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A FINE RISK TO BE RUN?  
THE AMBIGUITY OF EROS AND TEACHER RESPONSIBILITY

**ABSTRACT.** Teachers are often placed in a space of tension between responding to students as persons and responding to students through their institutionally-defined roles. Particularly with respect to eros, which has become increasingly the subject of strict institutional legislation and regulation, teachers have little recourse to a language of responsibility outside an institutional frame. By studying the significance of communicative ambiguity for responsibility, this paper explores what is ethically at stake for teachers in erotic forms of communication. Specifically, it is Levinas's own ambiguous understanding of the ethical significance of eros, and what we have to learn from it, that offers a way of reading the place of eros in responsibility. I conclude my discussion with some thoughts on what a renewed understanding of responsibility might mean at the personal and institutional levels.

**KEY WORDS:** ambiguity, communication, eros, institutions, Levinas, responsibility, teaching

*Communication with the other can be transcendent only  
as a dangerous life, a fine risk to be run.*

Emmanuel Levinas – *Otherwise Than Being Or Beyond  
Essence*

The idea that eros might constitute part of an ethical response toward an other is of utmost concern in developing a notion of teacher responsibility, one that can be attentive to the dilemmas facing teachers around questions of intimacy, closeness and physical contact with their students. This is particularly so when one considers the climate of moral panic that surrounds touching and displays of affection, to say nothing of sexual relationships, between teachers and students in North America today.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> I am thinking particularly here of the increasing numbers of policies being put in place which attempt to limit severely physical contact between teachers and students, and the attitudes toward human love and sexuality they both reflect and create. It is not, of course, that policies ought not to be developed to ensure that there are guidelines and procedures in place to prevent and deal with abuse. However, my concern is that such policies (including rigid no-touch and sexual harassment policies) create an excessive atmosphere of fear and mask the nature of responsibility, reducing the latter to a set of rule-bound behaviours divorced from the actual encounter with another person. Indeed, the idea for this paper originated out of a set of concerns raised by students I teach who are



Such a climate often leaves teachers little room for contemplating their responsibility in ways that recognise their own attentiveness and responsiveness to students in the form of love and physical contact, on the one hand, without becoming mired in institutionally-defined conceptions of responsibility that rely on obedience to strict codes of behaviour, on the other. That is, teachers are placed in a seemingly untenable situation with respect to erotic forms of communication so long as institutions attempt to regulate their behaviour so severely and to codify eros so rigidly.<sup>2</sup> My concern in this paper is to offer a way of thinking about responsibility that helps navigate through the tension of what it means to live ethically within institutions with respect to eros.

To do this requires, it seems to me, a deposition of eros as a stable category. Here I turn to the work of Emmanuel Levinas whose view of eros as an *ambiguous* communicative practice opens up a way for moving beyond rigid codifications of eros that impoverish teachers' working relations. And this is particularly the case since he views communicative ambiguity as itself central to an ethics of responsibility. More importantly, however, I find Levinas's discussions on eros to be especially instructive in that they themselves display a certain ambiguity. That is, taken as a whole, Levinas's work is undecided about the ethical significance of eros, and his discussions I think are helpful for probing the limits and possibilities of eros for teacher responsibility. In what follows, I first elaborate on the importance of communicative ambiguity for ethical responsibility and then offer a close reading of Levinas's own ambiguous position with respect to eros. In doing so, I seek not to simply *learn about* what Levinas writes on eros and responsibility in order to apply it to, or impose it on, education. In that it asks us to attend to the concrete communicative practices through which responsibility emerges, as opposed to offering prescriptions of what those practices ought to look like, the very nature of Levinas's work refuses such application. Instead, *learning from* Levinas gives us a way of reading concrete relations between teachers and students as the basis for responsibility. By way of conclusion, I discuss how actual communicative relations give definition and substance to teacher responsibility as a lived practice and consider what implications this has for educational institutions themselves.

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confronting, with despair and exasperation, the disciplining effects such policies have on their sense of responsibility.

<sup>2</sup> For critical discussions that take issue with the debasement of eros and the erotic in education, see, for example, Alston (1991), Gallop (1997, 1999), Johnson (1997), McWilliam (1997), Pellegrini (1999), Phelan (1997), and Silin (1995).

## THE FINE RISK OF COMMUNICATIVE AMBIGUITY

Both his attention to alterity and the essentially ambiguous nature of communication lead Levinas away from a simple humanism whereby the 'inter-human' is a relation between already complete subjects who follow certain rules of engagement in order to be responsible. The Levinasian emphasis on communication instead means that subjectivity and responsibility reveal themselves only in relation to an other and therefore emerge from a signifying encounter with absolute difference that cannot be predicted beforehand. That is, what counts as ethical in Levinas's thought is not encapsulated within rule-governed behaviours, ethical codes, or moral precepts that can be secured through stable significations. Rather, the ethical lies within the very ambiguity of communication, within that which slips our cognitive grasp and possession. Ambiguity is not so much a matter of misunderstanding what is being said (or expressed) as it is a matter of the impossibility of ever knowing the other through these significations. For Levinas, communication is inherently ambiguous because it gestures beyond any stable meaning toward the very otherness of the other that marks her as radically distinct from myself. And it is this relation to the other as one of unknowability where the ethical promise – and risk – of ambiguity lies.

To return to the quote that opened this paper, Levinas does not call upon us to take any risk, but to take a fine one, to place our selves in danger when we communicate. Indeed, what could be more dangerous for teachers than the risk of eros? But is eros a *fine* risk? Are sensuality, passion and love qualities of the transcendent communication that Levinas calls for? And how would such fine risk, understood as transcendence, be deemed ethically significant in the context of teaching within institutions?

The key word for me is fine. Although Levinas notes that "the word 'fine' has not been thought about enough" (Levinas, 1998b, p. 120), he nonetheless offers some guidance. For Levinas, a *fine* risk would run the danger of communicative ambiguity, the fineness to be found in the approach to the other that necessarily lies behind the communication: "Communication is an adventure of a subjectivity, different from that which is dominated by the concern to recover itself . . . it will involve uncertainty" (1998b, p. 120). A *fine* risk is equated with leading a life that ventures forth into an unknown (and unknowable) encounter with an other. What makes a risk fine has to do with a relationship in which the self seeks a radical openness toward the other and is susceptible to being moved by the approach of the other.

But *fineness* of risk also seems to suggest that there is a fragility, a delicacy in the openness, as if the relationship were somehow vulnerable to attack and violence and consequently needed to be protected from harm. Levinas writes, “these words [fine risk] take on their strong sense when, instead of *only designating the lack of certainty*, they express the *gratuity of sacrifice*” (1998b, p. 120 – emphasis added). Levinas is suggesting here that openness in communication is sacrificial in nature, that the self offers itself for the other in a spontaneous gesture of generosity that is not self-interested, but is only for the other. In taking a fine risk when the other approaches, the self is held in an obligation that is marked both by the ambiguity of communication – the communication that signifies the approach of the other – and a sacrifice – an offering up of oneself for the other. For Levinas, sacrifice is understood as a responsibility for the approach of the other (1998b, p. 120); significantly, the subject in communication is *already* a responsible subject. The fineness of risk, then, has to do with the responsibility inherent in the communicative ambiguity between self and other. This means that responsibility views communication neither as reciprocal nor dialogic in character, nor is it a form of speech amongst equal subjects. Rather, responsibility involves a radical openness in communication and an attending to the (unknowable) particularity of the other that lies behind the words spoken, the deeds committed. In short, responsibility involves transcending what is manifest in speech or gesture. It is in this sense that transcendence is ethically significant: “there is in the transcendence involved in language a relationship that is not empirical speech, but responsibility” (1998b, p. 120). Since responsibility is a gift born out of the communicative ambiguity between self and other, then taking a fine risk means opening oneself up to that very ambiguity which makes each one of us responsible.

Yet, it is precisely in this very communicative ambiguity where the problem of eros and teaching lies. The extreme censoring of bodily affection in schools reveals an incapacity to tolerate any ambiguity associated with such erotic communication. In the rush to prohibit physical contact, it is the very openness and uncertainty of interpersonal communication that is seen to be in violation of professional standards of conduct, which are by definition knowable, certain, and unambiguous in informing us about how teachers ought to behave. In opening up the possibility that the very ambiguity of communication allows for each one of us to exceed ourselves, to work across our differences, to become moved by and learn from others, Levinas intimates that responsibility is itself caught up in the very ambiguities that are all too often erased in the name of such ethical codes. This

means, then, that such codes often work to undermine the very thing they are trying to insure.

In undermining the responsibility initially born out of the interpersonal communication, institutional codes also serve to define erotic communication as “pedagogical excess,” to borrow Jane Gallop’s (1999) words; that is, eros becomes a communication that ‘inappropriately’ oversteps the bounds of how institutions define the pedagogical roles and responsibilities for members of their communities. These normative roles make it appear that teachers and students do not regularly participate in an economy of erotic affect. As both Gallop and Levinas make clear, however, the quality of human relationality is not reducible to the roles of those involved. Institutions generally proscribe certain *types* of relations rather than certain *qualities* of relations, which means that eros becomes problematic for teachers and students. Moreover, the focus on types of relations suggests that institutions are concerned with defining certain *types* of communication, rather than with exploring the *quality* of communication. The very ambiguity, the very tentativeness of the communication across the gulf that separates self and other is not considered. In other words, regulations are not instituted in ways that acknowledge communicative ambiguity, nor the transcendent quality of communicative openness. Instead, institutions are concerned solely with the content of what persons say and do, not with the quality of relationality these utterances and deeds help create and sustain. Thus, for example, the love affair between teacher and student (and I am speaking of consenting adults here) is only ever judged in terms of how one type of relation (love) excludes and contradicts another (teaching-learning). If we shift our attention instead to the quality of the teacher-student relation, then the question becomes to what extent does this love compromise or enhance the teacher and student as persons? And with respect to teachers’ unique positions within institutions vis-à-vis students, how might this love be construed as something other than a simple violation of professional obligations?

As we have seen, it is the quality of the interpersonal relation that marks the beginning of responsibility. Insofar as erotic communication exists in pedagogical contexts, it seems to me that one way of living well within the ambiguities of the institution is to reconfigure the relationship between the personal and the institutional, not so as to eradicate the tensions, but so as to acknowledge the ethical significance of the quality of human contact which necessarily involves a little risk-taking. For it is through the possibility of a fine risk that responsibility can be recentred in educational institutions. The question remains, however, to what degree does eros participate in the fine risk necessary to responsibility? If responsibility

entails a radical openness to communicative ambiguity that is nothing short of transcendent, to what degree can we say that eros is involved in such transcendence?

### DOING THINGS WITH EROS: LEVINASIAN AMBIGUITY

Levinas's thinking on eros reveals a gradual transformation of eros from a quality of transcendence to one of non-transcendence. In examining what is ethically at stake in eros, it is important to explore this transformation and to consider the shifts in Levinas's view to see what questions they raise about the place of eros in teacher responsibility.

#### A. *Eros's Ethical Potential*

In *Time and the Other*, Levinas invites a consideration of eros that takes on the characteristics of what he later defines as the ethical, that is, the relation to the alterity of the other, to the transcendent "mystery" of the other. He writes,

It is only by showing in what way eros differs from possession and power that I can acknowledge a communication in eros. It is neither a struggle, nor a fusion, nor a knowledge. One must recognize its exceptional place among relationships. It is a relationship with alterity, with mystery – that is to say, with the future, with what (in a world where there is everything) is never there, with what cannot be there, but with the very dimensions of alterity (1987, p. 88).

As an exceptional relationship, eros is not purely self-interested, nor does it assume a form with the other based on "grasping," "possessing," and "knowing." "But there is nothing of all this, or the failure of all this, in eros. If one could possess, grasp, and know the other, it would not be other. Possessing, knowing, and grasping are synonyms of power" (1987, p. 90). Clearly, then, the erotic relation is not a power relation; in fact, Levinas claims that power is precisely not a definitive feature of erotic life.<sup>3</sup> For Levinas, love is not fusional, it does not seek a unity between two. Eros is only possible as a relation because there are two. For example, voluptuousness is not a pleasure like other pleasures for it is not solitary (1987, p. 89), but always involves an other. Love engenders a pathos precisely because it

<sup>3</sup> In claiming that power is not a feature of erotic life, I am not suggesting that sexual relations as practiced never take part in power relations (sado-masochistic practices are an obvious example). However, I understand Levinas as trying to peel back the layers of sensibility that contribute to erotic forms of communication. In this sense, a reaching out toward another cannot be encapsulated within a sociological understanding of power.

“consists in an insurmountable duality of beings. It is a relationship with what always slips away” (1987, p. 86).

This slipping away which is part of the communication of eros is suggestive of the very ambiguity of love, for, like the caress, love cannot know what it seeks. It is not a conscious intention, but an anticipation of the future. In this regard, then, given what Levinas later expresses as the fineness of risk out of which responsibility is born, such an anticipatory state suggests that eros is very much a part of an ethical project of transcendence. Indeed, in the final paragraphs of *Time and the Other*, Levinas says as much: “It [temporal transcendence] is the face-to-face without intermediary, and is furnished for us in the eros where, in the other’s proximity, distance is integrally maintained, and whose pathos is made of both this proximity and this duality” (1987, p. 94). However, there is a curious turn of events in Levinas’s thinking.

### B. *Calling Eros into Question*

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas develops further his views of love and eros, and in particular elaborates on his conception of the feminine as “the contrariety that permits its [the relation’s] terms to remain absolutely other” (1987, p. 85). This conception of the feminine, while originating in *Time and the Other*, becomes intricately related to Levinas’s move to locate ethics outside the erotic sphere. Thus while the *quality* of human relationality in an erotic relation would appear to be ethically significant in *Time and the Other*, by *Totality and Infinity* the erotic relation is of a *type* that falls short of Levinas’s ethical stance with regard to the face. This is due, in part, to how Levinas understands the feminine as a non-transcendent term. Yet, his views on the matter are rather perplexing.

In an interview entitled “Philosophy, Justice, and Love,” Levinas responds to a question on the difference between Agape and Eros. His response betrays a profound ambiguity at the heart of his thinking on eros and the feminine:

*I am definitely not a Freudian; consequently I don’t think that Agape comes from Eros. But I don’t deny that sexuality is also an important philosophical problem; the meaning of the division of the human into man and woman is not reduced to a biological problem. I used to think that otherness began in the feminine. That is, in fact, a very strange otherness . . . I can say no more about it now; I think in any case that Eros is definitely not Agape, that Agape is neither a derivative nor the extinction of love-Eros. Before Eros there was the Face; Eros itself is possible only between faces. The problem of Eros is philosophical and concerns otherness. Thirty years ago I wrote a book called *Le temps et l’autre* [*Time and the Other*] – in which I thought that the feminine was otherness itself; and I do not retract that, but I have never been a Freudian (1998a, p. 113 – emphasis added).*

Literally framed within his declarations of “not being a Freudian,” Levinas asserts that he *used to* think (as if he does no longer) that the feminine was the locus of otherness, an idea which he nonetheless cannot bring himself to retract. This non-retractable statement is what leads him, in my view, to abandon eros as an ethical possibility: eros had been very much part of the face-to-face relation in *Time and the Other*, but is in his later works allocated to secondary status – as he says in this interview, “before Eros there was the Face.” Taking on primary rather than parallel significance, the face signals the possibility of transcendence in a way that eros, as it is always bound to the feminine, can never fully achieve.

However, Levinas is at pains to do something with eros, since his previous work suggests that eros itself participates in the same quality of relationship that he attributes to the face-to-face relation: that is, it has the capacity both to participate in the ambiguity that defines transcendence *and* to respect and maintain the absolute duality of the persons involved. What Levinas begins to work out more thoroughly here is his earlier views on fecundity and filiality. The possibility of transcendence for eros is now seen in terms of the fruit it bears, namely the child it issues forth, and its relation to paternity.<sup>4</sup> For Levinas, while it was the ambiguity of the erotic communication which suggested (if not assured) a reaching toward the future, a sacrifice of oneself for the other, here it is replaced by a paternal relation that erases the presence of the feminine.

In yet another way, Levinas reworks his concept of eros as a self-interested pleasure – and here he begins to look very much like a Freudian. In *Totality and Infinity*, it is only through the face-to-face relation, and not eros, that the alterity of the other can be maintained. His new formulation depends upon seeing eros as an impulse aimed toward pleasure for the self, marking a return to the self, a return which he expressly says is not part of eros in *Time and the Other*. Now the ambiguity of love has to do with the pleasure the self receives from the other – which cannot, therefore, assume ethical relevance. Consider the radical distance from *Time and the Other*:

If to love is to love the love the Beloved bears me, to love is also to love oneself in love, and thus to return to oneself. Love does not transcend unequivocally – it is complacent . . . (1969, p. 266).

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<sup>4</sup> The specifically heterosexual character of eros hails from both *Time and the Other* and *Totality and Infinity*, and its patriarchal connotations are sustained by Levinas’s attachment of the feminine to otherness. With respect to paternity, Levinas writes: “Paternity is a relation with a stranger who while being Other . . . is me, a relation of the I with a self which yet is not me . . . . In this transcendence the I is not swept away, since the son is not me; and yet I *am* my son” (Levinas, 1969, p. 277).



Levinas is himself unequivocal in suggesting that there is little hope here for ethics in the complacent shadow of love.

### C. *Eros and Proximity*

A further shift occurs in Levinas's thinking in *Otherwise than Being*, where it is not simply the feminine that is given up, but eros itself. No longer seeking to ascribe status (secondary or otherwise) to eros, Levinas begins to reformulate his concepts of erotic communication into less carnal forms of ethical relationality. In *Otherwise than Being*, the language of the text remains laden with erotic imagery, but the erotic relation itself no longer carries any ethical significance.

Levinas here focuses on the radical openness and passivity that mark the ethical relation and seeks to develop ethics as the metaphysical condition of subjectivity itself. Tracing this condition back to a pre-originary layer of sensibility, Levinas views closeness, vulnerability, and suffering as closely linked to the possibility of responsibility for the other. Yet, rather than returning to eros, Levinas now posits proximity as that 'special relationship' once occupied by eros, which is not merely a type of communication, but is in fact that which makes communication possible. He writes,

Saying states and thematizes the said, but signifies it to the other, a neighbor, with a signification that has to be distinguished from that borne by words in the said. This signification to the other occurs in proximity. Proximity is quite distinct from every other relationship, and has to be conceived as a responsibility for the other; it might be called humanity, or subjectivity, or self (1998b, p. 46).

As a signification prior to all significations, proximity to the other is located not in the words uttered or deeds committed, but in the realm of sensibility that is not touched by consciousness, intention, or knowledge. "Proximity, which should be the signification of the sensible, does not belong to the movement of cognition" (1998b, p. 63); instead, "the signification proper to the sensible has to be described in terms of enjoyment and wounding, which are, we will see, the terms of proximity" (1998b, pp. 62–63).

Proximity, then, is possible because "subjectivity is sensibility," because the "subject is of flesh and blood" (1998b, p. 77), and not because it thinks or speaks. Indeed, Levinas is adamant about what we might call the 'erotic' character of sensibility, claiming that "as soon as sensibility falls back into contact, it reverts from grasping to being grasped, like in the ambiguity of the kiss" (1998b, p. 75). Proximity in this regard is not a self-interested pleasure but a space/time of communication between two where the approach of the other signals the beginning of subjectivity itself.

It is not, then, that two subjectivities participate in proximity, as if each one decides to become closer to the other; rather proximity is prior to subjectivity itself, inaugurating its very possibility through difference.

The sensibility and physical contact of which Levinas writes would seem to suggest a return to eros; yet, while metaphorically Levinas is still very much committed to the caress, the kiss, the touch, they only serve now to illustrate the metaphysical themes of exposedness, vulnerability, passivity and openness that characterise proximity and responsibility. Eros, as Tina Chanter (1995) points out, now relies on signification already being in place: "There can only be non-signification [for eros] because signification already exists, or because the order of meaning is already established. In this sense, eros is always consequent upon ethics" (p. 206). In other words, rather than being a quality of communication, it is now assuredly a type. That is, like the face in *Totality and Infinity*, proximity comes before eros, even as it is described by Levinas through erotic metaphor. Now, transcendence through communicative ambiguity, the essence of a fine risk, is firmly and securely placed inside an ethical sphere which excludes the erotic.

#### LEARNING FROM LEVINAS: RETHINKING TEACHER RESPONSIBILITY, AMBIGUITY AND THE INSTITUTION

In terms of working our way through the ambiguities of teaching in institutions, the shifts in Levinas's thinking begs the question, which Levinas do we listen to? The one that views eros as potentially transcendent? The one that claims that eros, by virtue of its relation to the feminine, comes up short of transcendence? The one that views eros as ethically insignificant? My unsatisfactory answer must be none, or at least none exclusively. For it is precisely the placing of eros under the sign of ambiguity that is important for staking out responsibility in the context of teaching in institutions.

What I have been arguing here is the need to listen not only to what Levinas has said, but to how he says it: the deflections, omissions, repetitions, and repositionings that comprise, in part, the communicative ambiguity of which he so eloquently writes. With respect to eros, then, Levinas can help us think about the ways in which sexuality, love, and passion are always open-ended communications, that in and of themselves may or may not 'be' ethical – and, moreover, challenges the notion that any *type* of communication in and of itself can ever 'be' ethical to begin with. For it is exactly at the point where Levinas renounces eros as a quality of human relationality, as part of the face-to-face relation with which he begins his ethical journey, and turns toward a thematisation of eros as a

*type* of relation that eros slips its ethical moorings, and becomes something other than transcendent communication.

In focusing on the quality of human relations, rather than type, I do not wish to suggest that all manifestations of eros, or even some of them, including sex between teachers and students, are necessarily ethical or not. Rather, Levinas teaches us how to think about student and teacher relationality as a form of communication that cannot know beforehand its own ethical significance. In riding the rift between the personal and the institutional, for teachers in particular, there is potential for taking the fine risk of eros and for charting alternative courses for institutions themselves, both of which are interdependent to a large degree.

First, in considering the ethical aspects of eros in the person-to-person relation, what becomes central is to understand responsibility as that which emerges from an act of communication. In this sense, erotic expressions as communicative relations are fundamentally intertwined with the possibility of responsibility right from the start. What is important to attend to, of course, in this responsibility for the other, is the alterity of the person for whom one signifies. On a simple level this means refraining from reading or interpreting students' responses as all of a kind, as purely symptomatic of themes we can pull from our arsenal of knowledge, as though the meaning we exercise upon them is all there is to the story. Rather, remaining open to otherness is to sustain a relation to mystery that exceeds the bounds of our understanding. Insofar as it is a quality of relationality, eros holds hands with our capacity to listen and to be moved by the other without thinking we have to possess or know her. This requires, as we have seen, an element of sacrifice in giving up the certainty of our position as teacher (the all-knowing subject) and in moving toward the other in a loving gesture or embrace; and such sacrifice is frequently evident when teachers respond to students with love and physical closeness in the face of institutional pressures to act otherwise. Eros, as it participates in responsibility, may certainly be a source of pleasure for teachers, but in its ethical possibility, it is not driven by what it can return; rather, what makes it a responsible response is its openness to an unanticipatable future, where its signifyingness remains open-ended to the other's predicament, as both a student and a person. Thus, when I show love, generosity and affection, I do so to ensure that further openness and communication are possible, and that the other is given the space and time to become themselves responsive/responsible subjects. This means allowing students the opportunity to respond to eros in ways that make sense to them, which is not to say they necessarily reciprocate. Eros in this view is not a shutting down of communicative opportunities, but can, in its very ambiguity, allow

for further communication to take place. This is why eros, insofar as it can be a responsible response, cannot be purely self-interested, for then it would become a project of fulfilment, a telos, rather than a project of possibility, of surprise. This communicative understanding of eros gives, I think, teachers a beginning point to think through their responsibilities to their students as something more than embodied performances of a sterile script. It allows them to ask questions of their relationality and their responsiveness in a way that understands responsibility as something deeply connected to giving birth to signification. Moreover, it gives them a language for defending their actions against what at times appear as the impervious demands of the institution.

Second, in relation to institutions, it would seem on the surface that Levinas's eventual insistence on the non-ethical aspects of eros would support the de-eroticisation of institutional life, at least insofar as that life ought to promote conditions of responsibility. However, his staking out of the feminine as a diminished position in order to render eros problematic with respect to responsibility, allows us a perspective from which to question what it is that is being rejected when institutions sanitise teaching of all erotic possibility. I think that Levinas's disparagement of the feminine, his collapsing of the feminine into a carnality (a non-transcendence) that is unambiguous in its aim toward unity with the other, helps us to read the ways institutions often make a similar move in erasing the feminine from having any connection to responsibility (which is a transcendent term). Positioning expressions of eros as a series of behaviours to be avoided, leave, as Irigaray (1991) writes, "women without her own specific face" (p. 113) that is, without the capacity to be responsible for others in the sphere of the erotic. With respect to teachers, this collapse of the feminine with an eros that cannot be transcendent, and therefore responsible, affects both men and women alike, even if not equally. Teachers are caught within institutional assumptions of responsibility that are often undergirded by an image of teacher as predator (whereby female students in particular are perceived as victims) or as mother (whereby love and passion are enveloped within an image of safety as opposed to risk). Ironically, perhaps, alloying femininity to transcendence – and therefore responsibility – would enable a more careful rendering of eros that would pay attention to how both men and women (both students and teachers) are not always simply defined by patriarchal power relations, but may be exploring, however tentatively, relations that defy that power. Although abuses of eros can be facilitated by patriarchal attitudes, I think to read all eros as potentially abusive does little to alter those relations. Rather, understanding femininity as having a responsible relation to eros perhaps offers a better challenge

precisely because it calls attention to the quality of relationality where both women and men are responsible subjects and not merely perpetrators, victims or mothers. Although for men, particularly those who are teachers of young children, it might appear that connecting eros to femininity is precisely what is already in place and therefore least desired. I would argue, however, that current patriarchal and heteronormative prescriptions of male expressions of eros function in conjunction with a disparagement of the feminine. To be clear, I am not saying that eros should be seen as feminine, but that the feminine should be seen as having a responsible relation to eros. This would secure, it seems to me, a vision of eros as a quality of relationality that exceeds the bounds of any codification of it into a type, and thus would avoid a view of male affection as either emblematic of molester or ersatz-mother. Thus keeping femininity outside the ethical sphere short-changes the way both male and female teachers are inscribed within institutional codes of responsibility.

In my view, institutions cannot secure and implement rules that seek to erase communicative ambiguity by insisting that erotic relations are all of a type. Instead, it is precisely the quality of the relation that matters for the possibility of responsibility itself. In rethinking the institution, which is, of course, no small task and not one I can take on here, the difficulty lies in how to institute rules that serve to nourish both interpersonal communication and the community at the large. Eros, even when taken in its narrowest sense of sex, might still, I believe, constitute an unintentional reaching out to an other that is the very marker of responsibility. This is not meant to suggest that only eros can 'produce' ethical moments, merely that ethical moments potentially lie in all forms of communication which are open, ambiguous and maintain the alterity of the other. Viewing eros in this way, then, requires a new understanding of what ethical codes and rules of conduct for teachers look like. Performing as they do in ambiguous spaces, such rules are never fully adequate to addressing the fragility of communication between subjects, and perhaps need to be formulated in such a way as to call themselves into question, to be themselves ambiguous enough to ensure that the quality of relationships becomes their *raison d'être*. Thus rather than appear as a series of injunctions, institutions might develop protocols based on a series of questions that help teachers think about the quality of their relationships to students. By focussing on quality, rather than type, institutional rules are then able to ask if certain relationships may be harmful or maleficent. This requires, I think, a new way of writing policies that acknowledges the inescapable ambiguity of eros, and communication more generally, rather than seeing eros as a fixed relation in which affection, desire and physical contact are often erased in the name

of professional responsibility. I do not think that we need to sacrifice eros in our institutions in order to live well and responsibly – and responsively – within them. To do so would be, in my view, to turn our backs on that “ethical adventure of the relationship to the other person” (Levinas, 1987, p. 33) that makes our lives worth living, both within and outside institutions themselves. For eros is not *necessarily* a fine risk, but it can be.

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