

Ethics, Justice, Prophecy: Cultivating Civic Virtue from a Levinasian Perspective

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Trent Davis's fine analysis does not yet give a complete Levinasian basis for teachers to cultivate in students a democratic pathos. At the level of ethics Emmanuel Levinas's approach is radically first-person, one in which I become aware of the depth of my responsibility for the Other. Here the Other is not an alter ego who has a similar subjectivity (and responsibility); the Other's responsibility is none of my business. If ethics were all there is in Levinas's thought, then all I as a teacher can do is attempt to discharge *my* inescapable responsibility to the Other. I cannot burden my students with this or cultivate responsibility in them. We need something more from Levinas to make this possible.

Levinas scholar Jeff Dudiak is helpful here. He argues for understanding Levinas via three distinct yet interrelated ideas: "ethics, wherein I am alone and irremissibly responsible for the other; justice, wherein my absolute responsibility to the other is transformed into a concern for all (including myself) in society; and prophecy, wherein I appeal to the goodness of the other."¹ Although Davis has admirably outlined the first element, we also need the other two for cultivating civic virtue.

First, Levinas's idea of justice, which he introduces via the idea of the third: "The third party is other than the neighbor, but also another neighbor, and also a neighbor of the other, and not simply his fellow." This complicates the relation with the Other, because this relation is always already in the context of third parties — it is not as if at first there were only myself and the Other, and then later some others. From the beginning my infinite responsibility to the Other is compounded by the presence of the third party, who also calls for my undivided infinite responsibility. But this means that my responsibility to the Other is put into question, becoming a problem to me. The two (and more) neighbors are contemporaries, competing for my infinite responsibility. I need to draw back to figure out how to divide my responsibility fairly between the two neighbors, something that requires an act of reflective consciousness. The possibility for conscious thought thus arises from the problem of how to limit my responsibility to the Other precisely because of my responsibility to the third party. But to divide my responsibility fairly is a question of justice. Justice, distributing fairly and deliberately my infinite responsibility among two and more neighbors, is occasioned by the presence of the third and can arise only via comparison of incomparables.²

But there's more. Levinas says that the relation between my two neighbors, the Other and the second neighbor, might also be one of neighborliness. The third party might well also be a neighbor for the Other. The Other, to whom I have infinite responsibility, might her/himself also have infinite responsibility to the third party.

Levinas is cautious: it really is not my business whether the Other has infinite responsibility for the third party, as I do. However, it turns out that the Other, my neighbor, does show responsibility toward the third.

This comes to me indirectly, through the Other's entreating me to join her/him in being responsible for the third. In doing so, the goodness of the Other is revealed.³ Because I cannot demand this responsibility, the Other's responsibility shows up as something beyond duty, as grace. The Other's taking up responsibility for the third party, although asymmetric like my own, is goodness.⁴ It turns out that I too am included in this network of responsibility, although I have no right to expect this. Thus "it is only thanks to God," namely, through the goodness of the Other, that I too am approached as an Other, where others take responsibility for me.⁵

This sets the stage for the third element of Dudiak's analysis, prophecy. The Other, in calling me to join her/him for service to the third, issues a command; Levinas says, "this command commands me to command."⁶ Dudiak argues that this command coming from the Other "commands me to speak up, and even to speak out against him, in the name of the good, for the sake of the other, his other, including me."⁷ Prophecy is speaking up that is aimed at the Other(s) about responsibility, calling them to responsibility by appealing to goodness. Prophecy is possible precisely because the Other has already shown her/himself to be responsible to the third party. To prophecy is thus to appeal to the already present, self-revealed responsibility of the Other to the third party. What makes it possible for me to prophecy is that I have been commanded to command.⁸ Via the self-revelation of the Other's goodness, I am compelled to prophecy to the Other by appealing to that goodness as responsibility for the third party. But, it must be added, it is only an appeal. Ultimately, what the Other does with her responsibility is not of my concern. I cannot insist that the Other act responsibly towards the third.

Bettina Bergo points out that for Levinas "the community is instituted by prophetic language."⁹ Prophetic discourse makes explicit the relationality of the irreducible plurality of Others via the command to speak up for goodness. Community is formed through calling attention to the dynamic asymmetries of goodness that flow between others by grace. The prophetic can be seen as calling attention to responsibility in the name of justice, where "the concern for justice... is the spirit of society."¹⁰ Justice is the spirit that animates the organizational structures, practices, and institutionalizations of society, as community. The spirit that founds social formation as a community is the distribution of responsibility across the array of others. We might view prophecy then as interrupting the organization of society based on self-interested agency with an appeal to goodness, marked as responsibility to the third parties. That is, precisely because of the presence of the third party, justice requires prophecy, as explicit appeals that universalize responsibility.

We can now return to Davis's idea of cultivating a democratic pathos in the classroom. In my relation to any particular student as Other, all the other students are already present. In my infinite responsibility to any one of them as Other, the third party already appears, and my responsibility must be divided among them — justice

must be done. But it also means that, by grace, the Other's responsibility to third parties also already shows through. And further, there is no limit on the third party, thus including those out in the street, and even far away. Each human is an/other other to which the Other is already also responsible. This network of responsibility requires not only deliberation and thought but also prophecy about how to institute practices and structures that will facilitate the possibilities of exercising those existing responsibilities.

Civic education might well involve such deliberations, animated by the asymmetric ethical relation of responsibility, albeit via justice and prophecy. The presence of the third means that the student as Other not only engages my services in doing good to her/him, but also commands me to command. Each other in my classroom commands me as teacher to prophecy, namely, to speak up on behalf of goodness, and even to speak out against the Other, in the name of the good, for the sake of the other others. Thus, what Davis calls the teacher's task of cultivating a democratic pathos can be thought of as a command from the student(s) as Other(s) to speak up on behalf of goodness, even if it would mean to speak up against the student as *conatus essendi* interested only in maintaining her/his own place in the sun. This might show up as a primordial interruption of liberal democracy, disrupting the political structure organized around the order of competing egos with the possibility of a just political structure, animated by the spirit of responsibility.¹¹ Teaching civics might mean making visible, in the political, "a certain goodness, whose fragility is such that it does not survive thematization, [but yet] flashes through social interaction at times."¹²

But if this were the basis for cultivating civic virtues, then a different list of excellences might emerge. Not self-efficacy and self-initiative, or tolerance and patriotism, but concerns for human rights of the Other, actions for justice in solidarity with others far away, or a refusal to accept the status quo as final justice — in short, virtues clustering around the struggle to live justly, appealing to the importance of "small goodness, the goodness of everyday life and everyday people, and thus the goodness without witness, escaping every ideology."¹³ This would mean justice as a trace of goodness that animates how we might live among our neighbors, structured into the very fabric of society,¹⁴ prophecy as the appeal that keeps goodness visible, and teaching civic virtue as prophetic appeal.

1. Jeffrey Dudiak, *The Intrigue of Ethics: A Reading of the Idea of Discourse in the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), 325.

2. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1981), 157–8.

3. Dudiak, *Intrigue of Ethics*, 330. See Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 213.

4. *Ibid.*, 330.

5. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, 188.

6. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 213.

7. Dudiak, *Intrigue of Ethics*, 331.

8. Ibid.
9. Bettina Bergo, *Levinas Between Ethics and Politics: For the Beauty that Adorns the Earth* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 2003), 250.
10. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, 160.
11. Bergo, *Levinas Between Ethics and Politics*, 253.
12. Ibid., 257.
13. Roger Burggraeve, *The Wisdom of Love in the Service of Love: Emmanuel Levinas on Justice, Peace, and Human Rights* (Milwaukee, Wisc.: Marquette University Press, 2002), 175.
14. Bergo, *Levinas Between Ethics and Politics*, 253.