Proposal Abstract

Emmanuel Levinas (1905-1995) was a beneficiary of the French Enlightenment, but we can also consider Levinas a post-Enlightenment figure in that his project reveals the failure of the Enlightenment—the impossibility of negotiating a particular identity within a structure of universal rights. Levinas defines subjectivity by one’s ethical response to the other, not by one’s freedom or ability to make autonomous decisions. His most explicit statements about the “crisis in humanism,” found primarily in his essays on Jewish education, reveal his political ambivalence. Levinas’s educational writings encourage Jews to become more Jewish (particular), while his philosophical/ethical project describes human subjectivity as essentially Jewish (universal). Levinas and the Crisis of Humanism argues that by reading the educational writings and the philosophical writings in tandem we can see why the trope of teaching is so pervasive in his philosophical writings and so significant to the meaning—and success—of his ethical project.
Proposal Description

**Background.** Although Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995) is associated primarily with contemporary French philosophy, his writings have had a significant impact on a diverse set of disciplines across the humanities and the social sciences. These disciplines include literary theory, religious studies, women’s and gender studies, political theory, and education. Despite this recent proliferation of scholarly interest, however, the disparate themes in his writings remain unproductively segregated from each other. It is only in recent years that his writings on Judaism have been addressed by philosophers or scholars outside of Jewish or religious studies. This restricted focus is especially regrettable with regard to his essays on education, since even in the academic field of education, where Levinas’s influence grows, these particular essays remain disregarded. My proposed book project, *Levinas and the Crisis of Humanism*, is significant because it demonstrates that “teaching”—especially that associated with Jewish education—is not only pervasive throughout Levinas’s philosophical writings but also that it is significant to the meaning—and success—of his philosophical project. I demonstrate this point by reading and analyzing his educational writings in tandem with his philosophical writings.

*Levinas and the Crisis of Humanism* continues themes I introduced in my previous book, *Levinas, Judaism, and the Feminine: The Silent Footsteps of Rebecca* (Indiana 2003), where I developed an interpretation of Levinas’s use of the “feminine” as marking the intersection of his philosophical-ethical project and his writings on Judaism. My research revealed that the feminine, ultimately cast as “maternity,” played an instructive role when he named it the ethical relation par excellence. In this form, the “feminine” revealed subjectivity to be always already dependent, a view that Levinas gestures toward in his 1935 essay *On Escape* where he asserts, “there is no one more self-sufficient than Rousseau.” The most striking theme in this early writing is Levinas’s emphasis on the body and the role that embodiment plays in the formation of subjectivity. His phenomenological description reveals that embodiment necessitates vulnerability and dependence. Our bodies demand our attention, and thus, our first responsibility is to feed them, clothe them, and protect them. These primary needs weaken our belief that we are free in the sense celebrated by modernity. Levinas’s critique of modernity, which pervades his philosophical project, reveals a personal and philosophical ambivalence regarding political liberalism—what he refers to as the “Principles of 1789”—and the advantages this offered to Jews. He credits his French citizenship with saving his life, insofar as it required that he be put in a German P.O.W. camp rather than a concentration camp, even though he was Jewish. Yet, he also believes that modernity’s humanism allows for the self to take precedence over the Other. He believes that this priority of the self over the Other is a reversal of the ancient Biblical message that requires the self to turn toward the Other in responsibility. For Levinas, humanism is not found in introspection but rather in the recognition that the suffering of the Other produces the moral obligation of the self.

Although Levinas gestures towards this problem of liberalism as early as 1934, he does not yet identify liberalism as an issue confronting Jewish identity. His most explicit accounts of the “crisis in humanism” are found in two places: three essays collected under the title *Humanism of the Other* (originally written in the 1960’s) and his essays on Jewish education written after WW II. Although his essays in *Humanism of the Other* are widely cited, most likely because they recall his philosophical differences with Martin Heidegger, his essays on Jewish education are rarely if ever cited, even when the topic of discussion is precisely his critique of liberalism and his call for a new kind of humanism. This absence demonstrates that scholars have neither identified the connection between Levinas’s writings on Jewish education and his critique of liberalism, nor its significance. Significantly, while there is a connection between these two venues in which this critique is found, they are not identical formulations. Although Levinas outlines philosophical factors in this crisis in his essays on education, ultimately, he views the crisis as a crisis in religion—a point he does not make explicitly in the philosophical essays. As such, the role of religion in the solution that Levinas offers to this ‘crisis’ is found only by turning to these writings.
The original publication venues of the essays on education indicate that some were intended for an audience of Jewish educators and others were directed at French Jewish intellectuals. Recognizing that the intended audience for these essays included teachers and staff at the Alliance, as well as secular Jewish intellectuals in France, is crucial to understanding the significance of these essays. On the one hand, they are Levinas’s gentle attempt to persuade his readers to replace the secular mandate of the Alliance with one that is more religious—indeed, more Jewish. As a result, his educational writings implore the Jews to become more Jewish (i.e., particular). On the other hand, these essays require those of us who read them to ask the following question: If, in response to the crisis of humanism, Levinas’s essays on Jewish education implore the Jews to return to a deeper relationship to Judaism—to learn Hebrew, engage in Talmud study, and identify more closely with the ancient ethical message of Judaism—what then is his hope for those reading his philosophical work? What is his hope for those who are not Jewish? What is he asking everyone else to do, and how is he formulating his request?

**Links to Interdisciplinarity.** Levinas and the Crisis of Humanism demonstrates that the answer to the above questions lies in returning to the connection between theory and practice, between the universal and the particular, between philosophy and education. As provocative as this next claim sounds, for Levinas, it is not enough that the Jews reclaim their spirituality and deepen their relationship to their religion; the world must also change. If Levinas is correct that he humanism of modernity has its roots in ancient Judaism, then in a sense, we are all—or, rather, we all have the potential to be—Jewish (i.e., universal), by which he means ethical. Levinas’s philosophical project describes an ethical responsibility and a human subjectivity that traces its roots to the Biblical tradition in its universal expression—that is, in the self’s turn toward the Other. By making this claim, Levinas pulls out the roots of a philosophical prejudice that reserves universality for a certain type of Christianity (see Hegel), while relegating Judaism to the realm of the purely particular (Levinas, 1990a). My claim, then, is not that Levinas believes we should all attend a yeshiva. Rather, his philosophical work expresses the argument for this new humanism—this turn towards the other—and by incorporating the scriptural references into this writing he also invites his readers into a new way reading. If the different parts of Levinas’s corpus are read and thought of together, his project offers us not only a new way to think about subjectivity and ethics, but also a new way to think about education in light of the political tension between the universal and particular to which he attends. In addition to being of interest to Levinas scholars, scholars of French philosophy and French intellectual history, Jewish philosophy, Jewish studies, and political theory, this exhibit and my manuscript will be of great value to general audiences in the humanities because it demonstrates that if we are to radically transform the educational process with the democratic ideal in mind, we must reexamine both our conception of human subjectivity and the question of identity created by political liberalism. My research interests and expertise in feminist theory, Jewish thought and philosophy, and religious studies are brought to bear on this project. The research and writing that I will do this summer will have an impact on the design of my Spring 2011 graduate course on Levinas, which will be cross-listed between Philosophy and Women’s and Gender Studies.

**Levinas and the Crisis of Humanism** is currently divided into two parts, with three chapters in each. The first part of the book explores the question of humanism and its relationship to education. The chapters attend to the development of French republicanism and modern liberalism, the question of humanism, and the educational models that are informed by this political position. The first chapter turns to the development of French Republicanism, the Enlightenment, and the Universal Rights of Man (what Levinas simply refers to as “the Principles of 1789”). The second chapter examines the humanism that modernity delivered and the post-modern responses to that humanism, e.g., Martin Heidegger, Ernst Cassirer, and Jean-Paul Sartre. This part of the book ends with a chapter that addresses the question, “Is Education Political?,” turning to Nietzsche and Rousseau—their inheritors and their critics (Arendt and Dewey)—in order to address this question.
The second part of the book examines Levinas’s educational writings (1950-1976) and their link to his philosophical project. This section of the book provides a general introduction to Levinas’s ethical project while also demonstrating his ethical project and his description of ethical subjectivity are predicated on a model of Jewish education and the implications of this claim for the political. Chapter four returns to Levinas’s quandary over the problem of immanence and transcendence, themes in which his trope of the feminine played a significant role. Chapter five examines the pedagogical role of the scriptural references in Levinas’s writings and the relationship these references have to ethical response. Chapter six demonstrates the connection between Levinas’s philosophical-ethical project and the educational model that is produced as through his radical transformation of ethics.

Qualifications. Levinas and the Crisis of Humanism argues that Levinas’s relationship to the Alliance and his views on education, assimilation, and Jewish identity reflected in these educational essays inform his philosophical project. Yet, there are significant documents pertaining to Levinas’s philosophy that cannot be accessed by any other means than to visit the Alliance archives. In March 2006, I visited the Alliance archives, and in May 2009, I returned from a second visit, during which I found several documents relevant to my research that I would not otherwise be able to access. The documents were situated in a box of the complete correspondence from, to, and about Levinas during the time when Levinas directed the ENIO. For example, I discovered a document that links Levinas to Abraham Joshua Heschel on the theme of Jewish education. This is a connection that I intuited based on their common views of Jewish education, but until I explored the Alliance archives, I could not find any documentation that verified my intuition. I also discovered a document published in the January 1963 publication of the Alliance that proudly announces that Levinas served as the external examiner for William Richardson’s dissertation defense at the Catholic University of Louvain in November 1962. Interestingly, Richardson is one of the foremost scholars of Heidegger’s work. What is unique about the document is that it provides details of Levinas’s response to Richardson during the defense—going so far as to indicate that Heidegger’s philosophy “is a fundamentally foreign and hostile message to the great Biblical tradition.” Although this announcement was published in Les Cahiers d’Alliance (the notebooks), it was not written by Levinas. As a result, it does not appear in any bibliographical listing of his work. I came across the original typed draft in one of the folders of correspondence and was then able to find the published version in the notebooks based on the date written on the draft. Currently, the articles I have collected are available only in Les Cahiers de Alliance and only in the original French, in which I have reading proficiency (see CV) and to my knowledge, no else has ever made reference to this document. My academic credentials, which include a Ph.D. in philosophy (concentration in French philosophy and history of philosophy) and a Masters of Arts in Teaching (philosophy of education), ideally situate me to undertake this project.

Scholarly and Creative Outcomes. I am seeking summer support to continue my research and writing for this project. I am currently on schedule to complete this manuscript this Summer (2010). I am on teaching leave this Spring (2010) semester, and this past January I made a third trip to the archives. To my knowledge, no one else working in Levinas scholarship knows that these documents exist, much less has seen or made reference to them in scholarly writing. January 2010 through May 2010 allows me time to translate and categorize the newly collected material from the archives. The funding provided by the PESCA grant will further enable me to complete the writing of the manuscript—the two book chapters that rely on these documents. I will have a draft of the manuscript by the end of summer 2010. Although I have not been awarded external funding, I continue to make consistent progress on this manuscript, receiving numerous invitations to present and publish my research. During the academic year 2010-2011, I will revise the manuscript and prepare it for submission to a university press. I will submit the completed manuscript to a university press by summer 2011.