**PESA 2015 ACU MELBOURNE**

**Re-engaging with Politics: Re-imagining the University**

Emmanuel Skoutas

*Melbourne Graduate School of Education, The University of Melbourne*

**Title: Teaching’s Dialogical Encounter is an Ethical Call for Political Action**

**Abstract:***Like the interlocutors in Plato’s dialogues we come together to inquire only when we begin with an ethical disposition to welcome the other. It is an ephemeral but common event that is all too easily forgotten as an ethical encounter. Our imaginations of what a university can be begins from our certainty of the relational meanings that emerge between us as members of the university community. The university is a site for dialogue where teachers and students interrogate and interrupt the status quo. But this is not always the case. I discuss an example from an essentialist philosophy that has an immanent assumption about the identity of a university which, ultimately reduces the imagined university to an instrument for politics. Its critique emerges from an alternative discourse inspired by Emmanuel Levinas and his proposition of the transcendent Other (L’Autre). For Levinas, teaching is an encounter that allows radical questioning and an interruption to our habit of self-sufficiency and immanent hermeneutics. If this alternative is accepted, a university responds to the demands for the good that come from its ethical encounters and becomes the site to renew itself by responding to the call from the other. This imagined university serves as a source of reflection and dialogue that helps define the relationship between the university and its political context as ethically necessary.*

**Introduction**

The university is a place of teaching; but, because the university is essentially the interactions between people that associate and identify with it, politics becomes the necessary discourse that defines the relations the university has at an institutional and social level. But how can we imagine what a university can be? Is it not the case that any imagination of the mind is fed by the meaning and interpretation a mind has of the world it encounters? From the beginning places of learning have had an engagement with their political context. At times this has manifested in a constructive way when providing life -changing opportunities and at other times there have been tensions such as fee deregulation recently and even conflicts as is the case in Paris May1968 and Hong Kong 2014. But its identity is also defined by what happens there. Universities are places of theoretical research, they have scholarship programs, indigenous partnerships, and academic entrepreneurships and more generally they are seen as informed and reliable public voice for justice in the community. However, there is a temptation to reduce the identity of the university to a static theoretical representation that identifies a list of primary and fundamental characteristics and attributes. This type of reduction is an essentialist interpretation of the university. If we rely on this type of thinking to feed our imagination of what a university can be, then we run the risk of conserving the university as an instrument for politics rather than an institution that is responsive and creative in its relationships with the community it is a part of. Because essentialism requires that we posit a list of qualities about the university we act in way to achieve to achieve that imagined ideal rather than allowing the university to continually renew itself and be responsive to the needs of its community. The contrast I have in mind is similar to the contrast between a good teacher because of the attributes they bring to the class rather than being a good teacher because they desire to meet the needs of their students. The distinction is important because in the former version the good is a consequence of an ideal whereas in the later good teaching is motivated by the good. I will argue that the distinction is important because if we imagine the university along essentialist grounds then the university can be manipulated for political ends and in the first part of my paper I examine one such approach taken by Alain Badiou.

In the second part of this paper I will contrast this essentialist view with an alternative philosophical approach that does not privilege the essentialist attitude but interrupts it and in its stead invites us to be in the ethical mode of responsiveness that can imagine a university that is in constant dialogue and as a result its relationship with politics becomes ethically necessary rather than politically necessary. The analysis I present is inspired by the work of Emmanuel Levinas who offers a way of seeing teaching not in essentialist terms but as an ongoing dialogue between heterogeneous subjectivities who have ethical responsibilities and obligations toward each other. And in part three, I examine the implications of my reimagined university as a place where engagement with politics becomes ethically necessary.

**Part One**

**The Paradoxical Relation Between Philosophy and Politics**

Alain Badiou in his *Philosophy for Militants* (Badiou, 2015) deals with the perennial aporia that reaches back in Western history to at least Plato; what is the relationship between philosophy and politics? If the modern university is justifiably modelled on the ancient agora or school, we can imagine the terms philosophy, school and university are interchangeable. If this is accepted, then the question about the relationship between philosophy and politics was there for Plato in the apology of his teacher Socrates. In the book’s essay *The Enigmatic Relationship Between Philosophy and Politics* Badiou reflects on the trial of Socrates and re-imagines what a university might be like in order for the relationship between it and politics to flourish and not lead to injustice. According to Badiou we determine the nature of the university first and then define the possible relations and actions it can take. I don’t take issue with the fact that he tries to define its fundamental character but only that he then takes this to be sufficient and reliable justification for the political relations he is presents. In trying to resolve the enigma of the relationship between the university and politics. Badiou makes the mistake of neglecting an ethical imagining of the university and thereby makes ethics subordinate to politics.

For Badiou, the university can be imagined in two modes; the first is the ‘scholastic’ model that has generally become the image by which a university is defined as a theoretical research institution.

We can conceive of philosophy, … as a form of the discourse of the University, an affair for philosophers and students in reasonable institutions. This is the perennially scholastic vision of Aristotle. (Badiou, 2015 p.2)

In the second incarnation for Badiou the school is a site for personal growth and an applied philosophy that is enacted to achieve one’s potential and satisfy a personal obligation.

Or else we can conceive of philosophy as the most radical form of the discourse of the Master, an affair of personal commitment in which the combative affirmation comes first (above all against the sophists and against the doubts of the sages who honour the University.) (Badiou, 2015 p.2)

It is in the second conception of the university Badiou claims that philosophy is not identified by the protocols of discourse but by the reality of its act, its radical influence.

It is this act that the enemies of Socrates designated as ‘corrupting the youth’. … ‘To corrupt the youth’ is after all, a very apt name to designate the philosophical act, (Badiou, 2015 p.2)

For Badiou he considers the militant act revealed in the Socratic invitation for Athenian youth to question established opinions, to debate social norms and rationally critique the demands for obedience from their sovereign authority as relevant and important for philosophy. Because of its normative valuations Badiou concludes that philosophy is defined by the way established laws and conventions are challenged by its alternatives. Badiou however, points to a deeper problem in the relationship between philosophy and politics that makes the relationship not only problematic, but according to him impossible. The university can only engage with the politics of the day if it is essentially made compatible. However, for Badiou philosophy may not be able to make such a commitment for compatibility because there is an inherent conceptual paradox between philosophy and politics that makes it impossible for them to coexist.

We thus have a contradiction between the true nature of philosophy, which is certainly a democratic conception of intellectual argument and free thinking, and the explicit conceptions of philosophy in the field of politics, which accept very often the existence of an authoritarian framing for the collective destiny of humanity, and in any case feel no kind of fascination for the type of political regime that today dominates the West. (Badiou, 2015 p.18)

Badiou argues that although philosophy and politics share a foundation in ‘intellectual argument and free thinking’ democracy is essentially about freedom and philosophy about truth. If truth as an obligation limits absolute freedom then where there is absolute freedom there can be no truth and therefore Badiou concludes the two are in a perennial contradictory relationship. As a consequence Badiou reframes his question in order to understand why the relationship between the two that seems to be united in their commitment to dialogue at the beginning then evolves to be vexed for both and obstructed in the end by philosophy’s a priori commitments to truth?

Our question thus becomes: What is it in politics that is modified by the philosophical act in such a way that democracy begins by being a necessity, only to become something impossible or obscure in the end? (Badiou, 2015 p.19)

In order to resolve this dilemma Badiou seeks to redefine philosophy so that it overcomes two features about it that contradict central principles of democracy. He begins by accepting the essential attribute of philosophy as a discourse that is ‘independent of the place occupied by the one who speaks.’ Philosophy can come from anyone and is indifferent to the social and political position of the one who speaks or participates as an interlocutor, it is open to criticism from anyone and is available for all.

However a problem arises in the relationship between philosophy and politics in the fundamental distinction between truth and opinion. Philosophy cannot condone a plurality and relativism of opinion to undermine the validity and universality of truth. This limits philosophy’s claim on its relationship with democracy as democracy itself is necessarily pluralistic and tolerates the relativism of opinion. The limit to democracy from philosophy is the acceptance of universal rules of logic and not the freedom of opinion that is the cornerstone of a democratic politic. This kind of tension is debilitating for any action that a philosopher wants to effect in politics. At some point a philosopher will measure the claims of universal and logical rigour against the particular and often rhetorical demands of politics and find politics wanting. What is worse, the philosophical position can become dogmatic and contribute to injustice. He illustrates his point with a reference to the reign of terror in revolutionary France between 1792 and 1794 where the universality of philosophical truth conflicted with the particularity of individual political interests leading to atrocities committed on all sides. Justice was the price paid for the conflict of ideas. But we can readily add our own examples from the history of philosophy from Plato to Heidegger to support Badiou’s conclusions here.

Democracy is the condition for philosophy but philosophy has no direct relation to justice. (Badiou, 2015 p.25)

**The Essentialist Solution**

Badiou argues that to overcome the tensions with politics that emerge from our conception of philosophy, philosophy needs to accept a new role in society and establish a new relationship with politics. Badiou advocates for a theoretical protocol for dialogue to inform just action between the free political participants in a new communist movement to overcome the gulf between philosophy and politics, what he calls a ‘restricted communism’. Since democracy is the condition for philosophy for Badiou, philosophy will have to adapt to a ‘narrative’ in order to survive as a relevant institution and program in the new proletarian revolution.

We could thus say that the future of philosophy depends on its capacity for progressive adaptation to the changing of its conditions. (Badiou, 2015 p.2)

Badiou offers a consequentialist justification for the university to re-engage with politics. For Badiou philosophy has to be re-imagined as an instrument of politics if it is to be relevant and survive in its political context. If philosophy has the inherent problems with democracy that Badiou claims why does he think that that these issues require it to adapt to the demands of politics? Why should philosophy have to be a function of politics as Badiou suggests?

The reason is based on two assumptions about philosophy that Badiou insists on. The first assumption is that philosophy is about the ‘anonymous’ dialogue between interlocutors that is subject to the universal laws of reason. The second assumption is that philosophy is subject to the realities of the day and is always subject to their determinations. To illustrate his first assumption about philosophy he provides an analogy:

Exactly like mathematics, philosophy is valid from all and for all, and knows no specific language. But there is strict rule that applies to the consequences. Thus, when philosophy examines politics it cannot do according to a line of pure liberty or freedom, much less according to the principle of the freedom of opinion. (Badiou, 2015 p.22)

He is clear in his second assumption that philosophy is conditioned by politics, philosophy always arrives *‘apres-coup’* it arrives late to its originary material conditions and ‘non-philosophical innovations’. It is for this reason that the future of philosophy depends on its capacity to adapt to its changing conditions.

And all this takes place after certain events in politics, in art, in science, in love: events that have given rise to the need for a new variation on the same theme. (Badiou, 2015 p.12)

I agree with his second assumption that philosophy arrives late and that it is subject to the realities of political events but this assumption is compatible with an alternative approach that undermines his first assumption. It is in holding the first assumption that I think Badiou makes a fundamental mistake and needs to be addressed.

**Part Two**

**Anonymous Reason**

In what way can we re-imagine the university today, the inheritor of the enlightenment program? Do we accept Badiou’s consequentialist and instrumental answer to how the university and politics ought to relate? I do not.

The essentialist view represented by Badiou relies on a reasoning that is privileging a universalist and idealist claim about rationality. The assumption that reasoning between interlocutors is ‘anonymous’ and does not respond to the particular person is not acknowledging another dimension of reasoning. Here I present an alternative way of knowing that is not at a remove from its object, or that it occurs from a place that is a view from nowhere. If this alternative conception of thinking is accepted, then the assumption that philosophical dialogue between interlocutors is ‘anonymous’ and not directed toward anyone is not the whole story. Furthermore, if reasoning and philosophising is affective and responsive to its interlocutors, then I claim we are modelling the kind of university that is reasonable but at the same time aware of its political responsibilities as informed by its ethical obligations. This way of thinking about education is not new. In fact it appears as necessary to those teachers who imagine their school to be more than the transmission of logical protocols of dialogue. For example, Paul Standish in arguing against totalizing approaches to curriculum suggests we challenge this view by allowing the curriculum to be open and not as prescriptive in its outcomes.

(T)he curriculum – say, the triangle of teaching, learning and content – is one way in which the relation to the Other can be realized. By the same token, by accenting the negative correlate of this, the curriculum is a site in which the underlying relation to the Other – this obligation and responsibility- is commonly, casually, systematically denied. (Standish, 2007)

Here I present an alternative to Badiou that reflects a teaching, which does not ‘deny’ its responsibilities and which invites an attitude toward political engagement necessitated from an ethical obligation. My argument against Badiou is based on the work of Emmanuel Levinas. The dense and at times richly metaphorical writing of Levinas makes it difficult to delineate a linear argument in the style of the analytic tradition. However his phenomenological analyses do elucidate a position. In discussing the nature of consciousness I will refer to *Existence and Existents* (1947) and his *Totality and Infinity* (1961) for the claim that the ethical relation in education makes it possible for teaching to engage politically.

According to Levinas we can conceive of our reasoning in a way that is not only represented by a conception of philosophy but as an activity that is necessarily separate from the world it is engaged in but in need of re-joining it. Consciousness has the capacity to overcome the assumed insularity when confronted by the other (*L’Autre*). It is the encounter with alterity that finds its most forceful presentation when we encounter another person. The other shakes us out of the complacent acceptance of our ego centred subjectivity inviting one to become responsible and open to the possibility for justice. I will offer his phenomenological analysis as a point of departure for understanding how thinking is an intention to what is already given and therefore reflection need not capture all that is.

For Levinas we are not necessarily bound to the strictures of rationality or the protocols of dialogue and theoretical inquiry to be the primary ground for practical activity. His writings are an attempt to guard us from perpetuating the essentialist assumption that a-priori thinking and reflection are the principal and privileged place from which our choices for action can begin.

Were we not victims of an unrepentant (sic) intellectualism in having taken the theoretical contemplation of forms to be the condition for practical activity and desire? (Levinas, 1947 p.38)

Traditional notions of consciousness represent knowledge as a subject’s cognition of an object. Knowledge is represented as a relationship between a subject and an object and cognition is reducible and effected by a subject who is separate from the object and therefore able to suspend action and hold in reflection the cognitions of consciousness. In the case of Descartes his method of doubt was only possible because he accepted the possibility he could suspend judgment of his objects of cognition. This then becomes our modern model of knowing, of thinking and theorising in general.

Then what is essential in contemplation would be that it is only contemplation. (Levinas, 1947 p.43)

But after Levinas and many of his contemporaries we have become aware that we forget or pass over the fact that in thinking we have already turned our attention to an object as something given over to consciousness, directed to it and presented for consciousness to be grasped in a way that has implicated an intentionality already occurring in the event of consciousness that we are not conscious of immediately but only in reflection. This version of consciousness then becomes more like a multidimensional event that has to be reflected on for its various qualities to become manifest. But in so doing betray the ‘lived’ nature of that experience. Merely using the term relation to describe my conscious intentionality toward an object disguises the affective side of perception and intentionality that is occurring at the same time and is only ever recognised when I make my intentions objects of conscious a reflection. There is already a relationship before I even begin to reflect and make the event what it is to consciousness, that is, before I have ascribed a substantive to what it is that I am relating to. Levinas, (as a result of his reflections on Edmund Husserl’s pure consciousness) is asking us to accept an affective intentionality that is already directed to what is given before a subject.

Contemplation is turned to an object as something given. It is hence more than ‘pure contemplation’; it is already a factor in an action. … For the concept of a contemplation that remains completely foreign to contemplated forms, we are thus substituting the notion of an intention that turns to what is given. (Levinas, 1947 p.38)

This view of consciousness carries with it the problem that in the reflection of our intentionalities we place ourselves outside of the event as it occurred in living and in objectifying our intentionality. When we reflect we are removing ourselves from the engagement with life and hence we cannot escape the exteriority of objects even those objects given in our intentionality. But Levinas does not want to insert another privileged position for consciousness where the suspension of judgement, the *epoché* represents another level of reflection where there is an absolute position from which a pure consciousness can direct its gaze; a position that would only perpetuate the assumption that it remains separate from its object. This is the source of his criticism of Husserl’s ‘pure consciousness’. For Levinas this postulated problem of consciousness in trying to get behind what presents to it phenomenally misses the point of a deeper understanding and signification of the exteriority of our intentionalities. Levinas argues that we acknowledge the sensible and affective side of our comportment to the world instead of accepting the reductions of consciousness to only its theoretical objectifications.

Consider participating in a phenomenal experiment that is suggested by Levinas’s treatment of music in *Existence and Existents,* which may help to elucidate his thesis. The experiential analysis is of your own reflections on listening to music. We can engage in the act of listening to music and even provide a causal theory on how our perception occurs and the material factors involved in its production. But further to this empirical account, we can also reflect on our intentionality and phenomenal experience of music. For example, we can consider the secondary qualities in the effect the music is having on me, whether it is rhythmic or sublime, is it satisfying or not, whether I liked it or not. But set aside all these interests for the moment and consider another dimension of that experience. I am inviting you to reflect on the subjectification of the event, that is how the event I engage in actually makes me who I am. When we listen to a piece of music there is an instance of our experience where we can acknowledge a sense of subjectivity that accompanies our perceptions. An ‘I’ is implicated as the perceiver of my thoughts. We can in reflection ‘identify’ a self as a separate ego that has an interiority of presence and the act of perceiving music has the ontological quality of postulating an object external to a ‘me’. Hence, if I reflect on listening to music and accept the listening to music as an event I am undergoing, the I is assumed as present pre-reflectively in the event of listening to music. The action and event of listening references my subjectivity in a clear and unambiguous way. Levinas claims that the exterior aspect of the phenomenal experience of listening is an important phenomenon to consider. There is a ‘distance’ between the music and the listening ego and there is in our phenomenal analysis a sense of division between the object of what I am hearing and the subject that is listening or undergoing the hearing. Levinas describes such an event as an ego-centred world-view that represents it as an immanent hermeneutic.

The ego possess the given, but it is not overwhelmed by that possession and keeps a distance from the object, an attitude of reserve, which is what distinguishes an intention from enjoyment. This possession at a distance,… is what constitutes the intentionality of intentions. (Levinas, 1947 pp.38 - 39)

We usually don’t make our subjectivity explicit, but our grammar gives it away in the reflexive verbs we commonly use. When I listen to music for example, I do not think of the event in terms of a third person act such as ‘there is listening going on’, instead, the ‘I’ is a necessary part of the event and it is so ingrained that we assume our subjectivity in the events we engage with. If that is accepted then the certainty we have of our presence as an ego listening is dependent on maintaining this distance otherwise I would become the music and there would not be a subject perceiving the object, a ‘me’ listening to music.

Levinas is alerting us to the alterity we maintain in our cognitions, our subjectivity is not absorbed by the objectivity of the music. The subjectivity references the music - the exteriority of the musical sounds is relational to an inner world of consciousness for an ego. Hence his use of the term ‘enjoyment’ in the quote above to distinguish the pure event of listening to music where we immerse ourselves in and is contrasted against the intentions of consciousness when in reflection we take account of the objectifications of our intentionalities. This distinction emerges in a short excerpt from Levinas when writing about time:

In listening to music we are also following its entire duration. … we can say that the different instants of a melody only exist to the extent that they immolate themselves in a duration, which is a melody is essentially a continuity. Insofar as a melody is being lived through musically, and is not being scrutinized by a professor listening to his pupil, that is, is not work and effort, there are no instants in the melody. (Levinas, 1947 p.21)

According to Levinas the problem is, we habitually privilege the rational reflection over the immersive event of our actions. In the ego-centred world-view and the meaning I have of it is immanent to my understanding. The short hand term Levinas uses for this kind of ‘natural attitude’ to reduce meaning to our theorisations is the ‘Same’. Levinas notifies us of a transcendence to contrast with the grasp of rationality. But at the same time he references transcendence, he does so in a way that does not contradict the meaning of transcendence by providing an essentialist conception of transcendence. If he did that, conception in itself becomes a theory or an idea of transcendence instead of the living experience of transcendence we confront in alterity. The natural attitude that has a preference for totalising theorisations refutes transcendence itself. This is why the language of Levinas can be so enigmatic at times, he is trying to define the indefinable, which, is evidenced when he uses the term ‘designates’ below to point to the ‘trace’ of transcendence.

Transcendence designates a relation with a reality infinitely distant from my own reality, yet without this distance destroying this relation and without this relation destroying this distance, as would happen with relations within the same; (Levinas, 1961 p.41)

**Part Three**

**Alterity**

In the positing of the other in Levinasian terms there exists something more that what I can reduce to my knowing. By definition alterity is a transcendence of something wholly other than my being, my ego in relating to an other is gifted an escape from itself. There is something more than what the ego has brought with it in the encounter, more than the reduction to the Same, there is what Levinas calls ‘fecundity’ which I translate as creativity. If it were not for our encounters with others everything would be caught up in the ego and by taking account of the other we allow our selves to be otherwise than I would be without the encounter of the other. Describing the event of encountering the other he says:

It is on the ontological level, the event of the most radical break up of the very categories of the ego, for it is for me to be somewhere else than my self; … to not be a definite existence. (Levinas, 1947, pp.85 - 86)

But the emergence of the other also brings with it an awakening to ethical possibilities. Levinas proposes that the relationship can be founded on the obligation that comes from recognising the alterity of the other they are not an ‘anonymous’ rationality but they are who they are in themselves and hence I become uniquely responsible for their needs.

Here the interpersonal situation is not of itself the indifferent and reciprocal relationship of two interchangeable terms. The Other as other is not only an alter ego. He is what I am not: he is the weak one whereas I am the strong one; he is the poor one, “the widow and the orphan.” (Levinas, 1947, pp.85 - 86)

If we take this as our model of teaching encounters it can reconfigure our imagined university where it becomes a place of ethical encounters between heteronomous subjects that have an obligation toward each other, where the subjectivity of the other matters and is valued completely. For Levinas opens up the possibility for responsibility to be prior to and beyond reasoning and our intentionality and an event that is dense with possibilities:

We are thus responsible beyond our intentions. It is impossible for the regard that directs the act to avoid the non-intended action that comes with it. We have one finger caught in the machine and things turn against us. That is to say, our consciousness and our mastery of reality through consciousness do not exhaust our relation with reality, to which we always are present through all the density of our being. Consciousness of reality does not coincide with our habitation in the world. (Levinas, 1961, p.208)

Contrast this view with the model Badiou represents above where the university is a place of agreed transactions and protocols between ‘anonymous’ people of reason. If we stay with a conception of the university as Badiou represents it, the value of the university lies in the degree it is able to participate in an ideal form of a relationship. The university and political engagement is bound by something exterior and separate to both which is dependent on them as two differing entities finding a common bond. Analogously, individuals would only have value to the degree they agree to share a common contract. It would be like a pre-nuptial agreement.

One thinks that my relationship with the other tends to identify me with him by immersing me in a collective representation, a common ideal or a common action. It is the collectivity which says ‘we’ that feels the other to be alongside of oneself, and not facing one. And a collectivity is necessarily set up around a third term which serves as intermediary, which supplies what is common in the communion. (Levinas, 1947, pp. 97)

The sense of value is attributed to me as a subject because of my political decision to commune with the other rather than the value being found within myself as a subject that is formed in the relationship between each other. But Levinas suggests an alternative, which is found in the initial encounter between people before we are in a position to construct our political systems of alliances. Like the apology from Socrates began from the value he saw in the relationship between his interlocutors and himself, Levinas is inviting us to recognise the ethical importance of our relations and any political action that emerges is driven by the ethical imperative to do good to the ones we love.

To this collectivity of comrades we contrast the I-you collectivity which precedes it. It is not participation in a third term – intermediate person, truth, dogma, work, profession, interest, dwelling, or meal; that is it is not a communion. (Levinas, 1947, pp. 98)

Gert Biesta has written on the importance of this interpretation that is inspired from Levinas. Biesta reinforces how the ethical particularity of the address between interlocutors found in the writing of Levinas is a critique of hermeneutics and allows us to reimagine the university as a site of dialogical teaching that can be an ethical experience for its students. The other is not reduced to an idea where their value is attributed to them because of an unquestioned belief in pluralism. Instead a Levinasian other is valued just as Socrates valued his students, so much so, that the meaning of his final apology only became a significant political act because of the good he was trying to achieve for their souls.

This is where the ‘opening’ Levinas creates through his critique of the hermeneutical world view has its significance, as he shows that our subjectness is not constituted from the ‘inside’ through acts of interpretation and adaptation, but is called into being form the outside, as an interruption of my immanence, an interruption of fracturing of my being-with –myself, of my consciousness. … It rather is *the moment where I am addressed* by the other, … And may not this event of being addressed give us an entirely different and far more significant account of teaching and the experience of being taught? (Biesta, 2015)

In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas was to take these ideas and elaborate their consequences in more detail. In one such interpretation he describes how his thesis of the other engenders a mode of teaching that is founded on the relational encounter that becomes ethical in facing the alterity of the other. The importance of the dialogue emerges from experiencing the encounter as ethical in itself. This is reflected in the apology itself. The significance of the apology is more than the argument expressed its importance comes about because he is in the friendly company of his students there is a moral dimension to receiving his students at his final lesson that makes the argument possible in the first place.

But the first content of expression is the expression itself. To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression, in which at each instant he overflows the idea of a thought would carry away from it. It is therefore to *receive* from the Other beyond the capacity of the I … (Levinas, 1961, p. 51)

And not only is the argument responding to the uniqueness and singularity of the other it carries an authority that makes it worthwhile for his students to learn. The two modes of giveness are intertwined.

But this also means: to be taught … The relation with the Other, or Conversation, is ... an ethical relation; but inasmuch as it is welcomed this conversation is a teaching [enseignement]. Teaching is not reducible to maieutics; it comes from the exterior and brings me more that I contain. (Levinas, 1961, p. 51)

Levinas succinctly but densely encapsulates the argument. In it we see how he expresses his claim that the relation with the other overcomes the reduction of the other to an ideal and theoretical representation to be instead a dialogue between heterogeneous subjects that is primarily motivated by the ethical rather than a commitment to an ontological ideal.

The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me, the idea existing to my own measure and to the measure of its ideatum – the adequate idea. … It does not manifest itself by these qualities, but καθ’ αυτο’.(Levinas, 1961, p. 41)

Gert Biesta articulates the conclusion we have arrived at, namely that the engagement with politics ought to be for the good rather than an agreed protocol for mutual convenience. The way in which we understand our meaning making as we discussed in part one, needs to go beyond the essentialist models Badiou represents of the university and philosophy itself. Instead, the university as a model of making meaning is itself a dialogical encounter between individual people that determines the political action it ought to take to achieve the good.

Signification thus keeps the self to the self – never interrupted, always already identical with itself and sufficient for itself. ... While this may help the self to survive … it never creates a possibility for the self to exist. The question that never arises, to put it differently, is whether the environment to which the self is adapting and adjusting is *good* in the fullest sense of that word. (Levinas, 1961, p. 41)

Biesta in taking his ‘inspiration from Levinas suggest how we can ‘re-discover’ a sense of teaching by being open to Levinas’s claim that our meaning making and in the significations we make of our encounters with the other in dialogue are ethical events.

One key insight is the observation that signification is not an egological act or accomplishment, but consists of a relation with the one to whom I express an expression, the one to whom expression expresses. Signification thus derives its sense from this particular ‘event’. In this relation, the Other does not appear as object of my signification, but as interlocutor. (Biesta, 2015)

If I have been successful in this paper I hope I have at least made case for the possibility of imagining a university that is responsive to the needs of its students and making this response the motivator for political engagement. The political implications from my suggestions are that we do not have to settle for the dogma of ideas nor do we have to accept the relativism of unmitigated pluralism. Instead, our political involvement is necessitated by our ethical need to meet the demands of the other. Zhao (2015) interprets Levinas in a way that also supports the view that a reimagined educational practice can be a model for a reimagined democracy.

Levinas’s idea that community is built upon our responsibility to the other—the responsibility to receive the other as who he/she is with all his/her otherness and uniqueness, and the responsibility to respond to his/her suffering and destitution—transforms the modern belief that democracy is based on isolated, self-mastering, and self-realizing subjects pursuing their own self interests. Democracy is no longer a battleground where we strategically further our own purposes but has to be an ethical space where communication and rational discussion on issues of common concern take place. (Zhao, 2015)

It is not difficult to imagine an ethical university in dialogue with its students, a university that is ethically orientated toward the good and therefore engaged with politics to realise it. As such the university becomes a model for democracy. This is not a strange phenomenon we see it enacted in educational settings everyday and we have seen it since Plato’s Apology. The final act of Socrates was a dialogue taking into account the souls of his interlocutors out of his commitment to the good. An act that in the end was a model for engaging with politics, and if Levinas can help us re-imagine teaching, then we can be engaged with politics through the ethical concern of the good the other demands of us as teachers.

**Bibliography**

Biesta,G. *The Rediscovery of Teaching: On Robot vacuum cleaners, non-egological education and the limits of the hermeneutical world view* Educational Philosophy and Theory, Taylor and Francis 2015

Levinas, E. 1978 (1947) *Existence and Existents*, Duquesne University Press, trans. Alphonso Lingis

Levinas, E. (1961) *Totality and Infinity*, Duquesne University Press, trans. Alphonso Lingis

Peperzak, A. Critchley, S. and Bernasconi, R. (1996) *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings* Indiana University Press

Standish, P. Levinas and the Language of the Curriculum*,* in D. Edea-Kuehne(ed) (2007) *Levinas and Education: At the Intersection of Faith and Reason* London, Routledge

Zhao, G. Singularity and Community: Levinas and democracy, *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, Routledge, 2015