The Fertility of Dialogue: Levinas and Plato on Education

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In the summary of *Totality and Infinity* published in 1961 in the *Annales de l’Université de Paris*, Emmanuel Levinas offers a brief yet surprisingly comprehensive summary of the work, which served as the thesis for his *Doctorat ès Lettres*. The summary ends with the claim that the work must be read as “a return to Platonism” (Peperzak 121). As a number of recent works concerned with Levinas’s relationship to Plato have acknowledged, however, Levinas’s retrieval of Platonic thought is ambiguous. While Plato’s conception of a “Good beyond Being” orients Levinas’s project, Plato is also a paradigmatic figure of what Levinas refers to as “Western” thought, of which he is profoundly critical. This ambiguity is complicated by the fact that Levinas does not simply accept some aspects of Plato’s thought and reject others, but, as Francisco Gonzales has shown, Levinas is often critical of the very aspects of Platonic thought that he hopes to retrieve (Gonzales 50). The complexity and richness of Levinas’s relationship with Plato has led scholars to reevaluate central concepts in Levinas’s work such as Desire, transcendence, the feminine, and the political (see Achtenberg, Allen, Sandford, Staehler). Their work has also offered new critiques of Levinas, particularly concerning ambiguity and participation (see Gonzales, Staehler). These scholars have shown that putting Levinas and Plato into dialogue helps us both to better understand and to critique Levinas’s work.

With regard to Levinas’s account of Socratic education, the same ambiguity that marks Levinas’s relationship with Plato in general also holds. In many passages of *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas argues that Socratic education reduces the exteriority of the teacher to a moment of recognition within the student, finding in Socrates’s account of learning yet another instance of the totalizing tendency of philosophy, which too often reduces exteriority to interiority, heteronomy to autonomy, and the Other to the Same. At the same time, however, Levinas embraces the Socrates of the *Phaedrus* who argues for the priority of the address within dialogue. For Levinas, it is the presence of the interlocutor in the address, the ability for one who is speaking to offer an “apology” that ruptures the totality of a self in conversation with itself and offers an exterior orientation for signification. For Levinas, this attendance of the Other in
dialogue is the first primordial teaching that makes all other teaching possible. In this way, Levinas criticizes Socratic education by appealing to a Platonic notion of interlocution.

In this essay, I explore Levinas’s ambiguous critique of Socratic education and its limitations with the ultimate aim of reorienting the way that we understand philosophical pedagogy. I begin with Levinas’s conception of teaching, showing how he argues that a primordial teaching is necessary to orient signification. Next, I show how this argument is positioned as a critique of Socratic education understood as maieutics (midwifery). Following this exposition of Levinas’s critique of Socratic education, I offer a reading of Plato’s Theaetetus that presents a possibility for understanding Socratic education in a way that pushes back against Levinas’s critique. I argue that maieutics can be read in such a way that it does not deny the alterity of others but requires it. While I do not claim that this reading of Plato’s maieutics is definitive, I argue that such a reading, made possible by Levinas’s own philosophical framework, allows us to rethink how we engage students in the classroom in a way that is consonant with Levinas’s ethics. I end the essay with a very brief sketch of the direction such a pedagogy might take.

Teaching in Totality and Infinity

While references to the Other as teacher appear in several places throughout Totality and Infinity, Levinas’s most extended analysis of teaching occurs at the end of Section I, Part C, “Truth and Justice.” Here, Levinas argues that the possibility of making true claims about the world presupposes the ethical relation to human others. This relation between another and myself is not a dialectical relationship between two opposing concepts—self and other—but is a relation between me and one who speaks to me. Being addressed by another person cannot be understood through an analysis made from the position of a “synoptic gaze” that encompasses both you—the one who speaks—and me (Levinas, Totality 53), but can only be explored phenomenologically through a description of what it is like to be addressed. All teaching in the traditional sense, according to Levinas, presupposes this more primordial teaching, i.e. the addressing that opens up the very possibility of knowledge.

fn1 In this essay, when providing phenomenological descriptions of the ethical relation, I will use the terms “you” and “me” to describe the terms of the relation, rather than referring to the exterior term as “the Other.” Although this is not a choice that Levinas himself makes, rendering the terms of the relation in this way helps to evoke the concrete phenomenological context of addressing that Levinas describes. There are times, however, when the use of “the Other” is more appropriate when, for example, my claims are meant to describe what Levinas says in his text rather than to evoke a particular experience.
To unpack Levinas’s claim that knowledge about the world presupposes an encounter with another as my teacher, it is first necessary to explain Levinas’s account of subjectivity as it appears in Section II of *Totality and Infinity*. Subjectivity, as Levinas describes it, is an ongoing accomplishment that, when we come to investigate it, is already underway. We can, however, gain entry into an understanding of the subject by taking up a phenomenological perspective. In this way, we can describe the movements of subjectivity as we ourselves live them.

When we take up this phenomenological perspective, according to Levinas, we find that subjectivity opens up to us an interiority into which we can retreat as though we are alone in the world. This move of separation from the world into oneself is described as the coiling of an embodied subject that establishes itself as having an inside that is protected, a site from which it can live and, ultimately, serve others. This move of separation, which establishes what Levinas calls the “psychism,” is related both to Descartes’s skeptical move (Levinas, *Totality* 54) and also to Gyges’s position of seeing without being seen in Plato’s *Republic* (61). In both cases, the subject retreats into itself away from the world to observe reality from an interior protected space. The subject, in this position, appears to itself as free and invulnerable, independent from its susceptibility to an elemental reality that threatens it.

When I, like Descartes or Gyges, withdraw from others, the world, however, appears strange. What appears becomes, as Levinas describes it, a “pure spectacle” (Levinas, *Totality* 90). That is, I, as an observer, am detached from what I see. Put another way, the world becomes like my own personal film, which I can watch without truly sharing the world with others. You show up to me, from this perspective, like a character that I observe at a distance. You do not speak to me any more than the actors in a movie speak directly to me. When I am alone in interiority, I am not addressed in the way that I am addressed in the immediacy of discourse. In this way, the world is silent, according to Levinas. That is, when I move into the space of my own interiority, what appears no longer involves hearing or listening to others but observing and knowing them.

When I view the world in this way, from the position of the withdrawal into interiority, Levinas insists that I inevitably find myself mistrusting that which appears. When I see the world as a “pure spectacle,” the world is no longer that which I implicitly trust as I go about my day-to-day life, but is, qua appearance, dubitable. It is this doubt which gives rise, in Descartes, to the threat of the evil genius. Levinas writes:

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2 Levinas’s understanding of subjectivity undergoes a transformation between his two major works, *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*. In this essay, I focus primarily on the earlier work.
PhænEx

On first contact the phenomenon would degrade into appearance and in this sense would remain in equivocation, under suspicion of an evil genius. … The possibility of their fall to the state of images or veils codetermines their apparition as a pure spectacle, and betrays the recess that harbors the evil genius; whence the possibility of universal doubt, which is not a personal adventure that happened to Descartes. (90)

When I withdraw into myself, I do not discover a new fact that was already true of appearances, viz. that they are dubitable. Rather, it is by withdrawing into myself that phenomena “degrade” into appearances, that is, that they become dubitable. The movement by which I isolate myself is simultaneously the movement that makes the world untrustworthy. The fact of the appearance of this kind of doubt, Levinas argues, is not particular to Descartes but is a structure of subjectivity as such. The possibility, or temptation, to withdraw into myself is possible because the coiling movement of the subject creates this interior space.

This doubt, Levinas argues, is not the kind of uncertainty that arises because one has not yet acquired enough information or because one may be mistaken about a world that is coherent once mistakes are cleared up. Rather, this doubt, according to Levinas, is renewed in every attempt to overcome it that does not involve the introduction of something exterior to the subject. In Descartes’s Meditations, the discovery of the cogito appears to halt my doubt, but Levinas argues that a careful reading reveals that the cogito alone is incapable of putting the threat of the evil deceiver to rest. He insists that the idea that meaning can be guaranteed by a free and independent subject is a great misconception of modernity. The cogito, Levinas argues, is insufficient on its own to free us from universal doubt and it is not until the introduction of the idea of the Infinite that radical doubt is halted. The evidence provided by the cogito, Levinas argues, can itself be doubted. He writes:

In the cogito the thinking subject which denies its evidences ends up at the evidence of this work of negation, although in fact at a different level from that at which it had denied. But it ends up at the affirmation of an evidence that is not a final or initial affirmation, for it can be cast into doubt in its turn. The truth of the second negation, then, is affirmed at a still deeper level—but, once again, one not impervious to negation. (93)

It seems that the cogito gives us a piece of indubitable evidence, namely that I am a thinking thing, but we find that the threat of the evil genius remains. In the Meditations, even what seems most clear and distinct, like mathematical truths, cannot be guaranteed as long as the evil deceiver remains a threat. In this way, the cogito does not secure truth but only presents us with further doubt.

It is only when Descartes discovers the idea of the Infinite and offers his arguments for God’s existence that the evil genius can be banished once and for all and clarity and distinctness can become criteria
for truth. In Levinas’s reading of Descartes, as in other places in Totality and Infinity, the idea of the Infinite is compared to the Other. For Levinas, it is the speaking relation between you and me that ultimately halts the spiral of doubt set into motion by the withdrawal into interiority. He writes, “The I in the negativity manifested by doubt breaks with participation, but does not find in the cogito itself a stopping place. It is not I, it is the other that can say yes” (93). It is you who speak to me, Levinas argues, who gives me the possibility of truth. You, unlike the silent world that appears when I withdraw into myself, address me. Once I am addressed, my skepticism is halted because you place a demand on me that I am not free to ignore. Of course, I could pretend as if you do not really exist and question whether or not you are real or a mere apparition, but such a reaction would be unjust; it would violate the demand that your presence makes on me. I can withdraw into solitude and question the meaning of everything only until I am spoken to.

In this way, Levinas argues, the Other gives me the principle or archê that is needed to orient the meaningfulness of the world. He writes, “The ambivalence of apparition is surmounted by expression, the presentation of the Other to me, the primordial event of signification” (92). When you speak to me, I can no longer be like Gyges for whom everything is permitted, because I am responsible for you. It is in this way that you say “yes” to me, by breaking through the spiral of negation in which everything is called into doubt. Your presence as one to whom I am responsible orients my being in the world. It is as if, while watching my personal film, one of the actors miraculously turned towards me and began addressing me directly. I am no longer alone in the world, no longer invisible, but am spoken to. A radically new dimension is introduced into experience.

It is by offering me this principle or archê that orients the world as meaningful that the Other teaches me, according to Levinas. He writes, “To comprehend a signification is not to go from one term of relationship to another, apperceiving relations within the given. To receive the given is already to receive it as taught—as an expression of the Other” (92). Signification is not moving within a network of relations, a notion that Levinas finds in both Heidegger’s and Merleau-Ponty’s accounts of meaning. For Levinas, the problem with these accounts is that the orientation of these networks of signification is ultimately provided by the projects of the subject.3 That is, according to Levinas, such accounts of meaning ultimately attempt to ground meaning in the an-archic interiority

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3 These criticisms are presented, among other places, in Levinas’s 1964 essay “Meaning and Sense”, found in Basic Philosophical Writings.
of the subject in isolation. The meaning of the world as it is given, Levinas argues, cannot be established by examining a network of references making up a totality of significations traceable back to the powers of the subject. Rather, Levinas insists that I receive the world in being taught by you. The very possibility of a meaningful world is thus presented as something that is offered to me in speech. The world as “given,” i.e. as it shows up as meaningful, depends first on your giving me the world.

In this way, Levinas argues that the entire system of signification that allows for the world to appear to us as meaningful depends on the presence of one who speaks. He writes:

The objectivity of the object and its signification comes from language. This way the object is posited as a theme offered envelops the instance of signifying—not the referring of the thinker who fixes it to what is signified (and is part of the same system), but the manifesting of the signifier, the issuer of the sign, an absolute alterity which nonetheless speaks to him and thereby thematizes, that is, proposes the world. (96)

If we are in search of truth about the world, Levinas claims, we find that we are involved in the work of objectifying and thematizing the world. That is, expressions of truth about the world involve us in proposing to one another that the world is in a particular way. When we propose the world in propositions to one another, Levinas argues, what we propose is always “enveloped” by the instance of our speaking to one another. Every event of speaking about the world involves speaking to someone in a particular context.

Furthermore, when you speak to me, you demand that I respond and I have no choice but to respond. Even if I choose not to respond directly, my non-response is itself a response. My ethical responsibility for you precedes my ability to choose whether or not I want to engage with you. As my teacher, you are also my judge, that is, the one who calls my freedom into question. Responsibility, for Levinas, thus precedes the freedom of the independent autonomous subject to choose whether or not to be responsible. And in fact responsibility invests freedom with a meaning and a purpose. “My freedom is thus challenged by a Master who can invest it. Truth, the sovereign exercise of freedom, becomes henceforth possible” (101). The teaching by which you offer me the world makes truth possible and thereby invests freedom with meaning.

In describing the teaching relation between you and me as one in which I am obligated to respond, Levinas’s description of teaching rehearses the key feature of the ethical relation as it is presented in Totality

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4 The question of whether or not Levinas’s readings of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty are fair is beyond the scope of this essay.
that is, the face of the Other introduces into experience an ethical dimension that is irreducible and inescapable. While in this way the teaching relation shares the key features of the ethical relation taken more broadly, we also find in Levinas’s description of teaching a dimension that is unique. In the primordial addressing understood as teaching, not only am I obligated to be responsible for you, but Levinas also claims that your presence in speaking presents me with the promise of a response from you. He writes: “Thematization manifests the Other because the proposition that posits and offers the world does not float in the air, but promises a response to him who receives this proposition, who directs himself toward the Other because in his proposition he receives the possibility of questioning.” (96) This passage may be surprising as Levinas almost never discusses any kind of responsibility that the Other has for me. Rather, he insists that I must be responsible for you without any expectation of a return. We find here, however, that you, insofar as you are my teacher, present me with a promise that you will not abandon our conversation but will answer my questions. That is, insofar as you are present in addressing me, your presence offers a promise of a continued dialogue. Of course, there are concrete conversations in which this promise is not kept; a promise is not a guarantee. Others can refuse to answer my questions, lie to me, or manipulate me. Levinas’s point, however, is not that you always fulfills your promise but, rather, that conversation presupposes the promise of a response. That is, deception is only a deception on the background of a presupposed honesty.

In opening up the possibility of questioning by proposing the world and promising to answer my questions, Levinas claims that you offer the key to interpreting what you say. In this way, he writes, there is an element of teaching in all speaking. The presence of the interpretative key in the sign to be interpreted is precisely the presence of the other in the proposition, the presence of him who can come to the assistance of his discourse, the teaching quality of all speech. (96) The element of speech that Levinas describes as teaching is one in which discourse is opened up to an ongoing discussion and clarification of what is said. You do not simply propose the world to me and abandon me in my interpretation. Your presence guarantees the “plenitude of discourse” (96) and the “inexhaustible surplus of attention which speech, ever teaching, brings me” (97). Thus, “To have meaning is to teach or to be taught, to speak or to be able to be stated” (97). That is, the very fact that the given is given as meaningful presupposes the presence of you who signify. In being present in your signifying, you open up the plane of discourse in which we can continue to question and answer one another.
Levinas’s Ambiguous Critique of Socratic Education

In emphasizing the manner in which the Other orients the world as meaningful and opens up the plane of conversation, Levinas often refers to the “attendance” of the Other in his/her expression as important for the Other’s presence as a speaking being. He writes, “Speech disenchants, for the speaking being guarantees his own appari
tion and comes to the assistance of himself, attends his own manifestation. His being is brought about in this attendance” (98). In writing about this “attendance” of the Other in speaking, Levinas refers to Socrates’s argument for the advantages of speaking over writing in the *Phaedrus*, the dialogue that Levinas explicitly references more than any other in *Totality and Infinity.*

The famous myth in which Socrates argues for the benefits of speaking comes at the end of the dialogue. At this point, Phaedrus and Socrates have examined what makes speaking good and have agreed that excellent speaking requires both dialectic and knowledge of human souls both in general and in particular. Having examined speaking, Phaedrus insists that they complete their inquiry by turning to the question of what makes writing good, and Socrates responds with his famous myth.

The Egyptian god, Theuth, Socrates says, invented many things and went to the king of the gods, Thamus, to show him the arts that he created. When they came to writing, Theuth was especially proud, claiming that he had “discovered a potion [pharmakon] for memory and for wisdom” (*Phaedrus* 274e). Thamus insists, however, that writing will not aid memory but will cause people to forget because they will no longer practice remembering. Phaedrus and Socrates discuss this claim of Thamus and declare that he is right. Socrates insists that writing cannot “yield results that are clear or certain” but can only “remind those who already know what the writing is about” (275d).

Socrates goes on to claim that writing is like painting insofar as the “offspring” of painting, like written words, remain silent when you question them. The problem with writing, Socrates claims, is that written discourse is untethered from its parent/author.

When it has once been written down, every discourse roams about everywhere, reaching indiscriminately those with understanding no less than those who have no business with it, and it doesn’t know to whom it should speak and to whom it should not. And when it is faulted and attacked unfairly, it always needs its father’s support; alone, it can neither defend itself nor come to its own support (275e).

Unlike the skilled speaker who knows the souls of those to whom he speaks, a written speech cannot answer for itself but needs its “father” to

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5 The *Phaedrus* is explicitly referenced eleven times in *Totality and Infinity*. See pp. 49, 64, 66, 70, 71-2, 73, 114, 115, 124-5, 181, 297.
come to its assistance in order to explain and contextualize the writing for a particular audience.

There is, however, according to Socrates, a “legitimate brother” of written speeches, viz. writing in the souls of students. This kind of discourse can defend itself and knows to whom it should speak. Phaedrus clarifies as follows: “You mean the living, breathing discourse of the man who knows, of which the written one can be fairly called an image” (276a). Socrates agrees that this is a good description of what he means. Someone who really cares about justice, nobility, and goodness, Socrates claims, will not be serious about writing speeches in ink but will see this as a frivolous pastime. A person who is serious about the most important matters will be a dialectician who spends his/her time planting discourses in the souls of students:

The dialectician chooses a proper soul and plants and sows within it discourse accompanied by knowledge—discourse capable of helping itself as well as the man who planted it, which is not barren but produces a seed from which more discourse grows in the character of others. Such discourse makes the seed forever immortal and renders the man who has it as happy as any human being can be. (276e-277a)

Writing in the souls of others, Socrates claims, is better than writing speeches for the law courts or making laws and is the way for humans to be truly happy. In other words, what we should really be concerned with, according to Socrates, is teaching. It is in this way that one can truly become happy and help the city. Thus the dialogue ends with a subordination of writing to the “living, breathing discourse” with others who can respond and with an account of teaching that evokes metaphors of fertility and childbirth.

It is this idea of speech as a “living breathing discourse” that inspires Levinas in Totality and Infinity. Quoting the dialogue, Levinas writes, “Plato maintains the difference between the objective order of truth, that which doubtlessly is established in writings, impersonally, and reason in a living being, ‘a living and animated discourse,’ a discourse ‘which can defend itself, and knows when to speak and when to be silent.’” (Levinas, Totality 73) These quotations, taken from Phaedrus 276a, show that Levinas finds in Socrates’s argument for the priority of speaking a description of the address that makes possible the meaningfulness of the world. This address, as we have seen, is the teaching dimension of speech.

Levinas’s engagement with Plato on this topic is complicated, however, by the fact that this retrieval of the Socratic preference for speaking over writing is situated alongside an opposition to a Socratic conception of education. In particular, Levinas frequently targets maieutics, the pedagogical idea that the role of the teacher is to be a
midwife to the minds of students, helping them to give birth to their own ideas. If we examine Levinas’s criticisms of maieutics, we find that he presents two related concerns. First, he worries that in maieutics, learning is a process that takes place in and arises out of the interiority of the student. That is, in maieutics the exteriority of the teacher is lost insofar as the student already possesses, in some way, what he/she learns. The second concern, related to the first, is that what is learned in maieutics is a set of shared rational principles common to all. That is, Levinas worries that maieutics presents the teaching relation as one aimed at uncovering a common ground between interlocutors rather than as an encounter between unique concrete existents. I will examine each of these criticisms in turn.

First, Levinas worries that maieutics reduces the exteriority of the teacher to a moment of recognition in the interiority of the student. For Levinas, as we have seen, the introduction of the ethical dimension into experience by one who speaks to me, provides an orientation that cannot be derived from the powers of the subject. In this way, teaching is the introduction of something new, something that I could not arrive at on my own. I must receive the teaching of the Other who exceeds my powers as a subject. Opposing his own notion of teaching to maieutics Levinas writes, “Teaching is not reducible to maieutics; it comes from the exterior and brings me more than I contain” (Levinas, Totality 51). Here we see that maieutics is presented as if it is a process that does not involve an exterior presence. Rather, the student already contains everything that he/she will learn. In another passage, Levinas mounts a similar critique. He writes:

Teaching is a discourse in which the master can bring to the student what the student does not yet know. It does not operate as maieutics, but continues the placing in me of the idea of infinity. The idea of infinity implies a soul capable of containing more than it can draw from itself. It designates an interior being that is capable of a relation with the exterior, and does not take its own interiority for the totality of being. (180)

Again, the problem with maieutics is that, on Levinas’s reading, learning occurs through a process internal to the subjectivity of the student. According to Levinas, the student, taught by a maieutic method, forgets his/her relation with exteriority and mistakes his/her own subjectivity for the totality of everything. In other words, the student as represented in maieutics, according to Levinas, is like Gyges or like Descartes at the beginning of the Meditations, a subject that has withdrawn into solitude and been deluded into thinking that meaning can be found in interiority. The essential element of the primordial teaching relation, according to Levinas, is that it teaches something new that cannot be found by a subject

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6 Levinas is also critical of anamnesis, the notion that learning is a matter of recollection. In this essay, however, I limit my focus to maieutics.
who is alone. “Teaching is a way for truth to be produced such that it is not my work, such that I could not derive it from my own interiority” (295). This something new that the Other teaches me is the very presence of the Other him/herself who cannot be reduced to what can be known or recognized by the self.

Levinas’s second concern is that Socratic education presupposes that what we learn in our discursive encounters with others is misrepresented in Socratic education. For Levinas, what we learn in the primordial teaching is the ethical relation itself. The teacher teaches his/her own exterior presence. As we have seen, it is only because of this primordial encounter with an interlocutor that we can have a world ordered by objectivity and reason. In maieutics, however, Levinas sees the content of teaching to be quite different. He describes Socratic education as “the maieutic awakening of thoughts common to all” (219). He opposes this kind of education to the primordial teaching, which “teaches and introduces the new into a thought” (219). In this critique of Socratic education, we can see that Levinas presents a neo-Kantian conception of Socratic education. That is, we find that what is learned through maieutics is assumed by Levinas to be something like a priori principles that are common to all rational beings. If we understand Socratic education to be a process of coming to realize universal principles of reason that govern thought, Levinas worries, then we fail to realize the way in which this universal discourse arises out of and is made possible by the encounter between unique interlocutors. Levinas argues that teaching is not made possible because we, as interlocutors, already share the same ideas. Rather, conversation is possible and necessary only because we are not identical. Truth, Levinas insists, presupposes the ethical encounter with concrete existents who do not present us with universal truths but teach us that which can never be subsumed under a rational, objective ordering of the world.

Thus, Levinas rejects Socratic maieutics because he sees it as representing the totalizing impetus of “Western” thought. That is, for Levinas, “Western” philosophy, on the whole, aims at reducing exteriority to interiority and the Other to the Same. Maieutics, he argues, is a part of this tradition insofar as, in his view, it aims to help students to recognize the universal principles of rational thought that they already hold within themselves. Teaching, Levinas argues, is not an awakening to rational principles through one’s own efforts but is, rather, the reception and welcoming of the alterity of the Other from whom I receive the possibility of dialogue and the meaningfulness of the world.
Although I am sympathetic to Levinas’s philosophical project as a whole, and agree that the teaching relation must maintain the difference between interlocutors, I will argue here that we should not dismiss *maieutics* so quickly, particularly if we want to develop a pedagogy inspired by Levinas. If we look carefully at the *Theaetetus*, the dialogue in which Plato presents *maieutic* pedagogy, we find that *maieutics* does not deny the alterity of the Other in the process of learning, but precisely requires it. Furthermore, what is learned in the *maieutic* encounter are not rational principles common to all. Rather *maieutics* presents the encounter between interlocutors as unique and contextualized, just as Levinas insists we must understand it. To show why I think Levinas is wrong to reject *maieutics*, I turn now to a reading of the *Theaetetus*.

While the central question of the *Theaetetus* is that of the nature of knowledge, the context of the dialogue reveals that this question is motivated by a concern for the education of the youth, particularly the youth of Athens. The introductory framing dialogue takes place between Terpion and Euclides after the death of Socrates and the dialogue ends with Socrates going to the King’s Porch to hear the charges, brought against him by Meletus, that he corrupts the youth. Thus, while the dialogue explores the nature of being and of truth in an abstract metaphysical discussion, its frame places it within a concrete political context in which pedagogy is a central concern. Therefore, one way of understanding Plato’s concern in this dialogue is to see it primarily as a consideration of what kind of education is best for the men of Athens.\(^7\)

After the introductory dialogue, there is a brief conversation between Socrates and Theodorus, a mathematician, in which they discuss which of the youth of Athens show the most promise. Theodorus sings the praises of Theaetetus, claiming that he is an especially good student as he is both quick and courageous while also being gentle and thoughtful, a rare combination of qualities. Soon after, Theaetetus approaches with his friends and Socrates engages him in conversation to see if he is indeed as promising a thinker as Theodorus claims. The question which Socrates poses to Theaetetus is that of the definition of knowledge, and through the discussion, they arrive at several answers—knowledge is perception, knowledge is true opinion, and knowledge is true opinion with an account—each of which is found to be unsatisfactory. Thus, the dialogue ends aporetically; however, the interlocutors plan to continue the discussion the next day, a conversation that is recounted in the *Sophist*.

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\(^7\) I am guided in my reading by Avi Mintz’s essay, “Four Educators in Plato’s *Theaetetus*” which provides an excellent argument for the pedagogical importance of the dialogue.
In talking to Theaetetus, Socrates presents his own pedagogical style as being one of *maieutics*. He claims that he, like his mother before him, practices midwifery, and he goes on to enumerate several characteristics of midwives, which he claims to share. Midwives are barren but were previously able to bear children (*Theaetetus* 149b-c). They have techniques (namely, drugs [pharmakia] and incantations) that can bring about and relieve labor pains (149c-d). Their best skill, which is both surprising and controversial according to Socrates, is that they are excellent matchmakers, best at knowing what erotic encounters are likely to be fruitful (149d-150a). Socrates claims that his own art is like that of a midwife except that he is concerned not with the body but with the soul and he deals with men and not women (150b-c). Furthermore, because he deals with ideas and not children, he must also determine whether the ideas that his art gives rise to are “real” or mere “phantoms” (150b). Theaetetus is, Socrates suspects, “pregnant and in labor” (151b-c). It is Socrates’s task to help Theaetetus to give birth to his ideas and to determine whether or not they are worthy of maintaining or if they must be rejected.

The themes of intercourse, conception, pregnancy, and birth, as in the *Phaedrus*, are carried throughout the dialogue. When Theaetetus is introduced, he is described as a “thoroughbred [gennikon]” (144d) and also as looking like Socrates, with the same snub nose, bulging eyes, and aptitude for philosophy (143e-144a). This comparison invites us to think of Theaetetus as a kind of child of Socrates, the product, perhaps, of Socrates’s fertile dialogical encounters with the men of Athens. We find that Theaetetus has grown up and has been, thus far, well educated in the city and he now comes to Socrates pregnant and in need of help in giving birth to his own ideas. If we reimagine the course of Theaetetus’s “conception” and “pregnancy” as well as Socrates’s *maieutic* pedagogy, I argue that we discover that Levinas’s claims that *maieutics* excludes exteriority and is aimed at uncovering rational principles common to all are unjustified.

First, *maieutics* requires that the student become pregnant through an encounter capable of resulting in conception. Levinas insists that teaching must bring me “more than I can contain” (Levinas, *Totality* 51). *Maieutics* is criticized because, according to Levinas, it does not recognize that exteriority is necessary for knowledge. When we examine the metaphor of midwifery, however, we find that *maieutics* not only allows for exteriority, but requires it. In being “pregnant,” Theaetetus certainly has within him “more than [he] can contain,” something that Theaetetus himself claims at the end of the dialogue when he says, “As far as I’m concerned Socrates, you’ve made me say far more than ever was in me, Heaven knows” (*Theaetetus* 210b). *Maieutics*, contrary to Levinas’s criticisms, presents us with a relational subject who not only encounters
exteriority but is capable of embodying alterity within him/herself. The subjectivity of the student as metaphorically pregnant in the maieutic model is not the dominating, self-sufficient, independent, autonomous subject that Levinas criticizes. Knowledge originates, in the maieutic model, through fertile dialogical encounter with others.

In fact, Levinas himself uses the metaphor of maternity to describe the ethical subject in *Otherwise than Being*. In this later work, Levinas’s account of the subject is such that subjectivity is substitution, the-one-for-another (Levinas, *Otherwise* 135-140). I am utterly vulnerable and passive in my responsibility for the Other. The maternal body represents, for Levinas, the corporeality of this vulnerability and passivity (75-81). For the later Levinas, the corporeality of responsibility in the form of sensibility is represented in the pregnant body, which literally holds and nourishes another within itself, making his earlier rejection of maieutics all the more puzzling. 8

Furthermore, we find that knowledge, understood through the maieutic metaphor, is not possessed for all time by a self-sufficient soul, but is generated through encounters with exteriority. This is certainly the case with Theaetetus’s “first-born child,” i.e. the idea that knowledge is perception. Socrates says:

So we find the various theories have converged on the same thing: that of Homer and Heraclitus and all their tribe, that all things flow like streams; of Protagoras, wisest of men, that man is the measure of all things; and of Theaetetus that, these things being so, knowledge proves to be perception. What about it, Theaetetus? Shall we say we have here your first-born child, the result of my midwifery? (160d-e)

We find that Theaetetus’s first fully formed idea—that knowledge is perception—does not spring from his own soul alone, but is the product of several generations of thought. Homer and Heraclitus introduce the idea that everything is in flux. Protagoras inherits this idea and transforms it to say that, because everything is in flux, perceivers are the measure of

8 It is important to note that feminist interpreters of Levinas have both criticized this conception of maternity and attempted a critical retrieval of it. On the one hand, Levinas seems to perpetuate stereotypical representations of femininity and motherhood by emphasizing the supposed passivity and vulnerability of female embodiment. Similarly, we certainly should be concerned about the valorization of maternal sacrifice and the implications that this may have for reproductive freedom. On the other hand, we can also read Levinas as presenting an alternative to the dominating, self-sufficient, “masculine” subject that is presupposed by many ethical theories built on a modern conception of subjectivity. Thus, there may be feminist reasons both to reject and to build on Levinas’s conception of the ethical subject as represented by the maternal body, not to mention Levinas’s discussion of the feminine in *Totality and Infinity*. While these questions are certainly important and deserve much more discussion, I cannot sufficiently address them in this paper. For more see Rosato, Guenther, and Sandford.
everything. And finally, Theaetetus develops Protagoras’s idea into the conclusion that knowledge is perception. The picture of learning that is presented here is not one of isolated souls all in communion with a shared, abstract, universal *logos*, as Levinas worries, but of ideas generated through fertile encounters between teachers and students with each generation contributing something new.

Finally, we also find in the *Theaetetus* that *maieutics* presents us with an example of teaching that is attentive to the contextual situation of the students. This recognition of the concrete situatedness of the interlocutors is precisely what makes speech preferable to writing according to Socrates in the *Phaedrus*. In Levinas’s retrieval of Socrates’s argument, as we have seen, it is the unique and concrete presence of the Other in the address that opens up the field of conversation. In insisting on this presence, Levinas emphasizes the way in which knowledge originates in concrete encounters with others, with existents who always exceed the categories that I use to understand them. The *maieutic* model, I argue, is attentive to the uniqueness of interlocutors insofar as it presents learning as a process of coming to an understanding that occurs over time and involves a contextualized negotiation. The midwife/teacher must use his/her art to make practical decisions about when to bring about pain and when to relieve it based on the particularities of the situation.

We find that Socrates exhibits this ability to attend to the particularities of the situation and his interlocutors, most strikingly in his dealings with Theodorus. Throughout the dialogue, Socrates attempts to get Theodorus to engage in the dialogue and Theodorus repeatedly refuses, urging Socrates to talk with the young Theaetetus instead (146b, 162a-b, 165a, 168e). Eventually, however, Socrates convinces Theodorus to take part, which leads to the important digression in the middle of the dialogue about the difference between the philosopher and the sophist. The reason that Socrates is finally successful is that he appeals both to Theodorus’s friendship with Protagoras and to his passion for mathematics, asking Theodorus to consider whether Protagoras’s claim that humans are the measure of all things can apply also to the proofs of geometry (169a). At this point, Theodorus can no longer refuse to take part. Socrates, the skillful teacher, knows who Theodorus is and what he cares about. As a result, Socrates is able to engage Theodorus in the discussion. As Theodorus says, “Socrates, it is not easy for a man who has sat down beside you to refuse to talk” (169a). Thus, we see that the skillful midwife who knows when to bring about and when to relieve labor pains must attend to the concrete particular student, even an unsuspecting student like Theodorus. In this way, contrary to Levinas’s critique, *maieutics* presents us with an example of a teacher who *attends* his/her speaking, who is present in the conversation to answer the students’
questions and fulfill the promise that is made by the opening of the plane of conversation.

Conclusion: Reorienting Philosophical Pedagogy

It is well known that, although Levinas argues for the priority of ethics within philosophy, he nowhere offers a prescriptive ethics. Aside from the command not to murder, Levinas does not provide principles of ethical action in the traditional sense. He does not give us a way of checking our actions against a set of norms. Rather, Levinas’s work is aimed at uncovering the condition of the possibility of ethics, not specifying rules for living. The question of “applying” Levinas’s philosophy to pedagogy is, therefore, fraught with difficulties. In her essay “Don’t Try This at Home: Levinas and Applied Ethics,” Diane Perpich argues that attempts to apply Levinas’s philosophy often fail to recognize that the face of the Other cannot provide norms for action because, as she writes, “the face is not a solution to ethical dilemmas, it is the name for a problem” (Perpich 144). That is, the ethical demand of the face of the Other does not offer principles of action but, rather, always calls into question our practices. Thus, while we cannot apply Levinas’s philosophy to pedagogy, in the sense that we have no principles against which to verify the goodness of particular actions, we can use Levinas’s insistence on the priority of the ethical to critique and orient the way that we understand what it is we are up to as teachers of philosophy. To conclude, I will provide some preliminary reflections on how we might reorient our understanding of the practice of teaching philosophy in light of the above analyses.

In many ways, Levinas’s critique of Socratic education is well taken. It seems that among philosophers, Socrates often continues to be held up as the philosophy teacher par excellence, and the understanding of Socratic education as it appears in many conversations about philosophical pedagogy is often of the sort that Levinas criticizes. That is, we frequently view ourselves as catalysts of students’ learning to recognize and articulate principles of logical reasoning that are already implicit in students’ thinking and speaking. Levinas’s critique of Socratic education is helpful insofar as he insists that the rational discourse of philosophy must be understood as already situated within an ethical discourse. The ethical relation that makes this discourse possible is not a relationship that is properly characterized as an encounter between two rational beings with a shared logos. Rather, the ethical relation, according to Levinas, is that which makes possible the rational ordering of the world necessary for philosophical discourse, traditionally understood.

Nevertheless, as I have shown, Levinas’s critique of Socratic education fails when brought to bear on Plato’s account of maieutics in the
Theaetetus. Given that *maieutics* recognizes the alterity of the other and the contextualized nature of discourse, it may provide resources for orienting our understanding of philosophical pedagogy. As I have indicated, *maieutics* presents us with a way of understanding subjectivity that improves upon the model of the subject often presupposed in discussions about pedagogy. Students, in the *maieutic* model, are viewed as particular existents who are fundamentally in relation to others. Our tendency in philosophy is too often to forget that students come to class with relationships to others and to the world, relationships that directly impact learning. As teachers, in order to help students to become better at engaging in philosophical discourse, we must understand that this discourse always involves an encounter with particular embodied, affective subjects to whom we are responsible and who are in relation to others.

Recognizing our ethical responsibilities to students as concrete existents in relation to others also helps us to reorient our understanding of the goal of philosophical pedagogy. Philosophy teachers often express hopes of and take delight in “blowing students’ minds,” but we are rarely attentive to the distress involved when students undergo radical transformations of their worldviews. Relationships with friends and family can be strained when long-held and treasured beliefs are called into question. Not recognizing our responsibilities to be attentive to the affective dimensions of transformative education presents a number of problems.

At best, failing to recognize these responsibilities leads to ineffective teaching. For example, when we teach topics that are particularly likely to disrupt students’ ways of seeing and understanding the world, students can react with what David Concepcion and Juli Thorson Eflin have called “retrenchment” (Concepcion & Eflin 182). That is, a student might appear not to understand a given philosophical position when in fact the problem is that the student is not emotionally prepared to give up a deeply held way of understanding the world. The response of the teacher in this situation will not be effective if her pedagogy is aimed only at trying to get the student to grasp the rational necessity of the argument. In order for the retrenched student to understand the philosophical position, the teacher must recognize the way in which reason is embedded in a broader affective and social context. The *maieutic* model, I suggest, encourages us to see our relationships with students as occurring within just such a context. By thinking of ourselves as caretakers for students who are struggling and sometimes in pain in giving birth to new ways of seeing the world, our methods of approaching students become more attentive to their needs.

Much more work needs to be done to further develop a *maieutic* philosophical pedagogy, and many problems remain to be explored. In
particular, a further development of the line of thinking presented in this paper will require a careful consideration of the way that gender functions in the *maieutic* metaphor. While I have argued that *maieutics* is promising, scholars like Derrida, for example, find Plato’s use of the language of reproduction and parentage with regard to discourse to be a manifestation of patriarchal dominance. A full examination of this potential critique is beyond the scope of this paper, but a more fully developed account of *maieutic* pedagogy would certainly need to consider such concerns.

Although more work needs to be done, I have argued that because the *maieutic* model of learning presents teaching as an encounter between concrete individual subjects who are not self-sufficient and free, it presents us with a way of thinking about teaching that is promising and is consistent with Levinas’s insights. A model of education that situates the role of rational discourse within a broader phenomenological and ethical context, as *maieutics* does on my reading, aligns with Levinas’s insights. The teacher must understand the end of philosophical education to be served by the recognition of shared rational principles, but articulating our common *logos* is not the end of philosophical education. When we mistake the tools of reason for the goal of philosophical discourse, we risk being ineffective or even unjust teachers. By understanding that teaching philosophy is a concrete, embodied, ethical encounter between human beings whose rational understanding cannot be separated from their values, we can become more effective at accomplishing the goal of philosophical education, which I would argue, following both Levinas and Plato, is to work towards the creation of a just community.

Works Cited


