

Limits and Pitfalls of Freire's Ethic of Solidarity

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In "A Relational Ethic of Solidarity," Frank Margonis revisits the student-teacher relationship and proposes to "argue for the enduring value of solidarity in critical education" while acknowledging that "solidarity" is a "contested concept." His argument is based on Paulo Freire's solidarity as "the defining aspect of a radical education ethic" and on Myle Horton's "one-way" or "asymmetrical solidarity" he places at the heart of "co-intentional education."¹

Margonis recalls that challenges to the concept of "solidarity" are raised on two fronts. On the one hand, Emmanuel Levinas's concept of interpersonal, nonsymmetrical "intersubjective relation" with the Other, at the root of his notion of ethics, offers an ontological and ethical challenge to Freire's "true solidarity." On the other hand, Elizabeth Ellsworth raises political objections to Freire's unrealistic assumptions, stressing the risk teachers run when they forget their original social context and loyalties to better meld in solidarity with their students. She also points out the risk the educational enterprise itself faces when teachers cannot move from "humanitarian" to "humanist" generosity, providing only "the false generosity of paternalism"² and their own political visions. In fact, both Freire and Horton acknowledged their struggle against letting their political concerns get in the way of "receptivity" and of entering "into *communion* with the people."³ Margonis concludes that Freire "was unsuccessful in developing a nontotalizing conception of solidarity."

Consequently, in order to support his argument in favor of the "value of solidarity in critical education," Margonis turns to what he believes is a "more viable version of the ethic of solidarity," the experience of Horton's Highlander Folk School. To have a better sense of Margonis's argument, it is important to keep in mind the Highlander Folk School's history⁴ as well as the conversations between Freire and Horton who shared a dream of human liberation and a commitment to love and justice.⁵ For them, this "absolute commitment" to solidarity finds its expression in both political and educational contexts. However, for Freire, its success "hinges upon the teacher's ability to enact this egalitarian commitment" — obviously a serious source of problems. So is the role of the teacher "helping the students feel at home and comfortable" or monitoring the respect or lack thereof manifested in listening to others' "idiosyncratic statements." Does not this maintain, or establish anew some power hierarchy?

Difficulties also arise when "teaching" and "knowledge" remain evasive notions. For example, Freire writes: "To teach... is the form that knowing takes as the teacher searches for the particular way of teaching that will challenge and call forth in students their own act of knowing."⁶ Another problematic assumption made by both Freire and Horton is that human beings prefer to function in collective settings, in which they are reported to "perform better." Regardless of Lev Vygotsky's

research cited by Margonis, not all humans fare better in collectivities. In fact, in the Highlander Folk School, individualism played an important role in the construction of knowledge, as collective activities were “paired with a profound individualism” in the interaction between the group and the individual whose “judgment was the final authority.”

Margonis indicates that Horton managed to “develop an approach to solidarity” based on “a profound commitment to drawing out the distinctive perspectives of individual students, despite the operations of hierarchical relationships.” This approach was based on an asymmetrical relationship of solidarity in which the students “owed the teachers [nothing],” and on “a Levinasian belief in the asymmetry of ethical relationships.” Before turning to Levinas, and considering how his concepts of ethics and justice can help us understand this “asymmetrical” student-teacher relationship, we must remember that “solidarity” refers to unity based not only on a community of interests, objectives, and standards, but also on *responsibility* to the group or unit and to each individual in it. The interpersonal, intersubjective relationship, through the responsibility and the respect one must develop for the Other as other, is paramount in Levinas’s thought for whom consciousness and moral conscience are developed through the encounter face-to-face with the Other. Levinas considers it as essential and insists on his responsibility for the Other, “without waiting for reciprocity, were I to die for it.”⁷ Hence Margonis’s reference to Levinas in the context of his argument for “the enduring value of solidarity in critical education” and of his discussion on the role of ethics in the student-teacher relationship is not only relevant but quite helpful.

For Levinas, it is before the Other and the face of the Other that the individual can have the pure experience of the other which he sees as one and the same with ethics. According to Levinas, this approach to ethics, this concern for the other-than-I, this non-indifference to the Other constitute the trigger which could release the obstinacy of the individual in his or her perseverance, his or her insistence to be. This obligation to, and responsibility for, the Other is unlimited. Levinas insisted that “[i]n ethics, the Other’s right to exist has primacy over my own.”⁸ It is in this rupture of indifference, this concern for the Other, that ethics emerges that surges the ethical event. This emergence of ethics disrupts, pierces, breaks through the shell of being and essence as “the otherwise than being and beyond essence.” For Levinas, “[t]he forgetting of self moves justice.”⁹

With this concept of dis-interest-edness, parallel to the concepts Freire and Horton advocate, Levinas explores the first level of disruption of being in his move towards justice. Ultimately, he sees “the first question in the inter-human” as the “inevitable” question of justice, when it is necessary to “weigh, think, judge” within a relation of proximity, where everything is owed to *each* and *every* Other, demanding the impossible — “a comparison among incomparables.”¹⁰ Thus the movement from ethics to justice is triggered by the entrance of the third on the scene of the intersubjective relation. Levinas writes: “it is the fact of the multiplicity of men and the presence of someone else next to the Other, which condition the laws and establish justice.”¹¹ This is where Levinas sees “the quest for justice” as going back

to the face of the Other, “the source of my obligation” toward others, the source of responsibility and ethics.¹² For him, it is “[t]hat initial obligation, before the multiplicity of human beings, [which] becomes justice.”¹³ The individual’s choice to acknowledge the Other as other is an ethical decision, and it is this acknowledgement that Levinas calls justice.

In an interview with Raoul Mortley, Levinas declared that “there is a sense in which another is in conflict with my relationship with a third party,” which precludes “liv[ing] in society on the basis of this one-to-one responsibility alone.”¹⁴ Levinas sees there a relationship of “pity” through which “we enter into knowledge, judgment and justice.” Levinas was convinced of the paramount importance of justice and situated it at the core of “first philosophy” — which for him was ethics. He also saw demanding justice for the Other as a return to a profound morality which defies ideology.

Margonis’s reflection on the difficulties inherent in establishing a student-teacher relationship based on solidarity points to the shortcomings of Freire’s concept of “radical educational ethic.” Intent on supporting “the enduring value of solidarity in critical education,” Margonis moves through Ellsworth and Levinas to point to Horton’s Highlander Folk School efforts as a “more viable version of the ethic of solidarity,” based on Levinas’s understanding of our asymmetrical relation of responsibility to the Other. Levinas’s vision is deemed too idealistic by many,¹⁵ but only if one tries to read prescriptive directions in it, rather than what Freire describes as “‘a way towards’ something apart from itself outside itself, which surrounds it and which it apprehends by means of its ideational capacity. Consciousness is thus by definition a method, in the most general sense of the word.”¹⁶

1. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Ramos (New York: Continuum, 1993), 18.

2. *Ibid.*, 8.

3. *Ibid.*, 13 (emphasis in original).

4. Angela Smith, *Myles Horton, Highlander Folk School, and the Wider Coal Strike of 1932* (2003), http://www.highlandercenter.org/pdf-files/wilder_horton.pdf.

5. Myles Horton and Paulo Freire, *We Make the Road by Walking* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990).

6. Paulo Freire “Letter to North American Teachers,” in *Freire for the Classroom*, ed. Ira Shor (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1987), 213.

7. Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University, 1985), 98.

8. Richard A. Cohen, *Face to Face with Levinas* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1986), 24.

9. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond the Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1999), 159.

10. Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, trans. Michael B. Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 142.

11. Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 89 (gender use in original).

12. Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, 170.

13. Ibid., 175–6.

14. Levinas, in Raoul Motley, *Conversation* (London: Routledge, 1991), 11–23 and 18.

15. See Denise Egéa-Kuehne, “Levinas’s Ideal of Justice and Education” (paper presented at the conference of the International Society for the Study of European Ideas, Msida, Malta, 2006).

16. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 18.