unravelled before an exteriority which exceeds my interior dialogue. Autonomous thought, which rushes in to enfold exteriority with meaning, comes to the realization of its own incapacity, its insufficiency before the Other who divests itself of my *Sinngewunden*. The other person can simply say “no” to what I say. This no, which is not the no of force, has the effect of revealing the injustice of my freedom. Before the Other I encounter what cannot be made to fit neatly within a pre-established world of meaning and sense. I encounter absolute otherness, which is to say that I encounter distance, the ever-increasing gap between my thought and the Other.

Levinas argues that we experience this gap as an “enigma.” An enigma is not a problem which at some later point admits of a solution. Nor is it simply the irrational or the absurd, for this would be to define it in terms of a measure of rationality. An enigma makes its (nonobjective) “presence” felt without there being the means by which to identify the cause or origin of this presence. The enigmatic represents a disturbance or interruption which is invisible to thought. “The alterity that disturbs order cannot be reduced to the difference visible to the gaze that compares and therefore synchronizes the same and the other. *Alterity occurs as a divergency and a past* which no memory could resurrect as present. And yet disturbance is possible only through an intervention. A stranger is then needed, one who has come, to be sure, but left *before* having come, absolute in his manifestation.”¹¹

An enigma comes to pass as the overwhelming of consciousness, the taking of consciousness by surprise. The Other surprises and interrupts consciousness because it does not conform to what was expected (remembering that the Other absolves itself from my *Sinngewunden*). To the extent that the Other does not fit within my pre-established order of meaning, he or she is not really present because the condition for presence is the adequation between idea and ideatum. Levinas describes this discrepancy as follows: “In the *mean-*

while (entretemps) the event expected turns into the past without being lived through, without being equaled, in any present.”¹² The Other came and went without having fit into my world. My only sense that the Other might have come is the sense that my world has been disturbed by something of which I am not entirely sure. Autonomy has, in other words, been shaken, been put into question.

The “ethical relation” is, therefore, not a relation with an objectifiable presence. Hence its peculiar nature – a *relation sans relation*. It is, rather, an occasion for the interruption of autonomous thought. In the encounter with the Other consciousness is presented with its own insufficiency to overcome the non-adequation between idea and ideatum. It is not an insufficiency borne out of weakness, as though a strengthened consciousness would someday finally overcome this weakness, but of injustice before the Other who exceeds and puts into question my autonomy.

Our discussion of the “ethical relation” has now put us in a better position to understand the difference between maieutics and teaching, between autonomy and heteronomy. Maieutics is defined by the absence of radical exteriority. To be sure, others may be in the vicinity. But others do not contribute in any fundamental way to the journey to truth and knowledge, I am a law unto myself, and therefore do not need others in more than a superficial sense (midwives only aid a process that goes on independently and quite naturally). What is more, the autonomous learner does not ever find his or her world seriously challenged. Spiritual midwives have the effect of making us comfortable with ourselves.¹³

The “experience” of heteronomy, however, reveals that an autonomous being is not entirely free in its appropriation of the world. In the “ethical relation” I encounter another person who exceeds my grasp, and in so doing puts into question the whole machinery and process by which I would comprehend him or her. For the first time I discover that I am not a law unto myself, that I am already handed over to the Other who reveals the injustice of my law. The Other does not simply question me, and therefore leaves me to myself. Rather, the Other puts me into question, and in so doing leaves me answerable for the insufficiency and injustice of autonomous thought. With the possibility of the acknowledgement of the injustice of my freedom I am introduced to the possibility of teaching.

When Levinas speaks of teaching he does not have in mind the transmission of a content or piece of information. Instead he wishes to point us to a more primordial conception of teaching, one which indicates the conditions necessary for there to be an opening of the self beyond its own frame of reference. In this respect teaching bears close affinities to the idea of revelation, understood as the irruption of the absolutely foreign rather than as

the transmission of a positive content (as in the revealed doctrine of certain religions). As with the infinite, there is not first a content that is subsequently revealed. Revelation refers us to a modality called infinity – the revelation is constituted by the disproportion between idea and ideatum. “*Revelation constitutes a veritable inversion [of] objectifying cognition*” (TI, 63/67).

As we have seen with our discussion on the possibility for heteronomous experience, teaching will depend on an encounter with a reality that can disengage itself from the *Sinngebungen* of autonomous thought. Levinas writes: “The absolutely foreign alone can instruct us. And it is only man (*l’homme*) who could be absolutely foreign to me . . .” (TI, 71/73). The foreignness of the Other, furthermore, does not depend on my seeing another person as somehow strange or peculiar. It is rather that the Other is unique among things in its ability to reveal the distance between my idea of the Other and the Other *kath hautō*. In the face of the Other we meet not a transcendent object (as though it made sense to speak of such a thing) but transcendence. “Teaching signifies the whole infinity of exteriority. And the whole infinity of exteriority is not first produced to then teach: teaching is its very production. The first teaching teaches this very height, tantamount to its exteriority, the ethical” (TI, 185–86/171). In other words, teaching teaches distance, the insufficiency and the injustice of autonomous life.

This description of teaching clearly takes us beyond the conception of learning suggested by maieutics. The opening of the self beyond itself is not possible solely in terms of the self, in terms of one’s forgotten, though recoverable, resources. If teaching is to be possible at all there must be an encounter with the Other. In this encounter a profound change in the self becomes possible. This change we have called “metanoia,” the redirection of the self from interiority to exteriority. It is not a term that Levinas himself uses, but it is nonetheless suggestive. Metanoia means repentance, the acknowledgement of wrongdoing, in the face of a power beyond myself. This sense is in keeping with Levinas’s repeated statements to the effect of the injustice of autonomy. Its religious connotation is also in alignment with Levinas’s assertion that religion is “the bond that is established between the same and the other without constituting a totality” (TI, 30/40). The redirection of the self to exteriority is a “conversion” because it is a movement that is not deducible from the identity of the self, is not commensurate with the self (TI, 56/61). Teaching depends on the possibility that my whole being can be put into question.

The account of teaching offered here would seem to have the odd conclusion that learning is impossible. If teaching entails the putting into question of my being, does this not entail the cessation of my power or freedom? Does not heteronomy spell the death of autonomy? Once again, if this is how we

understand Levinas then we have surely missed his meaning. Teaching does not amount to the overthrow of autonomy. It leads rather to its redirection, its movement outward. If learning requires the reception of something truly new, and not simply the recovery of a forgotten moment from my past, then it must be possible that the self who learns is not annihilated but opened up. The interruption of my powers does not necessarily entail their cessation. Far from simply closing off my freedom, the Other makes possible the investiture of my freedom. "The presence of the Other, a privileged heteronomy, does not clash with freedom but invests it" (*TI*, 88/88). Levinas is calling our attention to the *ennui* that inevitably follows from a self-enclosed life. The encounter with the Other introduces us to the astonishing adventure called inspired living. The Other invests my freedom, inspires my being, by putting me on a new path of responsibility to a law beyond myself. "To recognize the Other is to give" (*TI*, 73/75).

4.

With this account of teaching we can now turn to more general considerations of how a conception of teaching alters the nature of the philosophical task. When philosophy is inspired by maieutics, then the philosophical journey is in essence a solitary one. As a law unto myself I am beholden to no one. Here the possibility of an encounter with genuine exteriority has been precluded from the start since all the resources I need for the coming to knowledge and truth are already within my possession. Socrates is clear that philosophy promises no discoveries. At best it can help us recover what is temporarily forgotten and buried.

When philosophy is inspired by the teaching of the Other, the situation of the philosophical traveler looks very different. Now I am no longer alone. I am, as it were, handed over to the Other, responsible to him or her as the one who redirects my interior life to an exteriority. Here we can talk about discovery because nothing within myself could have prepared me for the things I have yet to learn. As my teacher the Other does not fill me with a new content. Rather, he or she opens me up so that I can venture onto paths beyond my established world-view. For the one who is taught life becomes an adventure, a happening that comes to us without design. No doubt this puts the learner in an uncomfortable position because the security and the confidence that mark autonomous life must now be left behind.

Levinas is fully aware that this conception of teaching is difficult. Beyond the conceptual difficulty of heteronomous "experience" there is the further psychological fact of egoism. The avoidance of apologies in our day to day conversation mark a resistance to the acknowledgement of our injustice

before others. It is perhaps for this very reason that Levinas locates apology, the “inclination before the transcendent,” at the center of conversation (*TI*, 29/40). An apo-logy, the word spoken to the Other, acknowledges that I am not a law unto myself. I need the Other, if for no other reason than to keep the claims I make about the world from perpetuating injustice after injustice. Moreover, a conception of teaching as *matanoia* goes to the heart of Levinas’s reconception of language as the difference between the saying (*dire*) and the said (*dit*), a distinction prefigured in *Totality and Infinity* as a saying/unsaying/resaying (*dire/dédire/redire*) (*TI*, 16/30).

There is yet another reason why a conception of teaching must play a central role within the philosophical enterprise. It has to do with the nature of the knowledge and truth claims we hope to make. If philosophy has *maieutics* as its model, then it is apparent that there is little that can answer the objection that claims so derived are either naive or dogmatic. To the extent that I am a law unto myself I am answerable to no one. Nothing exterior to me can challenge the veracity of the interior monologue I have with myself, for in order for it to appear within that monologue its radical alterity must first be muted or dissimulated. And because my claims go fundamentally without challenge they are naive or dogmatic.

Levinas’s description of the “ethical relation” and of teaching serves as a corrective to this manner of philosophizing. Teaching, as the putting into question of autonomy, opens up the possibility for a critical knowing of reality, a knowing that is in-formed and inspired by exteriority. This possibility depends on the *metanoia* of autonomous thought. “The freedom that can be ashamed of itself founds truth . . .” (*TI*, 82/83) says Levinas. What philosophers of autonomy fail to realize is that without the Other, freedom is arbitrary. My freedom is not the last word. “The transitivity of teaching, and not the interiority of reminiscence, manifests being; the locus of truth is society. The *moral* relation with the Master who judges me subtends the freedom of my adherence to the true” (*TI*, 104/101).

Does this conception spell the end of philosophy? Given what we have said about the relation between autonomy and heteronomy, clearly not. Philosophy will continue the activity of mediation. Heteronomy does not annihilate autonomy. But with the teaching of the Other philosophy is given new life. Philosophical practice can proceed with a renewed sense of “critical speculation and interrogation.” As Levinas put it in one of his interviews: “Reason is never so versatile as when it puts itself in question. In the contemporary end of philosophy, philosophy has found a new lease on life.”¹⁴

Notes

1. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et Infini: Essais sur l'extériorité* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961), p. 84, translated by Alphonso Lingis as *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 85. All references to this work, French pagination first (we will refer to the pocketbook edition published by Brodard & Taupin), will be included in the text following the abbreviation *TI*.
2. First Published in *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 62, pp. 241–253, and subsequently reprinted in *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*, 2nd edition (Paris: Vrin, 1967), pp. 165–178 and Adriaan Peperzak's *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1993), pp. 73–87. Peperzak has included Alphonso Lingis's translation (slightly revised) of this essay as "Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite" (with commentary) pp. 88–119. All references to this essay (abbreviated *PII*) will be drawn from *To the Other*, and will be included directly in the text.
3. In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas is explicit in the linking of maieutics/anamnesis with the comforts of home. He writes: "Recollection and representation are produced concretely as *habitation in a dwelling* or a Home" (*TI*, 161/150).
4. It is precisely the linkage of maieutics with anamnesis that prevents this description of autonomy from reverting to modern formulations of autonomy as self-legislation. In the Socratic view the turn inward does not stop with the self. The self is, as it were, opened to the *eidé*, to the essences of things in their full reality. In modern philosophy this turn beyond the self gets cut off. For a recent description of this development see Louis Dupré's *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993). What Levinas will question is why the self, rather than another person, is given pride of place in the journey, even if the journey, as in Plato, does not find its basis solely with the self.
5. T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (London: Faber & Faber, 1944), p. 48.
6. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd edition (New York: Crossroad, 1991), pp. 362–379.
7. The question of silence sits, among others, at the heart of Jacques Derrida's influential essay on Levinas, "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas" (trans. Alan Bass in *Writing and Difference*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978). Derrida writes: "As soon as one attempts to think Infinity as a positive plenitude (one pole of Levinas's nonnegative transcendence), the other becomes unthinkable, impossible, unutterable" (p. 114). We will have occasion to question Derrida's use of the term "positive plenitude" since it represents an objectivist reading Levinas works against. As we will see when we turn to Levinas's account of heteronomy, the infinite or transcendent does not signify as an object of thought but as a manner or mode of thinking.
8. John D. Caputo, *Against Ethics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 80. Caputo admits that Levinas wants to avoid the dialectical opposition of self and other that would lead to their *Aufhebung* in some grand narrative, but he fails to account for Levinas's assertion that the "ethical relation" is a "*relation sans relation*." In *Demythologizing Heidegger* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993) Caputo again mistakenly charges Levinas with attempting the impossible, i.e., to "avoid being-otherwise" (p. 199). For Levinas the "otherwise than being" is not outside of being altogether, as though it could exist in some pristine, isolated location. The transcendence of the Other signifies not as a theme or content but as the interruption of self-referential consciousness. How this is possible we have now to see.
9. René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* in vol. II of *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff & D. Murdoch, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 31.
10. In his 1965 essay "Enigme et phénomène," which first appeared in *Esprit* (reprinted in *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* and translated by Alphonso Lingis

as “Phenomenon and Enigma” in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), Levinas wrote: “The relationship with the infinite is not a cognition but an approach, a neighboring with what signifies itself without revealing itself, what departs but not to dissimulate itself” (p. 216/73).

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 210–211/68.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 211/68.

13. Another way of describing this comfort is to notice that in a conversation I can always leave when the questions get too troubling. This leavetaking can assume many forms, as when I physically depart from an interlocutor or when I feign ignorance with respect to a question – the question is said to fall upon deaf ears. Here the person questioned cannot “hear” what I have to say because he or she cannot absorb or integrate my words. The effect of this deafness is to leave the questioned person’s world intact or untroubled.

14. Emmanuel Levinas and Richard Kearney, “Dialogue With Emmanuel Levinas,” in *Face to Face With Levinas*, ed. Richard A. Cohen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), p. 33.