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## Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas: ‘After you, sir!’

*Morality begins when freedom, instead of being justified by itself, feels itself to be arbitrary and violent.*

— Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*

‘After you, sir,’ a trivial everyday phrase, we would say, worn out by frequent use, even insincere due to its perfunctory delivery, and yet a phrase that could be said to capture the entire thought of Emmanuel Levinas, a Lithuanian philosopher whose reflection on the importance of ethics and the concern for the other person is one of the most important challenges to the preoccupation with our own being that seems to characterise our time. One can see an ever increasing inclination towards self-adulation and indifference in Western society, reducing any idea of human solidarity or genuine concern for the other person to a historical discrepancy or naïve idealism. Levinas, whose thought gravitates towards humility, self-effacement and responsibility, may at first be seen against the backdrop of such idealism or, even worse, he may be seen as the moralising, incriminating conscience of our time. One could say that Levinas is at odds with the chronic disease of egotism, self-interest and voracity of ambition that have all come to constitute contemporary sensibility. The forcefulness of the Ego to concern itself with its own being—what Levinas calls the *conatus essendi* or ‘the struggle to be’ that dominates all living things—the inviolability we assign to our freedom and to the sanctity of our time, the assumed legitimacy we attribute to our projects, the naïve right, we all think we have, to recognition of our subjectivity leading to the proliferation of self-affirmative discourses online and elsewhere as a consequence, are all encouraged and sustained by the neo-liberal systems of thought and the new global economy. The commodified nature of our identities and the ability to ‘sell’ ourselves is the currency of our age; everything else is either blind to the grit of our existence or just too insincere to be taken seriously.

In this autocratic reign of the Ego, the obsessive preoccupation and care for our own being that Levinas identifies with ontology and the primacy it gives to what *ensures* and solidifies our existence rather than what *justifies* it, the concern and fear for the other person, my responsibility for their vulnerability, emerges at best as an unrealistic critique of our inadequacies and moral failures, a guilty conscience easily overcome by the harsh realities of market economy and the cynicism it seems to inspire. But far from innocent idealism or naiveté of

premature consciousness, the concern for the other person for Levinas, and contrary to the entire tradition of Western philosophy, is what constitutes our subjectivity. One is a subject only and insofar as one is awakened or 'sobered up' to responsibility for the other person. The very identity, what makes me unique and irreplaceable in Levinas, is precisely the fact that no one can answer or respond to the distress of the other *in my stead*. This is what consigns me to my identity, the impossibility to shirk my responsibility without blame. My very enterprise in being a social subject is to be for the other person. 'Before the Other (*Autru*),' says Levinas, 'the I is infinitely responsible. The Other is the poor and destitute one, and nothing which concerns this Stranger can leave the I indifferent.'<sup>1</sup> Indeed, he says, it is what is 'presupposed in all human relationships. If it were not that, we would not even say, before opening a door, "After you, sir!" It is an original "After you, sir!,"<sup>2</sup> the original welcome that establishes hospitality and human solidarity at the very beginning of history. 'After you sir,' under all its quotidian significations, reveals the depth of the originary call to Goodness where the other person precedes my freedom and counts more than myself.

Considering the increasingly individualistic climate of our world, ethical concerns have resurfaced with more urgency in contemporary thought and ethics in Levinas' terms that we will consider is a summons to responsibility for the other person and the welfare of others *before* oneself. Ethics is a disinterested concern and preoccupation with the other person. Furthermore, this concern, says Levinas, is neither free nor rational but before the question of choice even arises, one is already indebted to the other. The presence or proximity of the other person makes me aware of their mortality and of my responsibility for their death that precedes questions of freedom or cognition. This is what Levinas means when he says that ethics understood as responsibility is 'older' than choice; it trumps the freedom of the Ego, in other words. We are under assignation of responsibility even before we can actively decide to act on it. It is enough 'to show oneself, to express oneself, to associate oneself *to be entrusted to me [m'être confié]*.'<sup>3</sup> Levinas argues that the 'destitute' other who is in need puts in question our self-righteousness and our presumed ownership of the world, that the other interrupts the selfishness of our ways. 'To approach the Other is to put into question my freedom,' he writes, the spontaneity of my ways.<sup>4</sup> It is to discover oneself passively, not as an agent but as an accused called to justification. The other person's claim on my freedom signifies, for Levinas, the beginning of moral consciousness.

This essay will introduce some of the fundamental concepts in Levinas' writing on ethics that in all our concern and care for our own being makes us alert to the proximity and presence of the other person who demands our attention so imperially that we are left without alibi or excuse. It is, for Levinas, impossible to desert one's post of responsibility for the other person. This introduction, which cannot possibly do justice to the complexity of Levinas' thought without compromise, will above all try to express the need and the exigency of reading

Levinas. In order to head off the all too facile criticism of difficulty or abstraction attributed to Levinas that always seems to exonerate the reader of responsibility, it is important to bear in mind that when trying to communicate what goes against the grain of habitual thinking, it becomes a necessity to rely on reader's patience and tenacity in meeting challenging ideas. Levinas is challenging, partly because he turns us against ourselves in a sense, invites us to act *in spite of* ourselves, for '[n]o one is good voluntarily,' as he reminds us in *Otherwise than Being*,<sup>5</sup> and partly due to the very nature of his writing that does not patronise the reader but demands rather that we take responsibility for our reading. This essay will hopefully reflect both the depth and gravity of Levinas' thought that would be lost to the reader if his perceptive insight into the nature of subjectivity and responsibility were watered down too much and allowed to stabilize into a commonplace the title seems to suggest. Staying faithful to the scope of the essay and the significance of the subject matter, I will proceed by a closer analysis of the most important conceptual eddies in Levinas' major works, where different currents seem to converge and form a powerful articulation of his thought. Following a chronologic trajectory of his thought at first seems most suited to the task at hand. However, the essay will focus more on the concepts Levinas develops in his 'non-allergic,' as he calls it, or 'ethical' relation to the other person and make forays accordingly into a range of writings in order to plumb for insight. Another important aspect at the beginning is also Levinas' thought on education that I will introduce by briefly examining its premises in the context of his larger ethical concerns in order to open up the paramount notions of responsibility, infinity and the other that, for Levinas, remain intimately related to teaching. To bear in mind here, however, is the fact that it is not a question of pedagogical practice but rather teaching as a relation that remains open to the other as what constantly destabilises or, in Levinas' more visceral terms, 'traumatises' our cognitive structures enabling their transformation.

Emmanuel Levinas was born in Lithuania in Kovno (1906-95) to a family who formed an integral part of Kovno's important Jewish community where he received his education in Hebrew and Russian. His formative years belonged to the extensive reading of the Hebrew Bible and the great Russian literature of Pushkin, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, who, together with Shakespeare, would continue to influence his thinking and work on ethics. Levinas came to France to study philosophy between 1923-28 with a brief but decisive spell in Germany where he attended Edmund Husserl's lectures in 1928. He developed an early interest in Husserl's phenomenology, a field in philosophy that studies the structures of consciousness and the ways in which 'phenomena' or appearances of things manifest themselves for us. Levinas was the one who by and large introduced German philosophy, and especially phenomenology that was to have a lasting impact on the subsequent development of Continental thought, to a French readership, translating Husserl's *Cartesian Mediations* and writing *The Theory of Intuition in*

*Husserl's Phenomenology* in 1930 and *Discovering Existence with Husserl and Heidegger*. Already in these initial reflections, one can discern the limits of phenomenology in its quest for essence and objectivity in the structures of consciousness and knowledge that Levinas' entire post-war writing with its incisive focus on ethics as metaphysics or 'first philosophy,' as he often argues, that is, as a foundation for all thought that precedes historical and cultural significations, will attempt to articulate and surpass.

Levinas had rather modest academic beginnings in Paris as a director of the *École Normale Israélite Orientale*, a Jewish institute for education where he was to remain and teach philosophy and Talmudic studies for more than thirty years. In 1973 he became a distinguished professor of philosophy at the Sorbonne where he continued as Emeritus until 1979. In his writing, Levinas often evokes teaching in order to speak of the concepts of responsibility that he so powerfully articulates in his philosophy but also of 'the idea of the infinite' that he borrows from Descartes, where, in presenting the infinite, one is inspired to contain more than one's capacity. In education, Levinas argues, one is subject to the same process. One is literally called *beyond* oneself by what comes from the exterior, by what one does not already contain. If knowledge, as Levinas sees it in *Totality and Infinity*, is a relation of 'the Same' with 'the Other' where the Other is always appropriated by and reduced to the Same, or, in other words, where everything is homogenised to my consciousness, to the totality of my world, and where thinking relates itself to the other as something ready for the taking, there to be possessed for the benefit of the Ego or the subject, then education, in order to maintain itself, must keep a relation with what is 'absolutely other.' This is what Levinas calls transcendence that resists reduction to the common categories and does not let itself be easily integrated within my frame of reference but is precisely what puts that frame radically in question. Education like ethics is the decisive experience of being put in question:

A calling into question of the Same—which cannot occur within the egoistic spontaneity of the Same—is brought about by the Other. We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics. The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity as ethics. Metaphysics, transcendence, the welcoming of the Other by the Same, of the Other by Me, is concretely produced as the calling into question of the Same by the Other, that is, *as the ethics that accomplishes the critical essence of knowledge*. (TI, 43, emphasis added)

In other words, knowledge in teaching becomes what carries me beyond that which constitutes my nature and my prejudice, it sustains the possibility of my being opened *beyond* myself which also, for Levinas, constitutes the ethical relation as 'the welcoming of the Other by the Same.' To welcome the other person is to be staggered by one's own insufficiency and narrowness of vision that opens up transformative possibilities in the

subject or, as Levinas puts it, it 'is to receive from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity. But this also means: to be taught. The relation with the Other, or Conversation, is a non-allergic relation, an ethical relation; but inasmuch as it is welcomed this conversation is a teaching. Teaching is not reducible to maieutics [or recollection]; it comes from the exterior and brings me more than I contain' (TI, 51). 'The idea of infinity' in teaching is not only articulated as a constant burden on the myopia of one's subjectivity as a student or a reader, but also concretely as an exorbitant demand on the teacher to always give more than s/he can, to actually give one's time where one has none. But, on the other hand, to *truly* give one's time one has to find it there where there is none left to give. For Levinas, teaching can only come from the Other and it is the Other as *transcendent*—that is to say, as irreducible to our categories—that inspires us to learn, saving us from complacency and atrophy of spirit. To be committed to teaching is to be 'obligated ethically to the surpassing of categorical constraints' that only the other person can bring about.<sup>6</sup>

Levinas' focus on the absolute primacy of the other person's dignity together with his radical attempt to break with what he calls 'the imperialism of the Same' (TI, 87) that he claims characterizes Western thought is directly related to his experiences during WWII. This was when Western philosophy's belief in the power of reason, in human progress and in an overarching sense of destiny and unity all collapsed in the face of the unprecedented destruction leaving a ravaged hole instead of reason at the centre of the world that used to make it cohere. The war itself, with its countless victims, both dead and those left behind to stitch back a fraction of meaning out of a world without one, represented a complete nervous breakdown of Reason itself that philosophy had ignored to hear for the second time. Levinas' family died in the Holocaust, and, as a French citizen and Army officer, he became a prisoner of war in Germany where he was compelled to forced labour while his wife and daughter were kept hidden in a French monastery until the end of the occupation by one of his lifelong friends, Maurice Blanchot, whose presence and importance in the intellectual life of Levinas and contemporary criticism in general cannot be overestimated. This experience, the searing wound of violence and cruelty man is capable of afflicting onto the other person because of their very otherness that the war presupposes and manifests in its implacable logic of extermination, shook Levinas' faith in modern philosophy and demanded a radical questioning of its critical heritage. War, he writes, "establishes an order from which no one can keep his distance; nothing henceforth is exterior. War does not manifest exteriority and the other as other" (TI, 21). Rather, its relation to alterity—to the other person who is not part of the Same because of ethnicity, faith, sexuality or whatever may be the watershed of his difference—is that of conquest and assimilation. War denies the very heterogeneity of the other, their otherness, in *absolute* terms. In war, our commitment to the other person's needs and vulnerability that ethics

demands has no room for its disclosure. For Levinas, war makes manifest ‘the allergic reaction’ against alterity and the horror of the other who persists *as* other, which he now sees as part of the Western systems of thought. Since ‘its infancy,’ says Levinas, Western philosophy, with its prerogatives of the Same and investitures in the structures of identity and integrated consciousness, ‘has been struck with a horror of the other that remains other—with an insurmountable allergy,’<sup>7</sup> whose logical terminus is war, hatred and annihilation of alterity. The entire trajectory of Levinas’ work from now on can be seen as one irremissible attempt ‘to encounter the Other without allergy, that is, in justice’ (TI, 303).

Martin Heidegger's affiliation with National Socialism in the 1930s thus quickly led to Levinas’ reassessment of his initial enthusiasm for Heidegger’s new form of phenomenological inquiry articulated in *Being and Time* (1927). Heidegger’s ontology, which Levinas ultimately equates with the barbarism of war and a primitive form of naturalism where each being perseveres in being without consideration for the other and that he sees as ‘an attachment to oneself as radical as a naïve will to live’ (TI, 87), cannot, however, be done away with altogether but, as Levinas sees it, must be surpassed. One must surpass one’s being, ‘escape it,’ as he will come to formulate it in one of his early responses to the burden and weight of being in *On Escape* (1935), and, in the anxiety and fear of death that motivates one’s perseverance in being, find a concern for the other greater than one’s being. If Heidegger’s primary concern is Being and its existential analytic of death—the fact that my perseverance in being depends on my anxiety of death—for Levinas, it is ethics as the surpassing of one’s being in *being for the other*. Since my being, rather than that of the other person, is my primary care in Heidegger, nothing can justify the sacrifice of my life. Ontology is an ‘egology’ that makes the Ego alone the object of my obligations—which is probably the best diagnosis of contemporary subjectivity. Ethics, on the other hand, is a relation beyond being. In ethics, as Levinas often points out, one fears murder more than one’s own death.

Out of Levinas’ agonizing experience as a prisoner of war came *Existence and Existents* (1947), tentatively introducing the concerns that were to be fully developed in *Totality and Infinity* (1961) and *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence* (1974). *Existence and Existents* deals with the problem of subjectivity and its emergence from the anonymity and impersonality of being. It already signals a movement towards intersubjectivity and the encounter with the alterity of the other person whose articulation will become the burden of Levinas’ mature writing. The volume, as he writes in the preface, considers ‘the problem of the Good, time, and *the relationship with the other as a movement toward the Good*.’<sup>8</sup> What is, however, most striking is the fact that the centerpiece chapter of the book called *Il y a* or ‘There Is,’ rendered as ‘Existence Without a World’ (45), was written during Levinas’ captivity as the French officer in the prison camp near

Hanover. The experience of horror and the unbearable monotony and indifference of being—the horror of the *il y a*, of the ‘there is’—that Levinas articulates here through the phenomenological analysis of insomnia and nausea is one of the most disquieting and haunting sections ever written in philosophy and, as Howard Caygill writes in *Levinas and the Political*, the horror of being in *Existence and Existents* is inextricably ‘bound to haunting, to the dead who cannot be forgotten.’ Being, in other words, is weighed down, burdened by the barbarism of its own freedom and the insufferable memory of its own injustice. *Il y a*, Caygill continues, ‘is the continual “presence” of the murdered awaiting justice.’<sup>9</sup> The chapter on *Il y a* is a fragment, an open wound that forms a dark backdrop of existence around which the book and Levinas’ thought as a whole are structured but that remains itself inassimilable to any structure of rationality or thought due to the very trauma it tortuously attempts to articulate. *Existence and Existents*, as Levinas describes it, is clearly marked and ‘governed by a profound need to leave the climate’ of Heideggerian thought and its preoccupation with being, but also ‘by the conviction that we cannot leave it for a philosophy that would be pre-Heideggerian’ (EE, 4). Heidegger, once again, must be surpassed.

Beginning with *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* published in 1961, Levinas’s work is firmly set on a trenchant critique of ontology and Western philosophy in the name of ethics and responsibility for the other person. A genuine concern that Western philosophy has never done justice to the heterogeneity and difference of the other but has privileged the tyranny of the Same that denies the autonomy and dignity of the other person takes its most systematic expression in *Totality and Infinity*. The violence done to the other whereby the other is reduced to a set of knowable categories such as race, gender or other fixed identity which s/he inevitably exceeds, is what Levinas calls ‘totalisation.’ It points to the denial of the other’s difference that exceeds any reductive attempt and is always more and *beyond* any idea that I may have or carry from the other, whose distinct narrative, memories and subjectivity my history cannot possibly account for without injustice or prejudice. ‘To approach the Other in conversation,’ says Levinas ‘is to welcome his expression, in which at each instant he *overflows* the idea a thought would carry away from it’ (TI, 51, my emphasis). This overflowing is the excessive presence of the other that no totality can grasp and that is beyond the capacity of the Ego. Infinity, which in the title is set against totality, indicates precisely the break out of these reductive egological structures and a movement towards the other as radical exteriority, what is beyond my categories and otherwise than my being. If totality is the inscription of the other in the logic of the Same, a synthesizing of difference in assimilation that Levinas rejects in order to revert to the originary possibility of thinking that welcomes and remains open to the other *as other*, infinity, that is *beyond my being*, signals a displacement of the privileged place of the Ego or consciousness in the Western discourse. Infinity signifies “the exceeding of limits,” Levinas notes (TI, 26), and the limits are those of the subject or the ‘I,’

fearful of death and concerned only with its own being. This surpassing of my finitude—infinity—is brought about by my openness to the other person understood as irreducibly other and beyond my totalising grasp. The other, Levinas writes, ‘escapes my grasp by an essential dimension’ and is never ‘wholly in my site.’ (TI, 39). It is because of this essential resistance of the other I encounter that my world is shook and called to account. This does not mean, however, that the ‘I’ renounces its egotism. What it means is that the encounter with the other person in ‘conversation consists in recognizing in the Other *a right over this egotism*’ and the need of ‘justifying oneself’ (TI, 40, emphasis added). The presence of the other person in the encounter puts me in question and reveals to me the injustice of all my prerogatives. I finally find myself and the ‘naïve’ spontaneity of my freedom contested and interpellated. This ‘calling into question of the same,’ Levinas says, ‘is brought about by the other. We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the other “ethics”’ (TI, 43).

What thus, first of all, comes to constitute ethics, is the fact that it begins in generosity, my openness to the other *in spite of myself*, an originary ‘after you, sir’ we mentioned at the beginning where the other precedes my freedom and the natural egoism of my needs. Ethics, for Levinas, begins in a ‘face to face’ encounter with the other person that cannot be reduced to a symmetrical relationship or to a totality of shared concepts, such as the attachments of racial, ethnic, cultural or other belonging. I am obligated to the other person not because we are alike but precisely and insofar the other is infinitely heterogeneous to me. If ethics, as Levinas sees it, begins in the encounter with the other person who is always beyond and more than I can conceive, then any attempt at ‘totalisation’ is inevitably reductive and unethical because it strips the other of the very thing that makes them unique. Furthermore, the other person as the source of my moral obligations is due my concern *without* considering any reciprocity on their behalf. Reciprocity, Levinas says, is ‘*his* affair.’ ‘I am responsible for the other without waiting for reciprocity, were I to die for it.’ (EI, 98). This is what Levinas calls ‘the curvature of the intersubjective space’ (TI, 291) where the other is not the same as me but matters *more* than me, where the ego seeks the good for the other before itself, ‘*after you, sir!*’ It is, in fact, this unilateral responsibility without symmetry that individuates me and makes me irreplaceable in my responsibility, but it is also what retains the dignity and the rectitude of the ethical relation that would otherwise be no more than an economic transaction. And ethics exceeds economy; it must be a rigorous movement towards the other without return, compensation or restitution where the movement comes back and benefits the Ego. An ethical deed, as Levinas suggests, sets ‘its sights on a time beyond the horizon of my time.’ One must ‘renounce contemporaneity with the triumph of one’s work’ altogether.<sup>10</sup> To act ethically is to act without any symbolic recognition that glorifies the Ego in the form of martyrdom or any self-congratulation that we may feel applauds us whenever we give to charity. This is when the subject still takes himself as an end and beneficiary of his generosity. Ethics invites us to act without gratitude or ‘thanks’ in return. The agent acts, says



Levinas, 'without hope for self' or any thought of 'entering the Promised Land' (HO, 27). To be ethical exceeds even the concept of sacrifice, strictly speaking, which still implies economy: one sacrifices in order to appease the gods, to get in their good graces and ensure a future of plenty, for instance. Self-sacrifice that the rigour of the ethical relation requires is shorn of any hope of martyrdom for the Ego, it is beyond 'hope for self,' a pure *being-for-the-other* without return. 'After, you sir!' expects nothing in return.

In the ethical relation, the intersubjective space is 'curved' rather than symmetrical or reciprocal insofar as the other matters *more* than me and is privileged in the encounter. The other is not the same as me but comes from the exterior, so to speak, from beyond *my* world and from an ethical height as a command. 'There is a commandment in the appearance of the face [of the other], as if a master spoke to me,' writes Levinas (EI, 89). To welcome the other is to welcome 'the Most-High,' (TI, 34), whose claim on me is impossible to evade. But the other does not command attention because of their power, it is not by force that the other commands, but precisely in virtue of their powerlessness and vulnerability. The other person commands by his/her exposure and openness to blows and outrage. Richard A. Cohen captures this in a subtle but resonant way in his introduction to *Ethics and Infinity* when he writes that 'ethics opposes *less* than power can conquer' (EI, 13). In ethics, in other words, I am *overpowered* by the frailty of the other, by their supplication to freedom that precedes mine and not by their force. There is a moral charge in the face of the other and a conquering mastery, but at the same time, Levinas continues, 'the face of the Other is destitute; it is the poor for whom I can do all and to whom I owe all. And me, whoever I may be, but as a "first person," I am he who finds the resources to respond to the call' (EI, 89). It is in their vulnerability that the other's authority and height over me reside. What is signaled here is precisely the reversion of the natural or ontological order into an ethical one where 'the mastery of the Other and his poverty, with my submission and my wealth, is primary' (EI, 89). The other, in Levinas, is, indeed, often referred to in terms of 'the stranger, the widow and the orphan,' representing the everyman, the no matter who, in order to indicate the essential vulnerability of human beings behind all subject assertions and the insuperable need for solidarity and compassion, but also to point to the irremissible responsibility that I have for the other who is without support or protection. This essential vulnerability of the other person for whom I am responsible and to whom I owe everything is articulated in Levinas as 'the face of the other' that erupts on the scene defenseless and disempowers me, putting a stop to the natural selfishness of my will. The face of the other opens me to the call of Goodness. It is the analysis of 'the face' that carries the entire weight of the argument in *Totality and Infinity*.

The face, for Levinas, is immediately ethical. It is closely related to sensibility that is there prior to cognition and the structures of reason that order the perception of our world. Sensibility, furthermore, is fundamentally passive, 'more passive than all passivity, more passive than matter,' says Levinas (HO,

75), because of its *vulnerability*, because it is open to touch and to wounding. And it is precisely in sensibility that one encounters the other person, beyond the categories of cognition and beyond all cultural significations. The source of my ethical vigilance in which the weight of my responsibility manifests itself lies in the vulnerability and exposedness of the other person who *in passivity* resists the appropriative power of my will. For Levinas, this ethical resistance of the other—ethical because powerless and passive and yet, by that same token, infinitely imperious—is expressed in the epiphany of ‘the face’ in the face-to-face encounter with the other person. ‘Face-to-face,’ and the immediacy of contact it suggests, is the very foundation of intersubjectivity in Levinas.

The face of another is, above all, an ‘exposure, without defence.’ Its skin ‘stays most naked, most destitute’ (EI, 96), as Levinas writes, and because of its extreme exposure, even inviting violence, it becomes the watershed of the ethical exigency. One always hates and strikes another’s face, one aims at the face that yet, in its very vulnerability and exposure to outrage, signifies authority: ‘The face is what forbids us to kill,’ says Levinas. It is ‘that whose meaning consists in saying: “thou shall not kill”’ (EI, 86). The face is thus an authority *without* force. It is a command that ‘does not render murder impossible’ but it nevertheless forbids it. ‘I have said,’ as Levinas points in one of his interviews, ‘that in my analysis of the face it is a demand; a demand, not a question. The face is a hand in search for recompense, an open hand. That is, it needs something. It is going to ask you for something.’<sup>11</sup> What the face so imperially demands and asks for is the interruption of my being and my intoxication with it, in which the motivation of all my efforts ensures my existence. But this does not mean that one has to obey: ‘When I said that the face is authority, that there is authority in the face, this may undoubtedly seem contradictory: it is a request and it is an authority. You have a question later on, in which you ask me how it could be that that if there is a commandment in the face, one can do the opposite of what the face demands. The face is not a force. It is an authority’ (169). Not only is it authority without force but authority precisely in virtue of the fact that it is defenseless, in virtue of its extreme vulnerability, ‘open like a city declared open to the approaching enemy’ (HO, 63). The face is thus what makes me acutely aware of the presence of the other person whose claim on me comes from on high and beyond *my* world, from an ethical dimension of height—literally an uprightness of another person—as a command that sobers me up to responsibility. Only when faced with another there before me is one sobered up from intoxication with one’s own being. The breaking up of the other in what is my world, a world *for* me, signifies also the beginning of a subjectivity delivered from itself and the burden of its own being. It is the dawn of compassion, committing me to solidarity, to ‘human fraternity’ as Levinas calls it (TI, 215).

The face signifies thus an *ethical* resistance, a ‘gentle force’ that obligates. One can still make it bleed, one is even invited to because of its extreme exposure, but what bleeds at the same time is one’s own humanity. In its total nudity and incapacity to resist anything, the face resists murder. ‘There is

here a relation not with a very great resistance,' writes Levinas, 'but with something absolutely *other*: the resistance of what has no resistance—the ethical resistance' (TI, 199). This ethical inviolability of absolute frailty can even be manifested in the common perception of our inadequacy to speak untruth directly to the face of the other person, to hurt or even reproach, not to mention to kill the other when confronted directly in the face-to-face. This inadequacy or difficulty of the Ego is significant because it points to the originary ethical resistance of the face that underlies it and that the face *immediately* signifies, prior to any cognition or social and cultural categorization. The face obligates me immediately and cannot be relativised. It is pure metaphysics that transcends and obligates beyond cultural, social or gender difference. The face is not culturally or otherwise contingent. Prior to consciousness, to interpretation and representation, I am already obligated to the other, which means that ethics precedes conceptual knowledge. This also means that the face as the origin of moral obligation is not an object of thought or perception. The face immediately calls me to respond before I consider or decide whether it may be 'sensible' to do so. It is important to understand that, for Levinas, the demand of responsibility that devolves on me is not verifiable but *irresistible*. The face is, as he writes, what cannot 'become a content, which your thoughts could embrace; it is uncontainable' (EI, 86-7), exceeding the capacity of the Ego to reduce it to the same, to a typology or a theme. The face of the other is uncontainable in that it is *other*, beyond the categories and frames of my reference. To reduce it to commonplaces and recognisable categories would then be precisely to deface, to do violence to the face.

If *Totality and Infinity* focuses on the alterity of the other person, another major work by Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* published in 1974, attempts to articulate the impact of the ethical relation on the subjectivity of the Ego. As Caygill points out in *Levinas and the Political*, '*Otherwise than Being* could equally be titled "otherwise than freedom," since it explores the "human possibility" of a subjectivity marked by responsibility rather than by the experience of freedom' (131). It is in many ways a critical reassessment of the thematising and conceptual language Levinas uses in *Totality and Infinity* in order to describe or represent the alterity of the other that he claims is precisely beyond thematisation and conceptuality, a critique powerfully articulated by Jacques Derrida in his essay 'Violence and Metaphysics,'<sup>12</sup> but it is also a continuing development of Levinas' work on ethics and the radical implications it entails for Western thought.

There is, indeed, a radical change in *Otherwise than Being* that pushes subjectivity obsessively towards self-abnegation and masochism for the sake of the other person—what Levinas calls 'substitution' or pure 'for-the-other' of the Ego where the self is 'a hostage' persecuted by its responsibility, existing 'through the other and for the other, but without this being alienation...' (OB, 114). The language in *Otherwise than Being* has also become more self-conscious due to the *aporetic* or paradoxical nature of thematisation that Derrida

had pointed out where the attempt to represent or thematise *otherness* can only be a self-defeating enterprise that fails the more it succeeds. This is the reason for the violent change from the systematic inquiry and conceptual certainties of *Totality and Infinity* to a more performative and expressive prose tortuously exacerbated by the obsessive need to surpass the very concepts it develops. Derrida's incisive reading of Levinas in 'Violence and Metaphysics,' published in *Writing and Difference* (1967), a few years after *Totality and Infinity*, had more than just a skin-deep resonance with Levinas, which bears out in *Otherwise than Being* with its radical awareness of its own use of language that now tries to escape the pitfalls of essentialism and ontological representation of *otherness*. This is articulated in terms of 'the saying' and 'the said,' that Levinas claims is 'one of the central theses of the present work' (OB, 46), where 'the said' is the constative and essentialising reification of the other person to a theme or identity that we have already described as the unethical reduction of the Other to the Same, and 'saying' is precisely the performative, ethical opening and exposure to the other *as other*. 'Saying' is undescriptive, in other words; it is the approach that does not objectify or ontologise the other person but exposes them as *otherwise than my being*. It signifies the immediacy of face-to-face, 'prior to essence, prior to identification' (OB, 45). For, before identity, 'before the creature collects himself in present and representation to make himself essence,' as Levinas writes elsewhere, 'man approaches man' (HO, 67), naked and vulnerable, where one is already moved to responsibility, prior to any calculation of merit or judgment on my side.

The nature of subjectivity in *Otherwise than Being* has also been radicalised and is no longer a welcoming host of *Totality and Infinity* but a traumatised 'hostage,' persecuted by the incumbent vulnerability of the other it cannot get rid of: 'Subjectivity is being hostage,' as Levinas writes (OB, 127). Insofar as one is under 'assignation' of responsibility which precedes the freedom of one's will, one is 'accused' from the beginning: 'Responsibility for another is not an accident that happens to a subject, but precedes essence in it, has not awaited freedom, in which a commitment to another would have been made. I have not done anything and I have always been under accusation—persecuted. The ipseity [or the self]... is a hostage. The word *I* means *here I am*, answering for everything and for everyone' (OB, 114). The 'I' is now completely deposed from its nominative or originative status and is no longer a beneficiary of action: 'Strictly speaking the other is the end, I am hostage,' (OB, 128), which is to say that the Ego or the 'I' is a *subjection* to the other. The 'I' now exists only in self-abnegation and sacrifice for the other, which Levinas calls 'substitution.' Derrida takes up and develops this point in *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* (1997), delivered partly as a eulogy upon Levinas' death in 1995, where he writes of a violent transition from 'the subject as host' in *Totality and Infinity* to 'the subject as hostage' in *Otherwise than Being* where subjectivity is constituted in and by subjection to the other that seems to precede the welcome made to the other.<sup>13</sup> I am elected to responsibility for the other before the

question of choice for me even arises and this election is prior to the welcome. The 'assignation of responsibility,' says Derrida, 'the election of the hostage seems not only more "originary," rendering my welcoming of the other immaterial, but also 'violent' and 'traumatizing.' The Good, in other words, where the other counts more than myself, 'elects me before I welcome it' (59), choses me 'first before I can be in a position to choose, that is, welcome its choice' (OB, 122).

Subjectivity in *Otherwise than Being* is without exit or alibi, elected to responsibility it cannot shirk, as if despite itself, despite its will to do otherwise which would only produce another self-abnegation in shame that itself only bears witness to the originary responsibility for the other one is unable to evade without fault. The 'I' is now without recourse, cornered by its responsibility and completely exposed as *for-the-other*, substituting itself for every other. Levinas: 'The condition of being a hostage is not chosen; if there had been a choice, the subject would have kept his as-for-me and the exits found in inner life. But this subjectivity, his very psyche, is for the other, his very bearing independence consists in supporting the other, expiating for him' (OB 136). The 'I' is already an object and accusative 'me' in which it discovers itself under accusation, that is to say, as responsible. 'Everything is from the start in the accusative,' Levinas writes, 'the signification of the pronoun *self*... know[s] no nominative form' (OB, 112). As accused, the assertive subject is stripped down to being '*less than nothing*,' reverted to its originary humility, '*the positing of the self as a deposing of the ego*' (OB, 58) that is readily available for the other. 'Here I am,' says Levinas, is what the 'I' signifies, my availability as the consequence of 'an unimpeachable assignation' and 'an impossibility to move away,' to not respond to the other 'without the torsion of a complex, without "alienation" or "fault"' (OB, 87). The Ego is thus pushed all the way down to its origin that is charity and responsibility for the other, so radical that the subject becomes a hostage of the other, persecuted and ready to substitute itself for the other in sacrifice and expiation. 'For under accusation by everyone, the responsibility for everyone goes to the point of substitution. A subject is a hostage' (OB, 112). But this radical subjection of the Ego, the being-hostage as responsibility for the other, is, for Levinas, 'the allegiance to the Good' (OB, 126). And it is in this allegiance that justice finds its conditions of possibility.

Although Levinas introduces justice as the arrival on the scene of 'the third' in the pure experience of the face-to-face, who comes as the limit of responsibility, introducing the questions of co-existence, fairness and reciprocity, representation and comparison of the faces, distribution of responsibilities in view of parity and equality, in short, introducing the juridico-political structure of society that ethics exceeds, justice is nevertheless tied for Levinas to the first charity of the subject, who, troubled by the proximity of the other person, will *forget itself*, be disinterested and thus capable of justice to begin with. 'The equality of all,' says Levinas, 'is borne by my inequality, the surplus of my duties over my rights. The forgetting of self moves justice' (OB, 159).

What one has to keep in mind when reading Levinas is the absolute rectitude and orientation of the ethical movement towards Goodness where my concern for the other person and their vulnerability precedes my freedom and the care for my own being. One has to consider here that for Levinas subjectivity is constituted in and as responsibility, the fact that the subject first emerges not in their freedom but in their responsibility to the other: 'Responsibility in fact is not a simple attribute of subjectivity, as if the latter already existed in itself, before the ethical relationship. Subjectivity is not for itself; it is, once again, initially for another' (EI, 96). But what makes me unique in the ethical relation is the fact that I am *irreplaceable* in my 'substitution' for the other. This is what Levinas calls the 'election' that individuates me and imperially calls me to respond. In other words, *no one can answer in my stead*, which also means that there can be no spectators any more. This binds us all to solidarity and action in the face of injustice even if the cost be life itself. For it is not enough to be. For Levinas, 'to be or not to be is probably not the question par excellence.'<sup>14</sup> It is, indeed, beside the question. What is important is not being but compassion of being where to be *for* the other is the gravity of being, whose pull is stronger than the fear of death. The for-the-other of my being or 'substitution' is *for* the other *beyond* my being, and it is unilateral. Levinas often quotes from *The Brothers Karamazov* by Dostoyevsky to bring this point of fundamental dissymmetry in the ethical relation across: 'Each of us is guilty before everyone for everyone, *and I more than the others*' (OB, 146, my emphasis). We are all responsible for each other, in other words, but I am more responsible than all the others. And this is what constitutes my uniqueness, the fact that I am irreplaceably called to alleviate the pain and suffering of the other *before* all others and *more* than every other.

After his death in 1995, Levinas' rise in significance across a variety of intellectual disciplines testifies to a critical need to account for the exorbitant challenge of responsibility and ethical obligation in the context of contemporary concerns. His contribution to ethics has become a key influence on the development of Continental thought and a watershed for a range of issues in politics, ecocriticism, theology, aesthetics and psychoanalysis. A growing number of thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Maurice Blanchot, Judith Butler, Jean-François Lyotard, Slavoj Žižek, Jean-Luc Marion, Simon Critchley and others have in the past decades attempted to consider the implications of Levinas' thought for their own specific disciplines and fields of inquiry, generating fresh points of reference that, in a successful cross-fertilisation, extend the immediate horizons of Levinas' concerns. Understanding Levinas, after all, is reading Levinas *otherwise*, in the context that always reflects the intrigues of our own circumstance, whose prejudice, with any luck, may be exposed and called into question. Only a good few authors are privileged with the power to reveal our prejudice and Levinas is undoubtedly one of them. The best place to begin to trace the intrigue of ethics that in Levinas unravels across a variety of conceptual clusters, from the feminine, the erotic relation, the caress, the desire for the other

to paternity, infinite responsibility, politics and justice, to name a few, may be *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo* (1985) that covers the grit of Levinas' thought without being too taxing on prior knowledge. The other book to recommend, apart from *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings* (1996), as an exceptional and lucid introduction that accounts for a range of subjects in Levinas' writing on love, desire, shame, politics, time, death and others, showing the extensive scope and breadth of his thinking, is another collection of essays and interviews by Levinas, *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of the-Other*, first appearing a few years before his death and in English translation in 1998. A comprehensive list of the works by and on Levinas can be found in Seán Hand's *Emmanuel Levinas: Routledge Critical Thinkers* (2009) series that is also an accessible and concise departure point, as well as in Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi's *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas* (2002).

What is revealed behind a simple 'after you, sir!' in Levinas is an unforeseen drama of subjectivity that we have traced and the depth of commitment that supports its prosaic truth. The meaning of social existence, of 'the interhuman,' as Levinas writes, lies 'in the recourse that people have to one another for help, before the astonishing alterity of the other has been banalized or dimmed down to a simple exchange of courtesies that has become established as an "interpersonal commerce" of customs... These are expressions of a properly ethical meaning...' <sup>15</sup> It all amounts to my responsibility and fear for the other person that trumps my right to be and is not traceable back to the comfort of my being. What is moving me, in the end, is the other's vulnerability. The other's need is my visceral concern and my responsibility even if I were to perish for it. Setting myself aside and the sovereignty of my needs for the sake of the other person is to respond to the call of Goodness expressed in the face that summons me uniquely. This is how the ethical plot unravels. But it is always a tragic story with the protagonist sacrificed in expiation for the suffering of others, and, what is worse, it is all done in discretion, in the absolute charity of the Ego, without pathos or grandeur of martyrdom, without reward or even hope for recompense at the end of time, because it is done *for the other*.

In a sense, ethics is more tragic than tragedy; it requires exorbitant sacrifices with no recognition, leaving no readable trace behind itself. There are countless, nameless, unsung heroes whose acts reverberate like whispers all around us with intensity strong enough to hush the roar of armies or bursts of gunfire. From Bosnia to Rwanda and Darfur, we have yet again witnessed the destructive power of man driven by hatred for the other and by a chronic need to dominate. This suffering can never be justified. It is impossible to justify another's suffering without it being an alibi for my indifference. 'For an ethical sensibility,' says Levinas in 'Useless Suffering,' 'confirming, in the inhumanity of our time, its opposition to this inhumanity, the justification of the neighbor's pain is certainly the source of all immorality' (98-99). Another's suffering testifies to the concrete exigency of my responsibility that does not wait for rationalisations and excuses. One has to commit or become an accomplice in another's death. The

countless genocides too quickly become statistics in the archives of history or part of history's grand expository systems that try to give meaning to the suffering in order to make it bearable for those left behind, but the murdered leave real open holes no meaning can ever justify. The murdered may be anonymous to me, but they stand in, like empty placeholders, for my absent humanity, scattered like sand in the burning winds of madness man is capable of. Levinas demands that we consume ourselves like cinders for the sake of the other, but perhaps it is our history that demands this, the countless slaughtered victims awaiting redress.

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<sup>1</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, 'Transcendence and Height' in *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak et al. (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996), p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1985), p. 89. Hereafter cited as EI.

<sup>3</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford UP, 2000), p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1969), p. 303. Hereafter cited as TI.

<sup>5</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1998), p. 11. Hereafter cited as OB.

<sup>6</sup> Seán Hand, *Emmanuel Levinas: Routledge Critical Thinkers* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 58.

<sup>7</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, 'The Trace of the Other' in *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1986), p. 346.

<sup>8</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 2001), p. xxvii, emphasis added. Hereafter cited as EE.

<sup>9</sup> Howard Caygill, *Levinas and the Political* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 52.

<sup>10</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Humanism of the Other*, trans. Nidra Poller (Chicago: Illinois UP, 2003), p. 27. Hereafter cited as HO.

<sup>11</sup> *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 169.

<sup>12</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas" in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>13</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford UP, 1999), p. 58.

<sup>14</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, 'Nonintentional Consciousness' in *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia UP, 1998), p. 132.

<sup>15</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, 'Useless Suffering' in *Entre Nous*, p. 101.