Special Invited Papers Celebrating UTEP's Centennial
Threading the Past into the Future:
Historical Reflections on Our Philosophical Identities at the Border

Levinas on the Border(s)—In Retrospect

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I begin my retrospective by expressing gratitude for members of the Philosophy Department, my colleagues in the College and at the university, and members of the New Mexico-Texas Philosophical society who have supported me in one way or another during the past 20 years in becoming the philosopher who I am today. I am not only happy, I am honored to have been able to grow with this institution and my colleagues in this Department and to have been welcomed and supported to practice philosophy, especially as a new graduate in 1994 at a time when philosophy at UTEP was struggling. I arrived in El Paso with PhD in hand that summer and was hired to teach Ancient Greek Philosophy because the Lecturer who was scheduled to teach that class had abruptly left to go sail a boat on San Francisco Bay and write the novel he had been dreaming about for the previous several years. That was my first stroke of luck, namely, that some other guy decided to follow his passions elsewhere than here. The second stroke of luck was that the Director of the Philosophy Program at that time had survived a heart attack and that his heart was strong enough and healed enough to be able to lead the Philosophy Program when I interviewed for a job. That was Jack Haddox and I distinctly recall the interview. We sat in his office, that was as crammed with books, papers, gifts and other artifacts from decades of teaching as it still is today—and after briefly looking over my résumé he looked me in the face and asked if I thought that I could do a good job teaching Ancient Greek Philosophy. I had just graduated and didn't have a job. At that point, I was not in a position to ask myself: "What would Levinas do?" So instead, I replied "absolutely—I can teach whatever philosophy you need or want me to teach." This was not entirely facetious since while I had not taught Ancient Greek Philosophy before, I had studied Plato and Aristotle and Medieval Philosophy as a graduate student with a really good medievalist. Jack said "good" and gave me the class list and said that the class starts in three weeks. As we walked out of Worrell Hall, he said in what seemed to be joyful belief, that "You will like working in Philosophy at UTEP since the philosophers who work here all got

along and are free to do the kind of philosophy that we each liked and feel called to do." I remember thinking that I would like to be happily involved in what seemed to be a pleasingly pluralist environment but mostly I was ecstatic to already be included in the category of "we." And before anyone really knew or could keep track of what I was doing, I was teaching Levinas, Levinas on the Border, that is.

My contributions to the panel presentation is dedicated to the generosity of philosophical inclusion that I experienced in those early years and that continued through most of the 20 years that I have spent working as a philosopher at UTEP.

The rest of this paper is both testimony to the phenomenon of philosophy at UTEP, as I have experienced that in the past twenty years, and a retrospective account of what it means for me personally to have practiced and to still be practicing philosophy UTEP at the beginning of the 21st century. It is especially pertinent for because of the fact that "we" are honoring the Centennial of UTEP as an educational institution in El Paso, in the Southwest, and on the border of the United States and Mexico.

I begin by referring to a paper that I presented at the 20th World Congress of Philosophy that was held at Boston University in 1998.[1] That event also marked a 'coming out,' so to speak, of me as a philosopher since I presented a paper in the "Teaching Philosophy" section and focused on what it meant to be teaching philosophy in the way that I was doing so at that particular time in my early years as a professional, academic philosopher. In re-presenting the original five categories and self-descriptions that I used at that time to explore the particular way that I was teaching at that time at UTEP, I assess and evaluate my speech-acts then and how my life as a philosopher played out over the ensuing 16 years in order to come up with some salient observations about what I think is important about teaching philosophy at UTEP now and to measure the relevance of the work that I began then by what has happened in the intervening years. By necessity, such a retrospective will, on the one hand, be subjective and personal, but on the other hand, since I will also be providing an interpretative account of the empirical events of those years—an account that relies on the historical facts of the matter of the growth of philosophy at UTEP—a fundamental level of objectivity will also be established.

The five categories that I used to structure my 1998 paper are the following:

1. Teaching Philosophy on the Mexico/USA Border
2. Teaching Jewish Philosophy
3. Teaching Jewish Philosophy on the Border
4. Teaching Philosophy of Religion
5. Non-Tenure Track Teaching

To the task:

1. Teaching Philosophy on the Mexico/USA Border

From the Congress text:

"What may not be as well known is the extent to which UTEP reflects the demo-

> graphic dynamics of its border situation. Despite political resistance, burgeoning border patrols and a government proposal to erect a fascist fence to divide the two communities, UTEP truly is a University of the border and, generally and for the most part, I have come to teach *from* the border. The student profile reflects this border reality since over 50% of UTEP's students are Hispanic and UTEP enrolls a higher percentage of Mexican nationals as full-time students than any other University in the U.S. Consequently, most students in UTEP's classrooms have deep bicultural concerns because of their roots which extend well below the surfaces on each side of the Rio Grande. Because I teach in this border situation I have found that teaching Levinas is especially helpful."

Today, according to UTEP's website, UTEP's "students … are 78% Hispanic [and] mirror the population of this region and, increasingly, that of Texas and the United States."[2] Moreover, these past 20 years of teaching at UTEP have revealed to me the extent to which the roots of most of our students "extend well below the surfaces on each side of the Rio Grande" and that their deep commitments to those roots on *both* sides of the border normatively influence the ways in which they express their concerns and aspirations in manifold ways. Then, as now, teaching Levinas from this embodied "border situation" is especially relevant because of how Levinas's claim that "Ethics is First Philosophy"[3] provides many different ways to interpret and understand those concerns and aspirations for me and the many other students who have sought guidance and direction in my classes.

Unlike more homogenous cultures which I have experienced, living and working here on the border and with a people of the border, caught as it were in the confrontation and synergy of two peoples, two nation-states, and two cultures—the possibilities for genuine encounters with those who are obviously other is more apparent. The bicultural expressions of the face-to-face encounters that I have with my students, have provided me with the living material which has helped me to become the philosopher I am today. Living here and with these many other Mexicans, Mexican-Americans, and other 'gringos' has provided me with the confrontations and challenges without which there is no teaching and learning, since, as Levinas has taught me, it is only through the face-to-face experience that the teaching relationship itself is initiated. "[W]here teaching leads to…logical discourse without rhetoric, without flattery or seduction and hence without violence, and maintaining the interiority of him who welcomes."[4]

Almost from the beginning, a Levinasian phenomenological approach has been inflected in my philosophizing here at UTEP. I have become convinced that teaching is not a maieutics and that something transformative actually happens in the teaching experience. In being approached by my students in their very otherness and needs and desires as students, my authoritative, autonomy and power is challenged and put into question. I am called to answer to their questions. This is a Levinasian phenomenological ethics. Over these many years, my self-awareness as a philosopher and the direction of my writing and research has been formed by the quality of the questions that have been put to me by my students, as we explore and discover the alterity of each other. This is because our relationships are fundamentally and primordially normative in their intentionality. As Levinas notes,

> The relationship between me and the Other does not have the structure formal logic finds in all relations. The terms remain absolute despite the relation in which they find themselves. The relation with the Other is the only relation where such an overturning of formal logic can occur. But we then understand that the idea of infinity [on which the relationship between me and the other occurs], which requires separation, requires it unto atheism, so profoundly that the idea of infinity could be forgotten.[5]

And what I have found is that many, perhaps most, of my students forget this experience of infinity by the time that they reach an upper-level philosophy class. What teaching "Levinas" from this border situation has taught me is to respect the expression of difference that I have discovered in those whose roots sink deep below the surfaces on either side of the Rio Grande. While my students may not yet appreciate it, the expression of their differences is the manifestation of their subjective, autonomous being which Levinas notes is not merely the "drawing aside of the veil of the phenomenon…[but]…is of itself the presence of a face, and hence appeal and teaching, *entry into relation* with me—the ethical relation."[6] Over the past sixteen years of teaching on the U.S.-Mexican border—since I originally presented "Levinas on the Border(s)"—I have become even more deeply convinced of the importance of "drawing aside the veil" by teaching philosophy in the context of, and with conscious attention to, the phenomenon of being in this strange border community. As I experience the indomitable and strange otherness of the alterity of my students—and as they have experienced my subjective ipseity, I have found more often than not that the more directly and honestly that I engage their unique subjectivities, the more they 'authentically' engage in the ethical normativity of their own lived worlds. Consequently, many of UTEP's philosophy students, many of my students, have gone on to practice philosophy as engaged philosophers making a difference in the world in whatever profession to which they are called.

2. Teaching Jewish Philosophy

I teach Jewish philosophy. I teach metaphysics, epistemology, logic and ethics too. But most of all, twenty years later, it should be no surprise that in part what I have been doing is teaching Jewish philosophy and my doing so has directly contributed to my international reputation and the sings of respect that I have earned from colleagues and students. Teaching Jewish philosophy also characterizes one way of describing the unique psychism of my work as a philosopher at UTEP. This category of my previous paper allowed me to address a set of very complex issues in philosophy and in my own education in philosophy, some of which have to do with what I consider the core identifying pluralism that has historically been the identity of UTEP's way of practicing philosophy but also, what I realized 16 years ago, was a way to address fundamental questions about the way that the generalizing and universalizing tendencies in professional, Anglo-American philosophy itself stand in need of critique. And that need for self-reflexive critique is precisely why I relied on Levinas, and still do so,

to teach Jewish Philosophy. It's a strange phenomenon, Jewish Philosophy, because it first emerged as a distinct sub-discipline in the history of Jewish thought and then as a sub-discipline in the tradition of philosophy which is, at the beginning of the twenty first century, as unclear and contended as it was when I was first introduced to that discipline thirty years ago.

What I seemed to have intuited sixteen years ago was that the tradition of Jewish philosophy was itself problematic but that using Levinas to teach from, out of, and away from that tradition enabled me to develop a self-reflective awareness that challenges facile claims to authoritative teaching traditions. Levinas is not a theologian but is a phenomenologist and philosopher *par excellence*. Today, I use Levinas's philosophy less to emphasize its contested place in a Jewish tradition of teaching but more for its contested place in the field of philosophy itself. That is because Levinas has assumed a recognizable place as a philosopher who not only affirms the deepest roots of the philosophical tradition through his trenchant engagement in and critique of that tradition, but who provides a viable and practical alternative to contemporary obsessions with docetic and dogmatic variants of thought experiments called "justified true beliefs" and myriad other trolleyologies as the empty sorts of profession philosophical posturings that they are. With this Levinasian perspective that is so deeply committed to a radical sort of engaged ethical empiricism, such rhetorical strategies seem to me to be empty saber-rattling when confronted with the eight murders that were occurring each day in Juarez, Mexico in 2010, just a stone's throw away from my the Philosophy Department's offices.

The critique of engaging in philosophy in the form of "doing business as usual" comes from Levinas's claim that "The knowing whose essence is critique cannot be reduced to objective cognition; it leads to the Other. To welcome the Other is to put in question my freedom."[7] Freedom is the correlate of one's spontaneous power that, as I roughly noted then, is a "function of my self-identity." (Simon) *That insight* that I gained from studying and teaching Levinas at *that time* has been deepened by the intervening years of philosophizing at UTEP. What I have experienced time and again is that the students who pass through my classrooms—those others—bring their ever-new and irreducible strange identities with them as they continue to challenge my preconceptions and the general categorial schemes that I employ in setting forth my seminars and lectures. Levinas was a French-Jewish-philosopher, 'fruitfully' living in exile in Paris after having survived with his immediate family, with the help of Christian and secular friends, the devastation of the genocide of the European Jewish community in Europe. Learning from those tragic realities and his almost-defiant embrace of an enjoyment despite that suffering and that suffuse his work, continues to deepen my awareness and appreciation of the joys and sufferings that my students bring to my teaching relations with them, accentuating my separation and distance from their identities and those experiences. This brings a heightened sense of urgency to my attempts to relate responsibly with them. The students with whom I share this Jewish philosophy are mostly Mexican and Mexican-American, suffering from a long post-colonial hangover and withal, mostly hopeful Christians and capitalists. As such, they continue to teach me by questioning my freedom and my power—secular and non-Christian but, most importantly, non-Latino and non-Mexican—and therefore privileged. This

is how I put my understanding in Levinasian terms of my relationship to my Mexican-American students sixteen years ago:

> Levinas claims that "If I can no longer have power over him it is because he overflows absolutely every *idea* I can have of him," he does so because of his conviction that a relationship of justice conditions any intellectual endeavor. As he notes in that same text, [*Totality and Infinity*], "The sense of our whole effort lies in affirming not that the Other forever escapes knowing, but that there is no meaning in speaking here of knowledge or ignorance, for justice, the pre-eminent transcendence and the condition for knowing, is nowise, as one would like, a *noesis* correlative of a *noema*." Relating to the other is accomplished through a face-to-face welcoming of the other in a discourse such that I place the other before me in a relation of priority and non-reciprocity that Levinas calls justice and which accounts for and continues to establish our heterogeneous, pluralistic society.

Justice is not a conceptual relationship and even resists being reduced to the *categories* of intentionality and agency. Rather, justice only appears as *actual* in the lived-world experience of a face-to-face relationship. It is inaccessible to conceptual analysis or any sort of meta-analysis. Justice entails engaging with others in the dynamics of enjoyment, suffering, and the questioning challenges that go along with those phenomena. Moreover, justice only appears in the context of a radical sort of pluralism where and when a society of others is the social condition. And it is to this issue of a "pluralistic society" that I turn to in the next section.

3. Teaching Jewish Philosophy on the Border

Then and now, I don't just teach Philosophy on the Border of the USA and Mexico. And I do not teach Jewish Philosophy just anywhere in some generic space or in some a-temporal way, *sub species aeternitatis*, as Spinoza would have it. Instead, in the intervening sixteen years since I presented that paper, I have come to appreciate the *genius loci* that is El Paso, and the people that constitute this place. This matter of a *genius loci* is something that I have come to learn to appreciate by teaching Jewish philosophy in this particular department of philosophy, at UTEP, in El Paso, on the border of the USA and Mexico. I have 'emerged' as a philosopher in just this situation and by taking and deepening my responsibilities and assignations as they have become apparent to me in just this place. What I intuited then in choosing to teach Jewish Philosophy on *this* border is that Levinas, and the ethical metaphysics that constitutes the core of his teaching, would resonate with the students in just the way that it has.

Of all of the sections in my earlier paper, this particular section on Teaching Jewish Philosophy on the Border was the shortest, but I have now come to the realization that doing just this has unsubstitutable significance for students who live their border conditions on a daily basis. The physical Border Wall that now militaristically and legally, from 'my side' separates one from the other, is a daily reminder that Levinas's position on the inherent exhilic condition of humans is an undeniable reality. For many of my

students, their bi-cultural identity is split right down the middle, leaving them alienated within themselves, internally alienated and struggling with ruptured self-identities. The questions that I now raise to my students, in teaching "Levinas on the Border(s)" of their lives, include asking them: What constitutes "home" for them? What does it mean to be displaced from 'home' as a migrant worker, as someone whose traditional way of life has been disrupted by neo-liberal policies of globalization and international trade agreements, like NAFTA? This is not the venue to discuss all of the complexities of the promises and the disappointing failures of the NAFTA accord, especially for Mexicans, but suffice to say that in 1998 from the office that I occupied in Worrell Hall on the campus of UTEP, I could look out of my window unobstructed and 'see' the struggles of my international neighbors, with their patchwork of homes and dirt roads. I could actually see the poverty-stricken barrio of Anapra in Juarez, Mexico just across the Rio Grande/Rio Bravo, less than half of a mile away from my office window in El Paso, USA. And NAFTA, with its debilitating trade policies, officially began the year I officially began teaching at UTEP.

Today, the view from that same window looks out on the University Bookstore and the Sunbowl Garage complex on the campus of UTEP. Mexico lies 'out of sight' and often 'out of mind' beyond the expansion and development of the university. To make matters worse, there now exists a physical Border Wall, erected to deter migrants and 'illegal aliens' from crossing the border to find adequate work and 'salvation' from the failing Mexican socio-economic and political system. Moreover, official UT System policy now prohibits and severely restricts faculty and students from UTEP from engaging in academic and community building endeavors with each other. Unsurprisingly, the UT System allows Mexican nationals to freely enter its academic system and to exploit their talents but does not reciprocate by freely allowing U.S. citizens, that is, members of the UT university system, to officially travel into and collaborate with Mexicans on their own terms or, minimally, without restrictive limitations.[8]

These changes that have occurred over the past sixteen years are dramatic and reach to the very core of what it means, for me, to teach Jewish Philosophy on the border. To begin with, there is no possibility of a face-to-face relationship when there are "strangers, widows, and orphans" in how the Mexican population has been economically and politically forced to flee their home villages and cities in search for better conditions. There are widows, because the men have all left the towns in search of work and/or education. And there are orphans because both men and women have left.

What has deepened in my work in teaching Jewish philosophy at UTEP is how appropriate and helpful it has been to do so in this particular place at this particular university and in a philosophy department that has historically embraced plurality. I expressed this sense that I had for a unique calling of UTEP's philosophy program when I began teaching Levinas here in the following lines from my earlier paper:

> Such a philosophy of teaching is demanded by the very heterogeneous nature of the border situation where what it means to be on a border is both to relate to the other as non-assimilable and to thereby retain one's own self-identity. In fact, *relating* to the other *as* non-assimilable other is only possible if that very relationship is grounded by one's own self-identity which entails an ongoing assertion of the cultural separations of what it means to be [culturally] rooted as

> a US citizen or as a Mexican citizen … [and] … what I do I do from respect for the other who calls the security of my own identity into question by not allowing me to appropriate their self-identity in my conceptual schemas. Levinas teaches me to accept the gift that is the cultural identity that my Mexican and Mexican-American students offer on a daily basis.

Nine years ago (in 2003), as Chair of the Department of Philosophy, I began to design and was the primary motivating force in helping to institute our current MA in Philosophy program at UTEP. Since its inception, we have had dozens of mostly Mexican and Mexican-American students successfully move through our program. But the success of the graduate program for both the Department and for UTEP is inestimable in how it has contributed to changing perceptions about *what is possible* in actual terms of changing the institutional structures of regulation normative forms of oppression. What I mean by that is that even in the very early years of its growth, the graduate program already began to deliver on its promises of providing a venue for Mexicans, Mexican-Americans, *and* other more traditionally educated U.S. graduates to understand and to begin to change the very dynamics of a border philosophy experience. That has happened in how students have been taught to teach others about the *critical awareness* that they have learned though learning philosophy on and from the border, mainly in the classes that I have taught but also in classes taught by some of my other colleagues, such as Steve Best, Peter Robinson, and most especially John "Jack" Haddox.

4. Teaching Philosophy of Religion

Where the previous section of my former paper called for greater elaboration, this section of that paper calls for much more attenuation. I no longer include teaching Levinas in my readings for philosophy of religion, although his philosophical perspective informs the readings that I do present. My position has not changed much in the past sixteen years and, for the most part, I have been the only philosopher at UTEP who has taught our Philosophy of Religion course. My observations then had to do less with my own limited experience in teaching Philosophy of Religion than with my perception of the lamentably limited and constricted ways in which Philosophy of Religion was being taught across the discipline. As evidence for that, I examined a selection of standard Philosophy of Religion textbooks, with both Continental and Analytic orientations, and came up with the conclusion that:

> (T)hese admittedly few selections out of the many that could have been chosen, [make it] obvious at least to me that the predominant model for reading and teaching philosophy of religion seems to have been and largely still is determined by Christian concerns. While there are many Christians in the world and, evidently, in publishing and teaching positions which determine the agendas of philosophers of religion and the texts available from which to teach, it seems that some of their more intractable difficulties could be addressed by allowing for a philosophy of religion that is not chained to the dominant model. This I do with Levinas.

My judgment on this matter has not changed much except for the fact that I no longer teach Levinas as a philosopher of religion, even though he self-identifies his work as falling into that category. The reason why I do not do so has to do with what Levinas has taught me about the importance of being self-critical about my authoritative position as a philosopher who has the power to determine what my students are exposed to, what they read, and the normative guidance that I provide. Instead of Levinas, I prefer to explore yogic and Buddhist philosophies of religion more thoroughly with my students. This development in my own teaching has to do with two factors that are unique to my teaching experience at UTEP, one being Levinas and his teaching about being open to the radical otherness of my students and the way in which they question my privileged position of autonomy, and the other the deep structural roots and orientation of UTEP from an Asian tradition, most obviously, from Bhutan. Ultimately, Bhutan stands for Indian and Buddhist cultural traditions and I feel that it is not only my *institutional responsibility* but it is my *world responsibility* to not only expose my students to the otherness of these Asian traditions because of how ubiquitous signifiers of that tradition exist at UTEP, but more importantly because teaching Asian philosophy, especially yogic philosophy, introduces a challenge to the dominant approaches to metaphysics, logic, and epistemology that are taught in Western universities. Levinas already challenges those paradigms from his phenomenological commitments but also from his metaphysical and religious commitments. His worldviews are neither neo-Platonic nor neo-Aristotelian out of which emerged the rationalism, empiricism, and logocentrism of Western philosophies. By contrast, and with striking similarity to the major streams of Asian philosophy, Levinas argues that "ethics is first philosophy," thereby radically departing from the totalizing rationalisms of most Western metaphysics and so-called 'metaethics' that prioritize ontology. In doing so, and as I indicated at the end of my previous section, Levinas provides us with an anarchical, atheist alternative starting point with which to begin our dialogues with each other and with which to begin our rationalizing and our concerns with justice.

5. Non-Tenure Track Teaching

Considerations of justice with Levinas lead into my final section. And with justice, I want to talk about pluralism in the profession of philosophy and the unique role that philosophy departments such as those at UTEP have played and can play in philosophy as a discipline. When I wrote my paper and presented my reflections sixteen years ago, I did so as a Lecturer jointly appointed in the Philosophy and Humanities programs. As I noted then, I was thankful to have been offered a position in academia that aligned with my journey in philosophy, from my existentialist awakening with Kierkegaard and Heidegger and that led to a long and ongoing journey into the roots of German Idealism with Kant, Hegel, and through the phenomenology of Husserl. In important ways, that journey continues and the roots continue to nourish me with inspiration and challenges. Sixteen years ago, as a non-tenure-track Lecturer, I wrote how I wished that the possibility of being "enmeshed in a tenure-track position, especially at UTEP" would become a reality and that I preferred to be "more firmly ensconced in a position somewhere doing the committee routine and losing sleep over not publishing as much

as I should or could or would." Be careful what you wish for! Several years later at UTEP, in the midst of living the dream, I realized that my name had changed to Jules "committee" Simon and even later than that, more recently, my personal life was falling apart because of my not publishing or presenting papers as much as I thought that I should be. Such normative intentionality created objective conditions that challenged my responsibility even further.

But I was at UTEP and I was happy to be there. I am at UTEP and I am happy to be here. The moral of this story is that, after just two years in a position as Lecturer, my colleague and fellow member on this panel, Peter Robinson, officially retired from teaching and left the university. The Philosophy Program advertised for a tenure-track position in the area of Continental Philosophy with concentrations in History of Philosophy and Philosophy of Religion. I applied and was hired. That was in 2000.

Eventually, I became Chair of the Department and I crafted and guided into place our MA in Philosophy program. Currently I direct the MA program and in my concern for the others in this place I now call home, I would like to establish a PhD program in Philosophy. For me, it's a matter of justice and fairness for those who live in this region to be able to have access to the all that is excellent, difficult, and rare.

Notes

1. Jules Simon, "Levinas on the Border(s)," Aug. 1998, presented at The World Congress of Philosophy, Boston; published in cyberspace at "The Paideia Project: Online" in the section, "Teaching Philosophy"; abstract refereed.
2. Diana Natalicio, "President's Welcome" *The University of Texas at El Paso, n.d.,* Web. 3 Feb 2014, <http://www.utep.edu/aboututep/presidentswelcome.aspx>
3. Emmanuel Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy," in *The Levinas Reader*, edited by Sean Hand (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 75-87.
4. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity,* trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 180.
5. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 180-181.
6. Ibid, 181.
7. Ibid, 85.
8. "Mexico," *The University of Texas at Austin International Office: Risk and Safety, n.d.,* 23 Sept 2016, <https://world.utexas.edu/risk/restrictedregions/mexico>.