

Facing the Perfect Stranger: Disrupting a Mythology of Innocence in Education and Beyond

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People desire to be good and, even more so, to be innocent of wrongdoing. Standing in the face of injustices across the world, we can seek a kind of redemption in trying to make the world better. And yet, as Antije Krog, Nosisi Mpolweni, and Kopano Ratele write, “Remember that one of the attributes of pain is that to have pain is to have certainty; to hear about pain is to have doubt.”¹ First Nations researcher and teacher Susan B. Dion coins the term “perfect stranger” to describe the ways that, even with the best of intentions, teachers and students protect themselves from ethical vulnerability. In this paper, I will explore Dion’s concept of the perfect stranger through the lens of Emmanuel Levinas’ ethics.

Juxtaposing two views of otherness (articulated briefly via Claudia Ruitenberg), I will first describe Dion’s concept of the perfect stranger and then look to the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas to understand the ontological implications of such a position, remaining within the thought of these two thinkers in particular.² Two claims emerge from an ontological examination of the position of the perfect stranger. The first claim, that the perfect stranger is objective, will take up Levinas’ discussion on objectivity and its relation to what he identifies as “a philosophy of power” in his early book, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (1958).³ Using Levinas’ reversal on the philosophy of power, I will then bring Levinas and Dion into conversation regarding alternative approaches that break apart the position of the perfect stranger at a metaphysical level.

From there I will extend beyond the metaphysical and examine

the political implications of this position, particularly with reference to the context of colonialism to which Dion responds and Levinas does not address. The second claim, that the perfect stranger is innocent, will be viewed primarily through a decolonial lens. For this I will briefly bring in another decolonial perspective, that of Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang in their article “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,” to describe the political reaction to a philosophy of power.⁴ Through both Dion and Levinas, I will discuss the attraction of the role of the perfect stranger and the necessary and inevitable pain of rejecting such a position. In the final section, I will show how the problem of the perfect stranger – here both a political and metaphysical problem – can be addressed by Levinas’ notion of infinite responsibility.

Keep in mind, as Dion does, that critiques of the perfect stranger are based on the assumption that such a position is neither easy nor simple. The challenges brought before the perfect stranger are difficult and complex, nuanced and fragmented. They are not universal. And they raise many more questions than they attempt to answer. The notions of objectivity and innocence are not specifically expounded upon by Dion, but I argue that it is here in particular that Dion and Levinas can be engaged together, and it is here that an ethical position in diametric opposition to the perfect stranger can be found.

AGAINST ALTERITY: THE PERFECT STRANGER AND THE COLONIAL “OTHER”

Writing as a teacher with more than a decade of experience working with pre-service and in-service teachers, Dion attempts to explore the relationship between Canadian teachers and Aboriginal peoples and suggest a form of “ethical learning” to transform this relationship.⁵ To understand the inadequacies of current relationships that reproduce

inequalities between Aboriginal people and settlers in Canada, she puts forth the concept of the “perfect stranger,” drawn from her experience as an Aboriginal woman and teacher:

I often begin my work with teachers and teacher candidates by asking them to write about and reflect on their relationship with Aboriginal people. Teachers respond with comments that go something like ‘Oh I know nothing, I have no friends who are Aboriginal, I didn’t grow up near a reserve, I didn’t learn anything in school, I know very little or I know nothing at all about Native people.’ One way or another, teachers, like many Canadians, claim the position of the ‘perfect stranger’ to Aboriginal people [...] I argue that it is not an un-complicated position. It is informed simultaneously by what teachers know, what they do not know, and what they refuse to know. It is, for many, a response to recognizing that what they know is premised on a range of experiences with stereotypical representations.⁶

The position of the perfect stranger is thus located in difference: a lack – or an abdication – of relation, understanding, and responsibility to the Aboriginal other. This sense of otherness, however, is in direct contradiction to the other use of the word “other” in this paper. As Claudia Ruitenberg explains in *Unlocking the World: Education in an Ethic of Hospitality*, otherness refers both to that sense of difference (“what a person is”) but also alterity (“who a person is”), the essential and irreducible distinction between beings in the world.⁷ The perfect (colonial) stranger, set in opposition to the (Indigenous) other, exemplifies the former definition of otherness.

The other referred to in relation to Levinas’ philosophy⁸, emerg-

ing from Jewish philosophy and phenomenology, is the other of alterity, an other who is always separate, an other who cannot be possessed,⁹ an other with whom I am, irresistibly, drawn into relation. This opposition is a central construct in the argument of this paper, where the former is identified by Levinas as the result of a philosophy of power and the latter emerges from an ethical relation within an opposing metaphysics. My approach follows Levinas' representation of *Totality and Infinity* itself: "the difference between objectivity and transcendence will serve as a general guideline for all the analyses of this work."¹⁰ In the following section, I will show how Dion's perfect stranger is an ontological position emerging from this philosophy of power, rooted in objectivity, and which Levinas also calls "a philosophy of injustice."¹¹

THE PERFECT STRANGER IS OBJECTIVE

In order to break apart the position of the perfect stranger, Dion designed a project, "the file of (un)certainities," which asked students to collect cultural artifacts from their own lives and juxtapose them with a selection of course readings and work by Aboriginal artists, bringing them into conversation through what Dion calls a "pedagogy of remembrance."¹² The goal of this project is for students to uncover their relationship to Aboriginal peoples through a reflection on their own history and that of others. Through this activity, they can resituate themselves in relation to the subject. The implication here is that the perfect stranger has forgotten their location in history; in fact, they have removed themselves from the relation.

Forgetting is a prerequisite of an objective view of history; time is frozen, and so is the object of knowledge (in this case, Aboriginal peoples). This stasis is necessary for the student to comprehend the object or to "know." "Facts" are not people, they are dead things, deprived of the

vitality of the relation – as Levinas says, they are “already happened and passed through.”¹³ The student also becomes a static entity. It is not to say that such knowledge is necessarily bad or wrong in every case,¹⁴ but rather, Dion sees consequences that are prohibitive to authentic – and transformative – ethical learning. The pedagogy of remembrance asks students to re-identify with their experiences in context. For Levinas, this kind of remembrance is part of the constant recovery of identity that is a part of life.¹⁵ The “I” cannot remain the same, and so the objective position that takes one out of time is incoherent with regards to the type of truth that Dion is asking students to experience.

This is why, instead of asking students to learn *about* the experiences of Aboriginal peoples, Dion prompts them to learn *from* their own experiences pulled into a relation with Aboriginal peoples and history. The distinction between learning *about* and learning *from*,¹⁶ which Dion borrows from Deborah Britzman,¹⁷ highlights the objective distance required in the perfect stranger position. To learn *about* asserts the power of the student in defining the subject of knowledge, amplifying the distance between them, and allowing the student to essentially objectify the subject. In this way, the perfect stranger is able to take their own perspective (or those of dominant discourses in which they may be embedded) for granted, hinging their knowledge on what is objectively “true” within those ontologies. This objectification is an inherent characteristic of colonial mentalities, where colonial powers are able to categorize different races and judge one as savage and the other as civilized. It is a philosophy that reduces the other to *what* they are instead of *who* they are (as Ruitenberg points out). This distancing of objective truth justifies dispossession, oppression, and genocide.

Dion focuses on the pedagogical and political implications of objectivity; here Levinas’ metaphysics furthers the critique. The idea of

the objective position is one that emerges from an objective “truth” that he identifies with an ultimately oppressive ontology. In order to enact this ontology, Levinas explains, the other cannot retain their radical alterity, remaining ever beyond our grasp in their absolute heterogeneity, but must instead be reduced to the same, which can be comprehended. The other is neutralized and becomes an object, a *concept* that can be studied outside of the relation. The radical alterity of the other as subject is destroyed. It is in this way that we can gain power over the other, who is now a static and controllable object that does not threaten our freedom with their alterity. In fact, a type of freedom is found in this ontology: “Such is the definition of freedom: to maintain oneself against the other despite every relation with the other to ensure the autarchy of an I.”¹⁸

The cost of this type of freedom, however, is heavy. Objectification allows us the power to define our shared reality as objective truth becomes anonymized, removing both the subject and object from the equation. “Universality,” Levinas writes, “presents itself as impersonal; and this is another inhumanity.”¹⁹ It is for this reason that Levinas claims: “Ontology as first philosophy is a philosophy of power.”²⁰ According to Levinas, such a philosophy of power is fundamentally contrary to justice, as will be expanded upon shortly.

Levinas may offer an alternative to this philosophy of power through his ethics. Rather than the knowing subject independently observing an objective reality, the “I” exists only in relation to the other and identity is constituted by alterity itself.²¹ We call each other into being. This position is radically different to that which posits the “objective truth” as the objectification, and therefore destruction, of the other. He positions truth within his metaphysics (with ethics supplanting ontology as first philosophy) as “arising where a being separated from the other is not engulfed in him, but speaks to him.”²² The quest for truth becomes

a relation²³, achieved through discourse and the presence of the other. In the face of their alterity, that which is wholly other to us, the other leads one into knowledge beyond objectivity²⁴ — not the “disclosure of an impersonal Neuter, but expression [...]”²⁵ Thus, truth becomes relational instead of objectifying. It also becomes contextual — encompassing past, present, and future — instead of removing the “I” from time and space, and thus the “I”’s implication in reality.

To break apart the philosophy of power — and the position of the perfect stranger and the coloniality it protects — Levinas transforms the act of truth-seeking into an act of critique, a “calling into question” that can only be brought about by our experience of the other. Here, Levinas and Dion use the same term, “calling into question,” to describe a breaking free from the objectification of oppressive ontologies.²⁶ This is a different kind of truth-seeking for Levinas, one concerned primarily with critique, that actively “discovers the dogmatism and naive arbitrariness of its spontaneity, and calls into question the freedom of the exercise of ontology.”²⁷ Calling into question that which is the same (as opposed to other) can occur only in dialogue with the other, before their radical alterity — for Levinas, this is ethics.²⁸ The philosophy of power, the ontology that does not call into question the same, is also identified by Levinas as a “philosophy of injustice.”²⁹

In practice (since Dion’s article details the stories of three students and their confrontation with their positioning of themselves as perfect strangers), Dion uses the phrase “calling into question” somewhat differently than Levinas. She sees calling into question as an activity that challenges hegemonies and asks students to question their own knowledge and their position in that knowledge. It is motivated by a type of confrontation with the other, in this case through art. This is consistent with Levinas as she borrows the phrase from Roger I. Simon, who used

Levinas extensively in his work.³⁰ Like the rest of the concepts Dion brings forth in her article, her analysis of calling into question does not extend to the metaphysical level that Levinas intends that is beyond the scope of her essay. Instead, she focuses on calling into question accepted truths of dominant discourses (the critique) but omits the notion of calling into question the same. At the same time, she does see the activity as motivating the student to “scrutinise her own identity.”³¹

Without the ability to call into question either in Levinas’ or Dion’s usage of the term, the objective position of the perfect stranger ultimately achieves a distancing of responsibility from the other, allowing the perfect stranger to remain perfect and unchallenged in their knowledge and strange in their distance – all on their own terms.

THE PERFECT STRANGER IS INNOCENT

The value placed on objectivity emerges from an ontological position that allows the perfect stranger to reproduce any of the dominant discourses (be it colonialism, westernization, eurocentrism, etc.) without calling them into question. Though Levinas explicitly denied that his work was political in any way,³² there are political implications to the adoption of a philosophy of power. The uncomfortable conclusion, often hovering in the periphery, is that such reproductions make the perfect stranger complicit in many epistemological and ontological hegemonies that contribute to injustice and play an important role in suffering, conflict, and catastrophe.

To recede into innocence, then, is a fatal move – one that can only be achieved through the distancing that makes calling into question impossible. In the context of the discourse on decolonialism, Tuck and Yang use the phrase “moves to innocence”³³ to describe seven ways in

which settlers of a colonial state “problematically attempt to reconcile settler guilt and complicity, and rescue settler futurity.”³⁴ “Settler’s moves to innocence,” they argue, “are those strategies or positionings that attempt to relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege, without having to change much at all ... [Moves to innocence] are hollow, they only serve the settler.”³⁵

Facing the possibility of not just non-innocence, but complicity, is challenging intellectually, emotionally, and even physically.³⁶ The discomfort and uncertainty of this possibility is felt in the body, often manifesting in ways that are involuntary and unconscious: a tightening of muscles, a clenching of the jaw, snakes in the stomach, a sense of unease creeping up the spine. However, as was explored in the previous section, this position forms the basis of an entire ontology; to affect change here is no small thing, demanding the perfect stranger call into question the foundation of their entire worldview and their place in it. It is for this reason that Dion emphasizes the complexity of the position of the perfect stranger, which I argue encompasses moves to innocence. She explains:

While dominant discourses structure teachers’ and students’ engagement with the stories of post-contact history, teachers and students take up these discourses as a way of protecting themselves from having to recognize their own attachment to and implication in knowledge of the history of the relationship between Aboriginal people and Canadians.³⁷

What, then, do Dion and others ask of the perfect stranger? By acknowledging that the perfect stranger position is largely motivated by a need to protect oneself, Dion importantly recognizes that the alternative view (and, for Levinas, the alternative metaphysics) is undeniably painful. And yet, it is not a pain that can be escaped; it is a pain of witnessing

the suffering of the other and situating ourselves in relation to it and responsible for it. Consequently, it is important to examine the notion of responsibility to understand how this difficulty can be addressed rather than downplayed or ignored.

INFINITE RESPONSIBILITY: A REVERSAL

This article has tried to show how hard it is to feel that one is the “bad guy” of one’s own story. The position of the perfect stranger is not necessarily a malicious one, but it is one that takes refuge in distance. It is one that refuses responsibility. It is a position that is built upon a mythology of innocence that we expend massive amounts of energy to keep intact. When the mythology of our own innocence is questioned, it means that we open ourselves to the possibility that we have not acted good, that we *are* not good.

For Levinas, however, goodness is not something that can be achieved. Levinas compares goodness to the metaphysical desire for the other, which causes us to reach out beyond ourselves to the ever-remote, separate, and utterly unknowable other. The notion of metaphysical desire is a pathway of sorts to infinity; we reach out toward the other not out of a need for some sort of completion, but out of this Desire for the absolute other. Goodness is much the same; it cannot be satisfied because it is intertwined with the notion of infinity itself. Goodness is never fulfilled, but only deepened.³⁸

The problem of a need for goodness, to achieve goodness, is therefore irresolvable within this metaphysics. This is clear in practice as teachers, students, and beyond – the very idea of having to successfully navigate the multitude of ethical dilemmas and challenges is both exhausting and patently impossible. We are never capable of meeting

the ethical demands that the other places on us. Today we are uniquely inundated with the suffering of the other, exposed to it on a scale never before seen – first through telephone and radio, then television, and now the digital world. The weight of responsibility for the world of others has never been more keenly felt, the face of suffering never more visible.

Yet the global interconnectedness to the suffering of the other is nothing new. The line today from the owner of a smartphone to crimes against humanity in the Democratic Republic of Congo is absurdly short. But colonial empires built upon the genocide, displacement, and enslavement of Indigenous peoples across the globe have shaped our relationships for centuries. An idea of innocence seems almost impossible for anyone. From the moment we are born in the modern world with all its wonders and beauty, we carry the weight of the suffering of the other that enables our experiences of it.

This is a frightening proposition, one we are not equipped to face in perpetuity, therefore rendering the role of the perfect stranger yet more attractive, or perhaps more dangerously, enabling a disengagement with the question of justice in total. Through achieving an absolute objective distance, one can amputate oneself from the world and view the suffering of the other as if removed from time and space itself. The scale and weight of these challenges to our responsibility are immense and ultimately insurmountable. Within the ontology rejected by Levinas, this presents an irreconcilable problem: people cannot “be good”. We cannot attain goodness and we cannot even claim blamelessness, the basic political consequence of the perfect stranger position. The demand is more radical; it is “a responsibility increasing in the measure that it is assumed ... The better I accomplish my duty the fewer rights I have; the more I am just the more guilty I am.”³⁹

Perhaps, however, people in varying degrees of “guilt” can “do

good” within Levinas’ ethics – an action that is constantly in motion, never completed. He positions Desire and goodness as the preconditions for a relationship where a philosophy of power can be disrupted because he believes that it is possible to do so.⁴⁰ At the same time, this disruption is not a wholesale solution and does not appear to simplify matters at all. Perhaps he is asking us to give up on the notion of innocence altogether. The alternative is not another way to “*be ethical*” in the world, but a way of constantly situating ourselves in that world so that we are able to respond to the other and reach toward fulfilling our responsibility for them. Like desire, goodness cannot be satisfied. To reject the notion of the perfect stranger, it is essential to reconcile ourselves to the fact that in reaching out toward the Other, we can take shelter in neither an idea of objectivity nor innocence. We can only reach out aimlessly toward infinity, as teachers, as students, and as persons, driven by our desire for the other, propelled by the goodness it engenders.

1 Antjie Krog, Nosisi Mpolweni, and Kopano Ratele, *There was this Goat: Investigating the Truth Commission Testimony of Notrose Nobomvu Konile* (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2009), 23.

2 I note that there is rich scholarship around Levinas’ ideas as they are put forth in this paper within philosophy of education and beyond. However, for the purpose of this paper, I will stay within the two texts with two small exceptions, used expressly for clarification of the ideas put forth.

3 The interpretation of Levinas presented in this article is based on the translation by Alphonso Lingis from the original French.

4 Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1-40.

5 Susan D. Dion, “Disrupting Molded Images: Identities, responsibilities, and relationships—teachers and indigenous subject material,” *Teaching Education* 18, no. 4 (2008), 329

6 Dion, “Disrupting Molded Images,” 330-331.

7 Claudia Ruitenberg, *Unlocking the world: Education in an ethic of hospitality* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 43.

8 Ruitenberg explicitly identifies Levinas as the foremost philosopher of alterity in this section of her book.

- 9 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Duchesne University Press, 1969), 38.
- 10 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 49.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 46.
- 12 Dion takes this concept from Roger I. Simon, who in turn cites Levinas as one of his influences; Dion, “Disrupting Molded Images,” 330.
- 13 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 69.
- 14 Levinas refers to the “idolatry of facts” that emerges as a part of contemporary ontology; Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 65.
- 15 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 36.
- 16 Dion, “Disrupting Molded Images,” 335.
- 17 Britzman has also cited Levinas in her work, though her work is psychoanalytical. One quotation that Dion pulls from Britzman uses more Levinasian language, albeit in a more psychoanalytical way: the “special reflection” that Britzman calls for “disrupt[s] the wish for a continuity and sameness that attributes to others the same state of mind.” Deborah Britzman, *Lost Subjects, Contested Objects* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998), 7, quoted in Dion, “Disrupting Molded Images,” 339.
- 18 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 45.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 46.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 46.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 251.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 62.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 61.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 67.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 50.
- 26 It is worth noting that the original French phrasing is “*mise en question*”; see Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et infini: Essai sur l'extériorité*, 4th ed. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1984), 13.
- 27 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 43.
- 28 *Ibid.*
- 29 *Ibid.*, 46
- 30 Dion, “Disrupting Molded Images,” 332. However, Dion cites Walter Benjamin when explaining Simon’s approach, not Levinas.
- 31 Dion, “Disrupting Molded Images,” 338.
- 32 In the preface to *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas locates politics in opposition with morality; Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 22. Furthermore, as stated elsewhere, Levinas’ views on this subject were never applied directly to colonialism in this way by Levinas himself, the historical person.
- 33 Tuck and Yang borrow this phrase from J. Malwhinney’s 1998 Master’s thesis.
- 34 Tuck and Yang, “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,” 3.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 10.
- 36 Looking now at my notes from when I first read “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,” I can see a high level of defensiveness in my own writing that far exceeds my feelings today, years later, after I have had some time to digest the arguments in

the article. I initially approached this article with a good dose of skepticism and I find it helpful to revisit it periodically for its ability to aggressively challenge my own positionality.

37 Dion, "Disrupting Molded Images," 331.

38 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 34.

39 *Ibid.*, 244.

40 *Ibid.*, 50-51.