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The Rediscovery of Teaching: On robot vacuum cleaners, non-egological education and the limits of the hermeneutical world view

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Abstract

In this article, I seek to reclaim a place for teaching in face of the contemporary critique of so-called traditional teaching. While I agree with this critique to the extent to which it is levelled at an authoritarian conception of teaching as control, a conception in which the student can only exist as an object of the interventions of the teacher and never as a subject in its own right, I argue that the popular alternative to traditional teaching, that is to make the teacher a facilitator of learning, is insufficient. The reason for this has to do with the fact that learning, understood as a process of interpretation and comprehension, ultimately also does not allow the student to exist as a subject. I provide support for this point through a reading of two articles by Emmanuel Levinas in which he puts forward the case that our subjectness is not generated through our own acts of signification, but is rather constituted from the outside, that is, through the address of the other. It is in this event, where a different conception of teaching emerges—one that, unlike authoritarian teaching and unlike self-generated adaptive learning, is precisely aimed at making the subjectness of the student possible.

Keywords: teaching, hermeneutics, signification, sense, being taught, Levinas

Un élève-sujet est capable de vivre dans le monde sans occuper le centre du monde. [A student-subject is able to live in the world without occupying the centre of the world.] (Meirieu, 2007, p. 96)

What is Actually Wrong with Traditional Teaching?

This is an article about teaching and learning. But unlike so many articles that have been published over the past fifteen to twenty years, it is not an article in which I will

follow the all too familiar line of argument in which so-called ‘traditional’ teaching—that is, a staging where the teacher speaks and students are supposed to listen and passively absorb information—is seen as bad and outdated, and where something allegedly more modern, focused on the facilitation of students’ learning—either individually or in some kind of dialogical process—is seen as good, desirable and ‘of the future’. While the opposition between ‘traditional’ and ‘contemporary’ is itself already a bit stale, we should not forget how traditional the critique of traditional teaching actually is. John Dewey already made the point, as did Jan Ligthart in the Netherlands and many educators and educationalists before and after them. The critique is also not entirely valid, because even in classrooms where teachers speak and students sit quietly, a lot of things are actually happening on the side of the students—they may of course feel bored, alienated or ignored, but they may also feel challenged, fascinated and inspired; who knows? I also wonder whether anyone has actually ever suggested that education *operates* as a process of transmission and passive absorption, even if it is *staged* in this way. Here, I agree with Virginia Richardson, that ‘students also make meaning from activities encountered in a transmission model of teaching’ (Richardson, 2003, p. 1628).

In light of the critique of traditional teaching, it is, of course, also ironic that some of the currently most popular technology-mediated forms of education—such as TED talks, MOOCs and the numerous amateur instructional videos on YouTube—are all staged in ‘conventional’ ways, that is, with someone talking and explaining so that others can watch, listen and learn. One could even ask whether the endless stream of worksheets and individual and group tasks that have invaded the contemporary classroom—from preschool to higher education—is not beginning to trivialise education, just turning it into busy work. And we should not forget those momentous examples of traditional, one-way forms of communication—from Socrates’s apology, via Lincoln’s Gettysburg address, to the speeches of Barack Obama—where, to my knowledge, no one has actually ever complained about the absence of study questions or group work that would allow the audience to make personal sense of what has been said. In this regard, I believe that we really should not underestimate our capacity to receive.

What these observations begin to suggest is that there actually may be something wrong with the ongoing critique of traditional teaching. But making this point, and trying to establish a more general case for the re(dis)covery of teaching (see Biesta, 2012a), is fraught with difficulties. This is not least so because nowadays the most vocal arguments for teaching and the teacher come from the conservative end of the political spectrum, where they are aimed at re-establishing the kind of order and control that apparently is lacking in modern society and modern education (for a different take on this issue, see Meirieu, 2007). This seems to suggest that the only *progressive* alternative lies in the demise of the teacher—and more precisely the demise of ‘traditional’ teaching—and a turn towards learning; a turn where the teacher only exists as a facilitator of otherwise ‘autonomous’ learning processes. (I use ‘autonomous’ here to refer to the idea that these processes are supposed to be going on anyway, irrespective of the presence of the teacher.)

The problem here, if I see it correctly, has to do with the binary construction of options, that is, with the idea that the only meaningful response to authoritarian forms of teaching lies in the abolition of teaching and a turn towards learning. It is just remarkable that the third option, namely that of reconstructing our understanding of teaching and the teacher along progressive lines, is hardly ever considered. Yet it is in this third option—an option which relies on the idea that freedom is not the opposite of authority or an escape from authority, but has to do with establishing a ‘grown up’ relationship with what may have authority in our lives; a process in which authority becomes *authorised*, as Meirieu (2007, p. 84) has put it—that we can see the beginnings of an entirely different response to authoritarian forms of teaching, be they traditional, be they progressive.

In this article, I engage with one dimension of the urgent and complex task of the re(dis)covery of teaching. I do this by means of an exploration of what we might term the anthropological¹ dimensions of the discussion, that is, of underlying assumptions about the human being and its place in the world. I embark on this with some trepidation, because I neither think that anthropology is a matter of choice—it is not that we can simply choose how we want to understand the human being and then can happily proceed from there—nor that anthropology is a matter of grounding—where, once we know what the human being really is, we can put education on a safe and secure path. My ambition with this article is to make visible what the prevailing conception of the human being is—first and foremost in our educational imaginary, but the impact is a wider one—and to suggest that such a conception is neither necessary nor inevitable by indicating how the human being and its place in the world might be approached differently. (I deliberately use the word ‘approached’ here because, as I will argue in what follows, this is not a matter of *understanding* the human being differently; the challenge rather is an existential one.) Through this I not only seek to create the possibility for developing a different understanding of teaching, but I also seek to show how teaching—or, to be more precise: the experience of being taught (Biesta, 2013a)—reveals something important about our human existence. This will allow me to suggest that in the demise of teaching and the teacher, there is actually more at stake than only an educational problematic and a problematic that would only concern the school.

The underlying structure of my argument is fairly simple, but I admit that the detail is more complex. I start from the contention that to the extent to which the critique of traditional teaching is a critique of teaching as control, this critique is educationally valid as it shows that in traditional teaching, the student can only appear as object of the teacher’s interventions, but never as a subject in its own right (which is also what Freire objects to in banking education, see Biesta & Stengel, *in press*). I then argue that the suggestion that we can overcome this problem by focusing on students and their learning—understood as acts of interpretation and comprehension—fails, because such acts of interpretation and comprehension have an egological structure that emanates from the self and returns to the self, even if this occurs ‘via’ the world. For this reason, I suggest that in acts of interpretation and comprehension, the self can still not appear as subject, but remains an object in relation to its environment. I suggest, in more philosophical terms, that our subjectness is not constituted through acts of signi-

fiction. This insight I take from the work of Levinas, who provides the main source of inspiration for this article. With Levinas, I suggest that our subjectness is rather called for from the ‘outside’—which is why I discuss the theme of ‘transcendence’—and has to do with the ‘event’ of ‘being addressed’. It is this event where a different meaning of teaching manifests itself, one where the student can appear as subject rather than object. And it is this sense of teaching that I seek to (re)discover in this article.

Overcoming the Egological World view

I proceed in this article by means of a reading of two texts from Emmanuel Levinas, the philosopher who, in my view, has contributed most to exposing the limitations of the ‘egological’ world view, that is, the way of thinking that starts from the (assumption of the existence of the) self as self-sufficient ego or consciousness, in order *then* to thematise everything that is ‘outside the subject’ (Levinas, 1994). However, Levinas’s thought is not a simple reversal of this gesture, but comes closer to what elsewhere I have referred to as an ‘ethics of subjectivity’ (Biesta, 2008). The idea of an ethics of subjectivity hints at a double shift. First of all, it indicates that Levinas seeks to approach the question of human subjectivity through ethics rather than through knowledge. There is, in other words, no *theory* about the subject, no cognitive claim about what the subject *is*. Yet this also means that Levinas’s writings should not be read as a ‘traditional’ ethical philosophy or theory of ethics as what is at stake is the question of human subjectivity or subjectness.² In this sense, we can say that his writings neither prescribe nor describe what being ethical or acting ethically is.

Rather modestly—particularly compared to the rich flow of language through which Levinas tries to ‘capture’ something of the mystery of human subjectness—Levinas somewhere says that he ‘describe[s] subjectivity in ethical terms’ (Levinas, 1985, p. 95). Key in this effort is his suggestion that responsibility is ‘the essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity’ (Levinas, 1985, p. 95). He emphasises, however, that responsibility here ‘does not supplement a preceding existential base’ (Levinas, 1985, p. 95). It is not that the subject first exists—as a self-sufficient, egological subject—and then encounters a responsibility or takes a responsibility upon itself. It is rather, as Levinas puts it, that ‘the very node of the subjective is knotted in ethics understood as responsibility’ (Levinas, 1985, p. 95). Responsibility, in the words of Bauman (1993, p. 13), thus appears as ‘the first reality of the self’. It is the moment where the self finds itself, so to speak. Or to be even more precise, it is the moment where the self *matters* because in its responsibility the self is ‘non-interchangeable’ (Levinas, 1985, p. 101).³

That Levinas’s ethics of subjectivity is not to be understood as a theory about the human subject already indicates some of the difficulties with trying to overcome egological ways of thinking and being. After all, if we simply were to issue a different theory or different truth about the subject—for example by arguing that the self has a social origin—we would decentre the self at the level of our theory, but would still be doing this from a centre, that is, the centre from which we issue such a theory. We would therefore performatively deny—‘that there is a centre from which I can issue the truth’—the very thing we would declaratively deny—‘that no such centre exists’. Before I discuss how Levinas engages with this difficulty, I wish to say a few things

about what I see as the prevailing educational imaginary, particularly in order to show its fundamentally egological character.

On Robot Vacuum Cleaners, Learning Environments and the Hermeneutical World view

One way in which we might characterise the prevailing educational imaginary is in terms of robot vacuum cleaners. This idea came to me after a conversation with a scholar working in the learning sciences who raised questions about my critique of the language of learning in education (for example in Biesta, 2010); a critique which, to a certain extent, he read as a critique of the very idea of learning itself (which I think is correct; see Biesta, 2013b). What, so he asked, could be wrong with or educationally unhelpful about the study of intelligent adaptive systems? While I was happy to concede that nothing is wrong with the study of such systems as such, my question was whether such systems provide us with an adequate image of students in educational relationships. And when I tried to imagine what intelligent adaptive systems look like, the robot vacuum cleaner was the first image that came to my mind. And perhaps it came to my mind because in French, these machines are known as ‘aspirateurs autonome’—and it was the word ‘autonome’ that captured my attention as an educationalist. So what do robot vacuum cleaners reveal about the prevailing educational imaginary?

What is interesting about robot vacuum cleaners is, first of all, that they are indeed able to perform their task—hoovering a room—autonomously. But what perhaps is even more interesting is that over time, they can become more efficient at doing so, because they can adapt—intelligently—to the particular room in which they have to perform their task. If their pattern is at first rather random or, to be more precise, guided by the particular algorithm they were programmed with, over time it becomes more adjusted to the situation in which they have to perform their task. We can say, therefore, that robot vacuum cleaners can *learn* or, if we wish, we can say that they can adapt to their environment in an intelligent way. While their learning is autonomous, it does not mean that it cannot be influenced. The way to do it, the way to let them learn more and different things, is by putting the machine in a different environment so that it needs to adapt to differing enviroing conditions. One can even assume that robot vacuum cleaners which have adjusted to a range of different rooms become more effective at adapting to any new room they are placed in. While their learning remains a lifelong task—each new situation may pose new challenges and thus will require further (intelligent) adaptation—they may nonetheless become more skilled at adapting to new situations.

I believe that the foregoing account provides a fairly accurate picture of *a*, and perhaps even *the* prevailing contemporary educational imaginary. This is an imaginary that sees education as a learner-centred endeavour, where it is ultimately for learners to construct their own understandings and build their own skills, and where the main task of teachers is to provide arrangements in and through which such processes can happen. In this situation, the teacher does, indeed, no longer transmit anything, but designs learning environments for students in order to facilitate their learning.

Similarly, students are not engaged in passive absorption but in active adaptive construction, and it is through this that they acquire the skills and competences that make them more able to adapt to future situations. This also shifts the meaning and position of the curriculum, which no longer exists as the content to be transmitted and acquired, but becomes redefined as a set of ‘learning opportunities’ in and through which students, in a flexible and personalised way, pursue their own ‘learning lines’ (a concept that has become popular in the design of school education in the Netherlands, see <http://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leerlijn>).

It is perhaps important to note that while this imaginary is contemporary—by which I seek to say that it is shaping contemporary educational practice in many contexts and settings—its theoretical frame is not new. We can find it, for example in the theory of autopoietic systems, that is, of systems that are able to regenerate themselves in constant interaction with their environment—an idea that was developed in biology by Humberto Maturana and Francis Varela (see, e.g. Maturana & Varela, 1980; Varela, Maturana, & Uribe, 1974) and that was further developed by Niklas Luhmann in his theory of social systems (Luhmann, 1984, 1995). Here, we can indeed find the idea that such systems (e.g. human individuals) cannot participate in each other’s autopoiesis—which for example can mean that they cannot participate in each other’s adaptive activities or cognitive constructions—but that they can interfere in each other’s environments so as to have an indirect effect on each other’s autopoiesis. But perhaps the most famous example of the frame underlying the ideas outlined above can be found in the work of John Dewey, whose understanding of action, communication and learning is based on a view of the human organism as being in ongoing transaction with its (natural and social) environment, constantly seeking to establish a dynamic equilibrium in processes of doing and undergoing (see Dewey, 1925). And in Dewey, we can indeed also find the claim that ‘we never educate directly, but indirectly by means of the environment’ (Dewey, 1966/1916, p. 19).

If I were to characterise the underlying anthropology—that is, the view about the human being and its place in the world—I would suggest to call this a hermeneutical anthropology and, more widely, a hermeneutical world view. The reason for using these phrases is that the human being appears here first and foremost as a sense-making being, that is, as a being who is in relationship with the world—natural and social—through acts of interpretation and comprehension. Such acts are issued from the self and, ‘via’ the world so to speak, return to the self. They are acts of comprehension in the literal sense of the word, in that they try to grasp (‘pre-hendere’) the world in its totality (‘com’). In such acts of comprehension, in such hermeneutical acts, the world thus appears as an object of our sense-making, our understanding and interpretation. One could—simply and straightforwardly—say that this is indeed the case. One could, in other words, affirm that the hermeneutical world view is *true*, and that we should therefore build our understanding of knowledge and communication, but also of ethics, politics and education upon this premise.⁴ But one could also pause for a moment and ponder whether the hermeneutical world view is as inevitable as it would seem, perhaps by asking what is *not* conceivable within the confines of this world view.

There are two issues that I would like to mention here. One is the question whether in the hermeneutical world view the world, natural and social, *can speak* in its own terms and on its own terms. The second is whether in the hermeneutical world view we can be *spoken to*, that is, whether we can be addressed (see also Biesta, 2012b). The hermeneutical world view, so I wish to suggest, precisely seems to preclude these two options (and it is important, as I will try to make clear below, to see them as two *different* limitations of the hermeneutical world view). The reason for this lies in the fact that the hermeneutical world view depicts a universe that is *immanent* to my understanding, to acts of my comprehension that always aim to bring the world ‘out there’ back to me. While such acts of comprehension do have an object—hermeneutics is not phantasy or pure construction—this object always appears as an object of *my* signification and, in this sense, remains dependent on these acts of *signification*. In the next two sections, I take up these two aspects—the question of immanence and the question of signification—in conversation with two texts from Levinas.

‘An opening in an opening’: On Signification and Sense

In his article, ‘Signification and Sense’ (Levinas, 2006; a different English translation was called ‘Meaning and Sense’, see Levinas, 2008; the original French version was published in 1964), Levinas explores both the limitations and the conditions of possibility of signification, broadly conceived as (acts of) meaning making. One line in the complex and rich argument Levinas puts forward concerns what he refers to as the ‘anti-Platonism in contemporary philosophy of signification’ (Levinas, 2006, p. 18). This anti-Platonism, which he sees in Hegelian, Bergsonian and phenomenological philosophies of signification, concerns the contention that, as he puts it, ‘the intelligible is inconceivable outside the becoming that suggests it’ (Levinas, 2006, p. 18). It is the idea that ‘(t) here does not exist any *signification in itself* that a thought could reach by hopping over the reflections—distorting or faithful, but sensible—that lead to it’ (Levinas, 2006, p. 18; *emph. in original*). Or in slightly more concrete language, it is the idea that ‘(a)ll things picturesque, all the different cultures, are no longer obstacles that separate us from the essential and the Intelligible (but are) the only possible paths, irreplaceable, and consequently implicated in the intelligible itself’ (Levinas, 2006, p. 18).

Levinas thus describes a situation of total *immanence*—all our meaning making, all our signification, occurs ‘inside’ culture and history—which he characterises as anti-Platonic because, as he writes, for Plato ‘the world of significations *precedes* the language and culture that express it’ so that it remains ‘indifferent to the system of signs that can be invented to make this world present to thought’ (Levinas, 2006, p. 18) Plato, so Levinas argues, believed in the existence of ‘a privileged culture (that) can understand the transitory and seemingly childish nature of historical cultures’ (Levinas, 2006, pp. 18–19); a privileged culture that, so we might say, could give sense *to* signification and make sense *of* signification. Levinas shows that in contemporary philosophy of signification this option is no longer considered to be possible. What we find instead is a ‘*subordination* of intellect to expression’ (Levinas, 2006, p. 19; *emphasis added*).

For Levinas, this not only poses a *philosophical* problem—which I have alluded to as the question where signification gets its meaning or sense from (I will return to this below). It also poses a *practical* problem that has to do with the (im)possibility of communication (to which I will return below as well). And it poses an urgent *political* problem, because this ‘most recent, most daring and influential anthropology keeps multiple cultures on the same level’ (Levinas, 2006, p. 20). According to Levinas’s analysis, the contemporary philosophy of signification thus amounts to cultural and historical relativism. Because of its total immanence, it lacks a criterion that would make any judgement about acts of signification (and wider practices and cultures of signification) possible so as to distinguish between those that ‘make sense’ and those that do not ‘make sense’. Without such a criterion, all significations and all systems and cultures of signification are simply ‘there’—on the same level. As this is clearly an undesirable situation for Levinas, he raises the question where such a criterion might come from.

One option Levinas briefly discusses is the suggestion that human need can provide such a criterion. The idea here is that ‘(n)eed raises things simply given to the rank of values’, that ‘(m)an confers a unique sense to being by working it’, so that ‘(i)n scientific technical culture the ambiguity of being, like the ambiguity of signification, is surmounted’ (Levinas, 2006, p. 21). Yet Levinas does not consider this ‘materialism’—to which he also refers as ‘economic signification’ (see Levinas, 2006)—to be a viable option, because, unlike what its proponents claim, the ‘technical designation of the universe’ has itself to be seen as another ‘modality of culture’ and not as something that transcends culture (Levinas, 2006).⁵ Does that mean that we can do nothing more than celebrate plurality? This is indeed what Levinas observes in ‘contemporary philosophy’ in that it simply ‘takes satisfaction [*se complaint*] in the multiplicity of cultural significations’ (Levinas, 2006, pp. 25–26). In his analysis, this manifests itself as a ‘refusal of engagement in the Other’ (Levinas, 2006, p. 26). Yet it is precisely in the latter movement that Levinas sees an opening.

There are two aspects to how Levinas constructs his argument here, and along both lines, he seeks to establish that signification ‘is situated before Culture’ and that it is ‘situated in Ethics (which is the) presupposition of all Culture and all signification’ (Levinas, 2006, p. 36).⁶ Rather than to refuse engagement in the Other, it is precisely this engagement which, according to Levinas, is the origin of sense in that it provides an ‘orientation’ (Levinas, 2006, p. 26). In a first step, Levinas characterises this orientation ‘as a motion from the identical toward an Other that is absolutely other’ (Levinas, 2006, p. 26). This orientation which, as Levinas puts it, ‘goes freely from Same to Other’ is what he refers to as ‘a Work’ (Levinas, 2006, p. 26; capitals in original). But for the Work to be radically Other-centred, it ‘must not be thought as an apparent agitation of a stock that afterward remains identical to itself’, nor must it be thought ‘as similar to the technique that ... transforms a strange world into a world whose otherness is converted to my idea’ (Levinas, 2006, p. 26)—which I read as another definition of the hermeneutical ‘gesture’. Hence, the Work needs to be understood as ‘*a movement of the Same toward the Other that never returns to the Same*’ (Levinas, 2006, p. 26, emphasis in original).

This line of thinking, which is akin to Derrida’s analysis of the gift (see, e.g. Derrida, 1992, 1995), leads Levinas to such observations as that the Work not only

requires ‘a radical generosity of movement’ but that, because of this, it also demands ‘*ingratitude* from the Other’, in that the other is not supposed to ‘return’ the Work by being grateful for it, as this would bring the Work back into a circle of economic calculation of costs and benefits, of expenses and returns (Levinas, 2006, pp. 26–27). Levinas writes: ‘As absolute orientation toward the Other—as sense—the work is possible only in the patience that, pushed to the limit, signifies that the Agent renounces contemporaneity with its fulfilment, that he acts without entering the Promised Land’ (Levinas, 2006, p. 27). The word that Levinas eventually suggests for this work is *liturgy* which ‘in its first signification means the exercise of an office that is not only totally gratuitous but requires from the executant an investment at a loss’—and it is this ‘uncompensated work’ which Levinas names as ‘ethics itself’ (Levinas, 2006, p. 28).⁷

Liturgy, Need and Desire

To keep liturgy—or in a more complex formulation: ‘sense as the liturgical orientation of the work’ (Levinas, 2006, p. 29)—away from need, Levinas introduces the notion of desire (see Levinas, 2006, p. 39). Here, desire is not to be understood as a desire for fulfilment, which is why Levinas writes that ‘(t)he Desire for Others—sociality—arises in a being who lacks nothing or, more exactly, arises beyond all that could be lacking or satisfying to him’ (Levinas, 2006). In desire, the ego goes out to the Other ‘in a way that compromises the sovereign identification of the Ego with oneself’ (Levinas, 2006). But how should we ‘approach’ this ‘Desire for Others that’, according to Levinas, ‘we feel in the most common social experience’ (Levinas, 2006, p. 30). Levinas observes that ‘(a)ll analysis of language in contemporary philosophy emphasises, and rightfully so, its hermeneutic structure’ (Levinas, 2006, p. 30), that is, that our approach to the other is to be understood as an act of signification. Yet Levinas is after a ‘third option’ where the other is neither ‘collaborator and neighbour of our cultural work of expression [nor] client of our artistic production, but *interlocutor*; the one to whom expression expresses’ (Levinas, 2006, p. 30, emphasis added). Precisely here we find a first and crucial ‘opening’, in that Levinas suggests that signification is not an egological act, it is not a gesture through which the ego generates meaning, it is not self-generated expression ‘onto’ a world (hermeneutics) because ‘before it is a celebration of being, expression is a relation with the one to whom I express the expression’ (Levinas, 2006, p. 30).

This Other ‘who faces me’ is precisely for this reason ‘not included in the totality of being that is expressed’—because in that case, the other would be the ‘product’ of my signification—but arises ‘behind all collection of being, as the one to whom I express what I express’ (Levinas, 2006, p. 30). This is so because it is only through the (presence of the) Other as *interlocutor* that ‘a phenomenon such as signification [can] introduce itself, of itself, into being’ (Levinas, 2006, p. 30). That is why, as interlocutor, as the one to whom I express the expression ‘and whose presence is already required so that my cultural gesture of expression can be produced’, the Other is ‘neither a cultural signification nor a simple given’ but rather ‘primordially, *sense*’ (Levinas, 2006, p. 30, emphasis in original). And here we have to remember that ‘sense’ for Levinas is pre-

cisely that which gives our signification meaning and, going on from this, gives our life direction. Levinas emphasises that this ‘turn’—about I wish to say one more thing below—‘means returning in a new way to Platonism’ (Levinas, 2006, p. 38) because it allows to go beyond ‘this saraband of countless equivalent cultures, each one justifying itself in its own context’ (Levinas, 2006, p. 37). While Levinas praises Husserl for a similar achievement that would (again) allow ‘for ethical judgements about civilizations’ (Levinas, 2006, p. 37), he notes that ‘(o)ne is not obliged to follow the same path Husserl took’, which was that of ‘postulating phenomenological reduction and constitution ... of the cultural world in the intuitive transcendental consciousness’ (Levinas, 2006, p. 37). Levinas claims that he has found a different avenue towards ‘the rectitude of signification’, namely through the idea that ‘intelligible manifestation is produced in the rectitude of *morality* and in the Work’—understood as liturgy (Levinas, 2006, p. 37, emphasis added).

Before I draw this section to a conclusion, there is one more aspect of Levinas’s line of thought that needs to be brought in, a line which responds to the point raised above about the (im)possibility of communication or interlocution. This, in simple terms, has to do with the question how the Other—in English translation always with a capital ‘O’—can be interlocutor. It is here that a second opening takes place. While Levinas acknowledges that the manifestation of the Other—and the word manifestation should be taken literally, that is, the way in which the Other manifests itself—‘is of course produced ... in the way all signification is produced’, that is, through an action of my ‘comprehension of the Other’ which, as Levinas emphasises, is ‘a hermeneutic, an exegesis’ (Levinas, 2006, pp. 30–31), the Other does not only come to us through manifestation, that is, as a ‘product’ of our signification.

If that were the case, then signification would remain the original event even if this signification would have an ethical quality, for example coming from my intention to want to do good to the other or care for the other. In addition to the manifestation of the other, that is, in addition to the appearance of the Other as *phenomenon*, there is also the ‘epiphany of the Other’—an epiphany that bears its own significance, ‘independent of the signification received from the world’ (Levinas, 2006, p. 31). The Other ‘not only comes to us from a context but signifies itself, without that mediation’ (Levinas, 2006, p. 31)—and it is this unmediated presence coming to us to which Levinas refers as ‘face’ and it is to the epiphany of the face that Levinas refers as ‘visitation’ (see Levinas, 2006, p. 31). Face, so we might say, ‘breaks through’ its signification, that is, through its image. This is a process of ‘deformalization’ (Cohen, 2006, p. xxxi) where the face speaks and where this speaking ‘is first and foremost this way of coming from behind one’s appearance, behind one’s form; an opening in the opening’ (Levinas, 2006, p. 31).

But the face does not speak in general—its speaking is not ‘the unveiling of the world’ (Levinas, 2006, p. 31).⁸ Rather the face speaks to *me*; the face addresses me, the face summons me and ‘announces thereby the ethical dimensions of visitation’ (Levinas, 2006, p. 32). It is precisely here that ‘(c)onsciousness loses its first place’ (Levinas, 2006, p. 32) because ‘the presence of the face signifies an irrefutable order—a commandment—that arrests the availability of consciousness’ (Levinas, 2006, p. 32). Levinas emphasises that in this moment, consciousness is challenged by the

face, but that it is crucial to see that this challenge ‘does not come from awareness of that challenge’ (Levinas, 2006, p. 32) because in that case, signification would come before the address. ‘This is a challenge of consciousness, not a consciousness of the challenge’ (Levinas, 2006, p. 33). This visitation is therefore ‘the upset of the very egoism of the Ego’ (Levinas, 2006, p. 33). It is important to see, however, that this does not amount to the destruction of the Ego but rather to what we might call a decentering; a decentering through which the ‘Me/Ego’ gains its unique significance. As Levinas explains, the responsibility ‘that empties the Ego of its imperialism [rather] confirms the uniqueness of the Ego’, a uniqueness which lies in the fact ‘that no one can answer in my stead’ (Levinas, 2006, p. 33). And discovering ‘such an orientation for the Ego means identifying Ego and morality’ (Levinas, 2006, p. 33)—and hence the moral ‘origin’ of the Ego-as-subject (hence the idea of an ethics of subjectivity mentioned above).

Revelation, Transcendence and Ethics

I have followed Levinas’s argument in much detail in order to show how this single (and singular) line of thought addresses the problems stemming from what Levinas refers to as the contemporary philosophy of signification. These problems were the question of *sense*—Where does signification get its meaning from?—the question of *communication*—How is communication possible in a radically plural universe?—and the question of the *criterion*—What makes it possible for us to evaluate (systems and traditions of) signification? Levinas’s line of thought provides an answer to these three questions, not so much to each of the questions separately, but more in an overlapping and interlocking way. One key insight is the observation that signification is not an egological act or accomplishment, but consists of a relation with the one to whom I express an expression, the one to whom expression expresses. Signification thus derives its sense from this particular ‘event’. In this relation, the Other does not appear as object of my signification, but as interlocutor. That is why the ‘appearance’ of the Other is not a matter of manifestation—the other is not a phenomenon—but of epiphany. What appears, therefore, is not an image of the Other, but what Levinas refers to as its face.

It is important to see that the face does not thematise me; the face does not make me into an object of its signification. Rather the face speaks to me. Yet this speech—and this is crucial as well—is not a revelation of the Other that I am just to receive.⁹ The key idea here is that the face speaks to *me* or, to be more precise: the speech of the face addresses me (and here we need to emphasise both the fact that the face *addresses* and that the face addresses *me*, in the singular, and not just anyone). It is an address in which my imperialism is interrupted, where my consciousness is challenged—‘(t)he face disorients the intentionality that sights it’ (see Biesta, 2012b; Levinas, 2006, p. 33)—where I am summoned to respond. And it is in this moment, in this ethical event, that the Ego gains its significance, precisely because it appears beyond/before/outside of any signification. In short, then, the ‘criterion’ Levinas identifies is ethics; communication is a matter of being spoken to, of being addressed; and it is in the ethical event of being addressed that signification acquires its sense, that significa-

tion first becomes possible—or with a more precise formulation from Levinas: that signification introduces itself into being.

Before I return to the question of teaching with which I have started this article, I wish to look briefly at another short text from Levinas called ‘Revelation in the Jewish Tradition’ (Levinas, 1989; originally published in French in 1977). In this text, Levinas also provides a critique of the hermeneutical world view, but in a slightly different register and vocabulary. Some might say that the text is radically different rather than slightly different as it deals with a theological question of the possibility of revelation. I see more continuity between this question and the themes of ‘Signification and Sense’, as in both cases, Levinas is trying to articulate a critique of immanence (see also Biesta, 2013a), and it is on this aspect that my reading here will focus. That the main ‘theme’ is the overcoming of immanence, is already clear in the opening sentence where Levinas states that the ‘fundamental question’ he is addressing ‘is less concerned with the content attributed to revelation than with the actual fact—a metaphysical one—referred to as the Revelation’ (Levinas, 1989, p. 191). Levinas goes even one step further by arguing that this fact in itself is ‘the first content, and the most important, to be revealed by any revelation’ (Levinas, 1989, p. 191). The ‘point’ of revelation is its exteriority—that revelation is something that comes to us from the outside. Hence, the question how we can ‘make sense of the “exteriority” of the truths and signs of the Revelation which strike the human faculty known as reason’ (Levinas, 1989, p. 192). ‘(H)ow can these truths and signs strike our reason if they are not even of this world?’

Part of the answer to this question is given in the idea of ‘the reader’s participation in the Revelation’ (Levinas, 1989, p. 194). While this may, at first sight, sound like an argument for interpretation that would bring hermeneutics back to the scene—and there are parts of the text where Levinas does indeed create space for hermeneutics; where it is also important to note that Levinas does not deny signification but seeks to decentre it—Levinas does not reduce revelation to hermeneutics but has a rather different relationship between revelation and the self in mind. He writes that while ‘its word comes from elsewhere, from outside [it lives at the same time] within the person receiving it’ (Levinas, 1989, p. 194). Levinas claims therefore that the only “terrain” where exteriority can appear is in the human being’ (Levinas, 1989, p. 194). But the human being here ‘does far more than listen’ (Levinas, 1989, p. 194). That Levinas does not understand this in terms of hermeneutics becomes clear when he argues that the message that comes from the outside does not come ‘in order to collide with a reason which is “free”’ but rather arrives ‘to assume instead a unique shape, which cannot be reduced to a contingent “subjective impression”’ (Levinas, 1989, pp. 194–195). Rather ‘(t)he Revelation has a particular way of producing meaning, which lies in its calling upon the unique within me’ (Levinas, 1989, p. 195). Revelation, in the language from the previous section, speaks to me or, to be more precise: addresses me, calls me, summons me.

That is why, in a familiar line, Levinas emphasises that ‘(m)y very uniqueness lies in my responsibility for the other [in the sense that] nobody can relieve me of this, just as nobody can replace me at the moment of my death’ (Levinas, 1989, p. 202). This allows Levinas to articulate a very different notion of freedom—not the liberal

freedom of being able to do what one wishes to do, but being free as ‘simply [doing] what nobody else can do in my place’ so that ‘to be free’ means ‘to obey the Most High’ (Levinas, 1989, p. 202). Just as God interrupts the human being, Levinas highlights that ‘man is also the interruption of God within Being, or the bursting out of Being towards God’ (Levinas, 1989, p. 202). ‘Man is the fracture in Being which produces the act of giving, with hands which are full, in place of fighting and pillaging’ (Levinas, 1989, p. 202). Levinas explains that this is where the idea of being chosen comes from. He acknowledges that this idea can ‘deteriorate in pride, but originally expresses the awareness of an appointment which cannot be called into question; an appointment which is the basis of ethics and which ... isolates the person in its responsibility’ (Levinas, 1989, p. 202).

This brings Levinas back to the idea of subjectivity as ‘the very fracturing of immanence’ (Levinas, 1989, p. 204). But how can this fracturing be understood? We might say that understanding is precisely the way in which this fracturing cannot be understood because if the fracturing, that which comes from the outside, is ‘thinkable’ then it is already, via a hermeneutical gesture, made ‘safe’, that is, it no longer is a fracturing. Levinas observes that the difficulty here ‘stems from our habit of thinking of reason as the correlative of the possibility of the world, the counterpart to its stability and identity’ (Levinas, 1989, p. 205). Could it be otherwise, he asks? ‘Could we account for intelligibility in terms of a traumatic upheaval in experience, which confronts intelligence with something far beyond its capacity, and thereby causes it to break?’ (Levinas, 1989, p. 205).

As long as we think of the whole process of revelation as the revelation of a truth to reason, then all this does not really make sense. But Levinas sees an entirely different option, the one where ‘we consider the possibility of a command, a “you must,” which takes no account of what “you can.”’ (Levinas, 1989, p. 205). In this case, Levinas argues, ‘the exceeding of one’s capacity does make sense’ because the type of reason corresponding to the fracture ‘is practical reason’ (Levinas, 1989, p. 205) which must mean, so Levinas concludes, that ‘our model of revelation be an ethical one’ (Levinas, 1989, p. 206). Here, notions such as ‘prescription’ and ‘obedience’ play a role (see Levinas, 1989, p. 206). But the obedience Levinas has in mind ‘cannot be assimilated to the categorical imperative, where a universal suddenly finds itself in a position to direct the will’ (Levinas, 1989, p. 206). It rather derives ‘from the love of one’s neighbour, a love without eros, lacking self-indulgence, which is, in this sense, a love that is obeyed’ (Levinas, 1989, p. 206).

This ‘love that is obeyed’ hints at the possibility ‘of a heteronomy which does not involve servitude, a receptive ear which still retains its reason, an obedience which does not alienate the person listening’ so as to be able to recognise what Levinas refers to as ‘the transcendence of understanding’ (Levinas, 1989, p. 207). Levinas is aware that ‘such moves towards acknowledging an irreducible transcendence’ cannot occur within ‘the dominant conception of reason held by the philosophical profession today’—by which he has in mind what elsewhere in this article I have referred to as the hermeneutical world view which starts from the self and conceives of the self’s relationship with the word in terms of sense-making. ‘Nothing can fissure the nuclear solidity of this power of thought’, Levinas writes, ‘a thought which freezes its object

as a theme' (Levinas, 1989, p. 207). This is different from the ethical relationship with the Other which, 'unlike the exteriority which surrounds man whenever he seeks knowledge ... cannot be transformed into a content within interiority [but] remains "uncontainable" [while] the relation is maintained' (Levinas, 1989, p. 207). Hence, Levinas's solution for the 'paradox of revelation' is one that claims that we may find a model for this relation with exteriority 'in the attitude of non-indifference towards the Other (...) and that it is precisely through this relation that man becomes his "self"' (Levinas, 1989, p. 207). Ethics, then, 'provides the model worthy of transcendence' (Levinas, 1989, p. 207), one where 'the Same—drowsy in his identity' is *awakened* by the Other (Levinas, 1989, p. 207).¹⁰

On the Rediscovery of Teaching

I started this article with some critical questions about the all too common and all too facile critique of traditional teaching—a critique that seems to have become the new dogma of contemporary educational thought. I showed how this critique has led to a demise of teaching and the teacher and a turn towards learning; a turn where the teacher can only exist as a facilitator of otherwise autonomous learning processes. From the 'sage on the stage', the teacher seems to have become the 'guide on the side' and, according to some, even the 'peer at the rear'. The reason for the emergence of the turn towards learning seems to lie in the fact that 'traditional' teaching is perceived as an act of *control*. That this is so also becomes visible when we look at the motivation of those who, in light of the turn towards learning, are making a case in favour of teaching, because they do so precisely because they want teaching to be a powerful act of control aimed at maintaining or restoring individual and societal order. While order is not necessarily bad—the question is not whether or not we need order, but when and where we need what kind of order and for what purposes; think, for example of the immense importance of the legal order—the problem with the idea of teaching as control is *that in such a relationship the student can never appear as a subject*, but remains an object. In a world that is not interested in the subjectness of the human being this is, of course, not a problem. The question is whether this is a world we should desire.¹¹

Yet what emerges from the ideas put forward in this article is that the option that is a proposed response to the idea of teaching-as-control, namely the idea of learning and, more specifically that of learning-as-meaning-making (signification) and of the learner as a meaning maker, suffers from the same problem in that, again, in acts of meaning making *the learner also cannot appear as a subject*. One way to understand why this is so has to do with the fact that the act of signification is issued from the self and returns—'via' the world as I have put it—to the self. Signification thus keeps the self to the self—never interrupted, always already identical with itself and sufficient for itself. Another way of looking at it is to say that in its ongoing attempts to adapt and adjust to changing environing conditions the self remains an object vis-à-vis the environment it is adapting and adjusting itself to. While this may help the self to *survive*—and it is remarkable how much of contemporary educational discourse is about survival, for example with regard to the apparent skills, students need to survive in an

unknown future—it never creates a possibility for the self to *exist* (also in the literal sense of being outside of itself). The question that never arises, to put it differently, is whether the environment to which the self is adapting and adjusting is *good* in the fullest sense of that world. To put it differently: the self—and perhaps we should say the adjusting self or the hermeneutical self—can never out of its own generate a criterion with which to evaluate that which it is adjusting to. It is thus ‘caught’, as an object, in that which it is adjusting to, an issue that is particularly visible in the image of the robot vacuum cleaner.

This is where the ‘opening’ Levinas creates through his critique of the hermeneutical world view has its significance, as he shows that our subjectness is not constituted from the ‘inside’ through acts of interpretation and adaptation, but is called into being from the outside, as an interruption of my immanence, an interruption or fracturing of my being-with-myself, of my consciousness. This is neither the moment where I interpret the other, nor the moment where I listen to the other (see Biesta, 2012b), nor is it the moment where the other makes sense of me—it is, in this regard, outside of the realm of signification. It rather is *the moment where I am addressed* by the other, where the other, in Levinas’s words, ‘[calls] upon the unique within me’. *And may not this event of being addressed give us an entirely different and far more significant account of teaching and the experience of being taught?*¹²

It is in light of this that we can begin to see why the idea of intelligent adaptive systems such as robot vacuum cleaners precisely does *not* provide us with an adequate image of students in educational relationships. While, as mentioned, such systems can learn, can adapt and adjust to their environments, and can, in this regard, be said to be capable of signification, the very ‘thing’ that cannot happen, the very ‘thing’ that can never ‘arrive’ in their universe, is the event of being addressed, that is, the event of being taught. In short, then, while such systems can learn, they cannot be taught.

Here, then do we encounter an altogether different ‘account’ of the event of teaching, one that is precisely *not* aimed at control, at the exercise of power and the establishment of an order in which the student can only exist as object, but rather one that calls forth the subjectness of the student by interrupting its egocentrism, its being-with-itself and for-itself. This is not only a teaching that puts us very differently in the world (and in this regard it can be seen as teaching with existential import). We could even say that this teaching puts us in the world in the first place. It is (a) teaching that draws us out of ourselves, as it interrupts our ‘needs’, to use Levinas’s term, or, in the vocabulary, I have introduced elsewhere (Biesta, 2014), as it interrupts our desires, and in this sense, frees us from the ways in which we are bound to or even determined by our desires. It does so by introducing the question whether what we desire is actually desirable, both for ourselves and for the life we live with what and who is other.

Such teaching is not authoritarian—it does not reduce the student to an object but rather has an interest in the student’s subjectness. But it does not overcome authoritarianism by *opposing* it (which would mean leaving students entirely to their own devices, that is, to their own learning-as-signification). It does so by establishing an entirely different relationship. This is a relationship of authority—bearing in mind that authority *is* relational (Bingham, 2008)—because in moving from what we desire to

what we can consider desirable, we give authority to what and who is other or, with a slightly different word, we *authorise* what and who is other by letting it be an author, that is, a subject who speaks and addresses us.

We have arrived, then, at the option that seems to be absent in the current way in which the critique of traditional teaching is being conducted, namely where the critique of teaching-as-control immediately ends up with the idea of learning as freedom. In the preceding pages, I have not only tried to argue that a different alternative *is* possible. I have also suggested that a different alternative *ought to be* possible because if we replace teaching-as-control with an alleged freedom of signification, we actually reinforce the student's unfreedom because, as I have tried to make clear through my discussion of Levinas, the student remains with himself or herself and, in acts of signification, always returns to himself or herself, but never comes into the world, never achieves its subjectness.

These ideas begin to outline a non-egological approach to education, an approach that is not aimed at strengthening the ego, but at interrupting the *ego-object*—turning it towards the world, perhaps even pulling it into the world (see Mollenhauer, 2014)—so that it can become a *self-subject*. Here, the quote from Philippe Meirieu which is at the start of this article has its meaning, as it suggests that what education should aim for is for the 'student-subject' to be in the world—rather than remain with itself—without being or becoming the centre of the world. Being in the world without being the centre of the world, that is, being in the world without trying, in a rather infantile way, to control the world, means to be or exist in the world in a *grown up* way, that is, in a subject–subject relationship, rather than a subject–object relationship in which the world can only appear as an object of my signification, of my needs. It is a way of being in the world where I have not become immune for what seeks to address me—a way of being in the world, in short, where I can be taught.

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Notes

1. I refer here to philosophical anthropology, not empirical or 'cultural' anthropology.
2. I prefer the notion of 'subjectness' over that of 'subjectivity' as the latter has echoes of subjectivity as the opposite of objectivity, whereas what I seek to refer to is the 'condition' of being a subject rather than an object.
3. In a forthcoming article, Zhao ([in press](#)) has raised some questions about my existential reading of Levinas's approach to the question of human subjectness. She does this in the context of the discussion about humanism. I take (philosophical) humanism as any attempt to articulate a truth about the human subject, whether such a truth sees the subject as fixed and self-enclosed, or as open, intersubjective and always in the making. The problem with

humanism is therefore not about the particular conception of the human subject—in which case the challenge would only be to come up with a better conception—but about the very idea that it is possible and desirable for the subject to jump over its own shadow in order to define itself, be it as fixed or be it as open. I see this, and not a concern about a particular conception of the human being, as the main thrust of the critique of humanism in Heidegger, Levinas and Foucault. What I value in Levinas is that he approaches the question of human subjectness not through a theory about the subject, but through the articulation of an event where my subjectness—as a first person issue and not a third person account—is ‘at stake’. In my work, I have particularly been interested in exploring humanist challenges and post-humanist possibilities for education—and this exploration is ongoing.

4. I am inclined to say that pragmatism—particularly in the work of Dewey and Mead—provides one of the most developed examples of this ‘programme’. This article can therefore also be read as an exploration of the limits of the pragmatic world view and everything that has emerged from this world view, including a theory and practice of education.
5. I raise this issue because, despite its philosophical sophistication, I believe that pragmatism basically starts from an anthropology of human need and, in this regard, retains a technical orientation towards the world, albeit one that is acutely aware of the moral and political challenges of such an orientation.
6. It is, therefore, the manifestation of the ethical event—or to be (much) more precise: the epiphany of the ethical demand—that gives sense to signification. This is discussed in more detail in what follows.
7. It might be interesting to ponder the extent to which teaching can be understood according to Levinas’s conception of liturgy.
8. I take this as a critique of Heidegger’s notion of *aletheia*—truth as unveiling.
9. I do not have the space in this article to engage in detail with the distance between Levinas and Heidegger, but this is one point where this distance appears and where, in my view, Levinas crucially moves beyond Heidegger. Whereas, to put it briefly and crudely, Heidegger and Levinas both see a similar problem with signification—namely that signification is egological, that it is driven by the self and always returns to the self—Heidegger proposes that the alternative to signification is reception, where we receive what speaks to us and care for it, whereas Levinas proposes that the alternative to self-enclosed signification lies in the fact that what speaks to us addresses us, singles us out, and summons a response. Whereas pure receptivity is ultimately criterion-less—it has no criterion to ‘select’ or judge what it should care for—Levinas ‘moves’ us from receptivity to responsibility, where the question for me is not how to receive and hold, but to ask what is being asked from me (with the emphasis, once more, on me in the singular, not on anyone in general). The distance between Heidegger and Levinas is also the reason why, earlier in this article, I identified two different problems with the hermeneutical world view—not only the problem how the world can speak in its own terms, but also how we can be spoken to.
10. It might also be interesting to ponder the extent to which teaching might be seen as a process of awakening.
11. I formulate this as a relatively open question in order to highlight the normative reference point in my discussion. Nonetheless the twentieth century in particular has shown the devastating consequences of totalitarian world views which precisely are not interested in the subjectness of the human being—or reserve the right to subjectness only to a privileged selection.
12. I make the distinction between ‘teaching’ and ‘being taught’ because a difficult but important issue in this discussion has to do with the question whether the teacher has the power to teach or whether the event of being taught should be understood as a gift that neither can be fully given by the teacher nor enforced by the student, but may nonetheless arrive in educational relationships (I discuss this in more detail in Biesta 2013a. I also refer the reader to Zhao (2014) for a probing discussion of these ideas.

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