

ETHICS AS THE TASK OF BEING HUMAN

Diane Perpich (Clemson)

Abstract

This paper examines whether Emmanuel Levinas's ethical philosophy is suited to address the contemporary crises facing democratic and social life, including rising autocracy, corporate corruption, and intensifying forms of racism, sexism, and xenophobia. Written in the aftermath of the catastrophic ethical failures of the twentieth century, Levinas's work effectively asks what ethics can mean when traditional moral foundations have been compromised or shown to enable violence. This paper traces Levinas's response to violence from his early notion of an "unheroic" human will to his later reconceptualization of subjectivity as vulnerability and responsibility. I argue that while Levinas's thought does not provide a rule or algorithm for determine ethical norms, his work does remain practically meaningful. Ethics, on this view, is not a possession but a recurring, urgent task of asking what ethics, and thus what humanity, is possible for us now.

Keywords: Levinas; ethics; vulnerability; responsibility; contemporary crises

Can we speak of morality after the failure of morality?

Emmanuel Levinas (1988, 176)

1. Ethics in Ruins

Is Levinas's thought equipped, are *we Levinasians* equipped, to say something about the shadow of autocracy that currently haunts democracies across the globe, about the corruption and greed that pervades corporate life, about the increased racism, sexism, and xenophobia, not to mention the sheer divisiveness of contemporary discourse? Is it clear that these threats are unethical in some sense that Levinas can help us see more clearly? Levinas lived and wrote in an era when ethics had failed in ways too spectacular to be ignored or explained away: it was a time when human reason made trains run with efficiency to mass extermination camps; when human innovation created bombs capable of killing more people at one time than ever before imaginable;

when the genocides of the twentieth-century put the lie to any straightforward endorsement of natural human compassion; and in a time when God most certainly seemed nowhere to be found or, as in our own time, invoked with great commitment on the side of hatred and nationalism. Written in the shadow of these ruins (cf. Manning 2022), Levinas's thought might be understood as asking: what might ethics mean *now* and *here* in the midst of such failures? Is there even such a thing as 'ethics' now? Thirty years on from Levinas's death these questions continue to have a pressing salience.

Levinas's thought is at its critical, sober best when it denies us the certainties and foundations of other systems of ethics—the categorical imperatives, the utilitarian analyses, the satisfactions of a life lived according to human virtue. Moreover, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence* goes even further in this direction than *Totality and Infinity*. Both texts speak of an infinite responsibility to the other, but the earlier text locates the command to responsibility in the famous 'face of the Other' whereas the later work speaks of the face and of its saying as passing only in a *trace* of itself. Does this mean we need to forego asking Levinas's later work to deliver ethical 'returns'?

In what follows, I begin from a red thread of sorts that runs from Levinas's work in the 1950s through *Totality and Infinity* before undergoing a significant shift in the later work. This red thread is that of the 'unheroic' human will and I argue that unpacking this trope can help us understand more clearly what Levinas subsequently means by *vulnerability* in *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, and what this means for making Levinas's later work ethically 'practical' (at least in a certain sense). The reading developed here suggests that ethics in a Levinasian sense is not something we have or possess, neither a property nor a capacity, rather it is the sole *task*, again and again, incessantly, of asking what ethics could mean now and in that asking creating what ethics, and what humanity, is possible.

2. The Unheroic Will

Scholars acknowledge important differences in method and language between Levinas's first major work and his second. *Totality and Infinity* (1961), as Alphonso Lingis notes, is "structured, classically, as a phenomenology in different strata, related as founding and founded," an approach he suggests is largely abandoned in *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence* (Lingis 1998, XV).¹ Paul Ricoeur similarly claims that

¹ Lingis, Alphonso. 1998. "Translator's Introduction" to Levinas, 1998, xv.

in the latter text "one notes no visible progression in the argument" and that the reader is "plunged straightaway *in media res*" and remains there for the duration of the book (Ricoeur 1997, 2-3). Even Levinas himself, in discussing the "itinerary" of the book, emphasizes that while there is necessarily a division of the work into chapters, the themes therein introduced "do not lend themselves to linear exposition" (Levinas 1988, 19). Moreover, what Ricoeur calls the 'verbal terrorism' (Ricoeur 1997, 26) of Levinas's later style is especially evident when we attend to the language in *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence* describing the relation to the Other. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas writes of the egoism of the ego being 'interrupted' by the face, or of the face as 'commanding' but also being 'welcomed' by the ego. In *Otherwise Than Being*, the verbs are nowhere so banal: in the later work I have become a 'hostage' to the other, responsible 'even for my own persecution,' with an 'aptitude for wounding and outrage'—nothing but a 'pure exposure' to the other. Robert Bernasconi credits the shift in language and method, as others have as well, to Levinas's attempt to move away from the "traditional language of ontology, something which he conceded that he had failed to do" in the earlier work (Peperzak et. al., 1996, 79). All of these readings seem absolutely correct: it is no longer a case of a phenomenological description of our experience of coming face-to-face with another; no longer is there a narrative of the function of home, family, and fecundity to connect that extraordinary relation of the face back to our everyday lives. The stylistic and methodological innovations of the later work mean that we need to tread carefully before assimilating it too quickly to central positions taken within *Totality and Infinity*.²

Chief among the thematic differences between *TI* and *OBBE* is the defense and reconceptualization of 'subjectivity' that takes center stage in the later work. That Levinas would revive the language of subjectivity in the mid-1970s is especially surprising given that a critique of the modern subject dominated the reception of Heidegger's work in France, leading ultimately to claims of the 'death of man' and 'death of the subject'. It has to be noted, however, that Levinas is not advocating a return to the logical 'I think' of Kantian philosophy; nor is it a return to the Husserlian conception of the ego constituting the world for itself in consciousness. It is not even a defense of the egoistic self of *Totality and Infinity*, a Ulysses always on his way home, reducing every 'other' within the world to a 'same'. The defense of subjectivity that Levinas mounts as he moves beyond *Totality and Infinity* has more in common with his similarly

² For a longer discussion of this point, see Perpich 2008, Chapter 3.

'outdated' defense of humanism in a series of essays that bridge the period between *TI* and *OBBE*, which are eventually collected as *Humanisme de l'autre homme*. Just as the subject was *persona non grata* in France in the 1970s, there was a corresponding (Heideggerian inspired) anti-humanism which rejected the idea that human history could be read as progression toward ever greater forms of rationalism and freedom. Indeed, it is clear from the essays in the small volume on humanism that Levinas largely *agrees with* the 'anti-humanist' critiques of his time for the reasons outlined at the beginning of this essay. In a passage that is about as unvarnished as Levinas ever gets when referring to the horrors of the second world war, he writes in one of those essays, "The unburied dead of wars and death camps accredit the idea of a death without a morning after, making tragi-comic the care for one's self and illusory the pretensions of the *rational animal* to a privileged place in the cosmos, capable of dominating and integrating the totality of being in a consciousness of self" (Levinas 2003, 45).³ What Levinas aims to recover and defend in subjectivity is a certain *interiority*, and as the humanism essays make plain, without this interiority there is no way to say 'no' or 'stop' to violence, no way to make a claim on behalf of the other.

To understand the stakes of this move, it helps to go back to Eric Weil's discussion of reason and violence in *Logique de la philosophie*. This text was published in 1950, was widely read, and clearly influenced Levinas's reflections on violence. Weil begins from the assumption that humans are beings "enchained in an animal body, indigent, with needs, with blind tendencies and passions" (Weil 1996, 10). As in much of Western philosophy, the body and its needs are the source of an inescapable violence within the human situation. Weil remarks with some irony that the ordinary man knows this well, and only the philosopher denies it! In short, Weil thinks philosophy gives reason too much credit, as if either the mere fact of rational capacities or the honing of our natural reason would be enough to stem the tide of violence. And though Weil maintains that rational discourse—that is, discourse free of logical contradiction—is the only nonviolent tool we have to counter violence, he also insists that the triumph of reason is not assured. Reason can banish violence only if we *choose* reason over violence; moreover, for Weil, it is this choice which marks and constitutes our humanity (Weil 1996, 5). There is a resonance here with Sartre's existentialist commitment to freedom and, certainly, the idea that one could *choose* rationality over violence was an attractive idea at the end of World War II for philosophers and non-philosophers alike.

³ For an analysis of the three essays that make up the humanism text, see Perpich (forthcoming).

I do not think one can explain the absolutely dominance of Sartre's existentialism without this.

Levinas's approach to these topics most assuredly influenced by his own experiences during the war. He agrees with Weil that the power of tyranny is stronger than either classical or modern philosophers were willing to acknowledge. But he still finds in these traditions—and by extension in Weil's thought—a rather blind faith in the power of reason. Socrates's death, as recounted by Plato, becomes an exemplar of the classical approach to such questions. Levinas remarks that "In his execution Socrates is free. He has a fine death" (Levinas 1987, 16). Socrates drinks the hemlock of his own free will; he becomes numb from his feet upward, says Levinas, indicating that his mind remains free and untouched until the end. And with some poignancy, Levinas notes that his friends do not abandon or betray him. None of this, of course, was the case for Jews and others victimized by the Nazi regime across Europe, nor true of *their* deaths in the camps and gulags. Where Weil extols the power of reason as a discourse free of logical contradiction, and argues that it has the power to stop violence, Levinas is all too aware that reason can be bent toward violence without sacrificing its coherence. Under the power of tyranny we do not just see hunger, we see *from* hunger. And deprivation is just one of the tools at tyranny's disposal. Indeed, Levinas suggests that tyranny has "unlimited resources;" true heteronomy is not being forced to do something against one's will—in which one can maintain an inner freedom—it begins "when obedience ceases to be obedient consciousness and becomes an inclination. The supreme violence is in that supreme gentleness. ... That one can create a servile soul is not only the most painful experience of modern man, but perhaps the very refutation of human freedom. Human freedom is essentially unheroic" (Levinas 1987, 16).

These themes are reprised in *TI*, specifically in the (again, mostly overlooked) section on "The Ethical Relation and Time." These sections borrow heavily from the essays written in the 1950s, not only thematically but in terms of the language employed as well. The will is portrayed again as vulnerable to threat and seduction. It "harbors treason in its own essence" and far from being an inviolable "for itself" is "essentially...susceptible of being coerced and enslaved *as a will*, becoming a servile soul" (Levinas 1969, 229, emphasis added). Levinas adds: "Gold and threats force it not only to sell its products but to sell itself. Or again, the human will is not heroic" (Levinas 1969, 229). In the *TI* account, the will is more deeply identified with "corporeity" (Levinas 1969, 229), which is said to contain an inherent "ambiguity" (Levinas 1969, 230). The corporeal will is at one and the same time a power to act and an exposure to

external forces and to the will of others. It would be a simplification to say that modern thinkers, or their descendants like Weil, assigned failures of the will to the indigence and desires of the body and its successes to the mind, that is to a capacity to act upon the dictates of reason, but it seems right to think that what Levinas wants to insist on here is that both capacities, failure and success, action and passion, lie in the will as a *lived* experience of corporeality—and of its ambiguity or contradiction (Levinas 1969, 237). Neither a disembodied angel nor a purely physical rock can be seduced or threatened. Only beings who live in the ambiguity of the will can undergo violence.

In a striking formulation, Levinas defines freedom in these passages not as the pure *I can* of past phenomenologies or existentialist philosophies. Freedom is a function of temporality, of having "time to forestall one's own abdication under the threat of violence" (Levinas 1969, 237). Corporeality and temporality in the same 'creature' means that we are always at a remove from the reifications attempted by tyranny, but that abdication is also an ever present possibility (Levinas 1969, 238). The "supreme ordeal" of the will, then, is not (as Heidegger would have it) death, rather it is suffering, since in suffering "the free being ceases to be free, but, while non-free is yet free (Levinas 1969, 238-39). Again, there is more than a touch here of the Sartrean, "I am what I am not, and am not what I am." But unlike Sartre, for whom human action creates what value there is in the world, and again unlike Heidegger for whom it is *my own* death that is the spur to authentic choosing and rejection of the mundane social meanings of my surroundings, Levinas suggests that there my own suffering, my own death are, effectively, meaningless. And indeed, neither of these is a bulwark against tyranny. Without much argumentation at all, Levinas suggests in *Totality and Infinity*, that violence is produced "only in a world where I can die *as a result of someone* and *for someone*" (Levinas 1969, 239). Death here is emptied of its pathos as *my death*, and the "center of gravity" of the will is displaced outside of my egoism as a "Desire and Goodness limited by nothing" (Levinas 1969, 239).

This motif, which is presented in this first instance in a manner that almost defies interpretation, recurs and is expanded in the essays immediately following *Totality and Infinity*. And it is here, too, that Levinas refines his thinking about what puts a stop to violence.

Looking to the humanism essays, we find Levinas worried specifically that Marxism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and the structuralist turn within the burgeoning *sciences humaines* have evacuated the self of its interiority. Marxism reduces the human to its material needs; psychoanalysis portrays the ego and its beliefs as the product

of unconscious neuroses; structuralist anthropology longs to reduce the human to the mathematical formalism of an 'economy'. Within the social sciences as they were emerging at that time in France, "the psyche and its liberties...would be but a detour taken by structures in order to link up in a system and bring themselves to light" (Levinas 2003, 59). But Levinas's defense of humanism and his reconceptualization of subjectivity are in no way, then, a nostalgic hope for a return to the rationalist ideals of earlier eras. And while there are moments where he betrays his frustration with the *au courant* nature of anti-humanist discourse,⁴ his critique is not that anti-humanism is a mere fad or bandwagon onto which French intellectuals have thoughtlessly jumped. He takes their criticisms seriously, but his worry, which arguably runs throughout and binds together the essays collected in *Humanism of the Other*, is that the so-called death of the subject and end of man also means the loss of any account of the *inwardness* or *interiority* of subjectivity. Moreover, the interiority he fears lost is not the formal 'I' of transcendental subjectivity, but the here and now, concrete and singular being who alone can say "stop" to violence and tyranny. In "Without Identity," the third of the humanism essays, the account of responsibility is taken a step further to the point where responsibility is my extreme exposure to the other, conceived now as *vulnerability*. If Heidegger and the human sciences make it such that the whole of the human is outside, Levinas reinterprets this exteriority as an exposure to the other that becomes the meaning of human inwardness.

3. 'Here I Am' for the Other

Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence is perhaps best approached by means of its opening section, entitled "The Argument". And, indeed, if there is any sense of an argument unfolding across the text, it is here. The first two sub-sections introduce an account of Being already familiar from Levinas's other writings: Being is a totalizing assemblage. Anything that would purport to be "otherwise" than being appears to be referred back to being, re-encompassed within being as a "being otherwise." The work

⁴ For example, he opens "Without Identity," the third essay of the humanism book, this way: "The end of humanism, end of metaphysics, the death of man, death of God (or death to God!): apocalyptic ideas or intellectual high-society slogans. Typical of such manifestations of Parisian taste and distaste, these notions take hold with the tyranny of the latest craze, but are soon reduced to bargain prices and downgraded" (Levinas 200, 58).

of being, which Levinas also calls *interessement*, is "an invincible persistence in essence, filling up every interval of nothingness that would interrupt its exercise" (Levinas 1998, 4). If we understand ourselves, animals, plants and the like as within being, we understand them in terms of the *conatus* or struggle for persistence in being, the drama of pursuing one's own interests. It is here, too, where Levinas makes his well-known claim that peace and commerce, while better than war, are nonetheless more of the same *conatus*.

What then could come to break up being? Is it possible to identify an 'otherwise than being' that is not simply a *being* otherwise? Typically, Western philosophy has located any break with pure being or the implacable processes of causation in freedom of the will. Levinas remarks that his own effort will "look beyond freedom" which, though it may be an "interruption of the determinism of war and matter," "does not escape the fate of essence;" that is, freedom "takes place in time and in the history which assembles events ... and synchronizes them, revealing their immanence and their order" (Levinas 1998, 8). To break out of being would not mean going toward some other *place* or ontology or order. Rather the "exception of the 'other than being'... signifies subjectivity or humanity, the *oneself* which repels the annexations by essence" (Levinas 1998, 8). If *Dasein* (existing, or the kind of being which we are ourselves *pace* Heidegger) can be broken down etymologically into 'being there', the subjectivity Levinas describes is a "null-site," a "unicity that has no site," a "unicity withdrawing from essence" (Levinas 1998, 8).

The question of how to describe or signal an 'otherwise than being' is not unlike the one that motivates negative or apophatic theologies: how to talk about that which is utterly transcendent to being (in the case of theology, God) without reducing it once more to being? The intractable nature of the problem, Levinas speculates, has to do with "the hold the *said* has over the *saying*" (Levinas 1998, 5). What is *said* is located within the world, within a logic, within an ontology. But perhaps *saying* in some manner escapes this? Levinas relies on two linked ideas to navigate this difficulty. First, if being is like a game, with rules, with winners and losers, always expressing an interest, a desire to persist, then 'saying' is a "complete gratuity", without stakes, without an interest: it is "the commitment of an approach" that keeps nothing back, that moves almost breathlessly toward another (Levinas 1998, 5-6). Second, the saying and the said cannot be "assembled" in a single time. In this, saying is like the statement of an extreme and utter skepticism: "Nothing is true!" says the skeptic, and though the logician wryly smirks at the performative contradiction, skepticism has the audacity "to affirm

the impossibility of statement while venturing to *realize* this impossibility by the very statement of this impossibility" (Levinas 1998, 7). The implication is that speaking of saying performs the same sort of contradiction and has the same audacity.

In his defense of a 'humanism of the other', as we saw above, Levinas criticizes the human sciences of his time for having evacuated the self of any interiority. This is not a nostalgia for the idea of univocal ego or 'I' so much as it is the worry that if human beings are nothing more than the play of cultural forces, then there is no one and nothing who says 'no' or 'stop' to violence. Culture becomes another inexorable expression of being. In *Otherwise Than Being* the defense is not so much of interiority as it is an attempt to see in subjectivity a relation to the other on the *inside*, as it were, of subjectivity. If *Totality and Infinity* is still 'too ontological' it is because the I and the Other encounter one another in a world. To be sure, the face of the other is said to 'break' with or 'overflow' any possible representation, to break with being even, but there is little consideration of what *in the subject* allows for, receives, welcomes or is commanded by that encounter. Levinas turns to the extremely suspect idea of the home and a 'feminine other' to explain how the command to an infinite responsibility is not a violent imposition on the ego. In *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, he remarks that the "infinite does not signal itself to a subjectivity, a unity already formed"—indeed "this is still perhaps a quite narrative, epic, way of speaking" (Levinas 1998, 13). Rather subjectivity or the self appears first of all in the accusative, namely, I am not first of all an 'I' or an 'ego', but a 'me'—one who comes to be *in responding*, but in a response that is not my choice, is not an expression of my will. Identity is not forged in self-coincidence, but in an extreme vulnerability, exposure *to* that becomes being *for* another.

Vulnerability, exposure to outrage, to wounding, passivity more passive than all patience, passivity of the accusative form, trauma of accusation suffered by a hostage to the point of persecution, implicating the identity of the hostage who substitutes himself for the others: all this is the self, a defecting or defeat of the ego's identity. And this, pushed to the limit, is sensibility, sensibility as the subjectivity of the subject. It is a substitution for another, one in the place of another, expiation. (Levinas 1998, 15)

This is effectively the point in "The Argument" where it is no longer possible for Levinas to give a linear exposition and as the passage here demonstrates the language becomes increasing poetic, the descriptions increasingly hyperbolic. The interpreter of Levinas's thought then faces a double bind: either one attempts to show that there is a convincing 'case' (an exposition with evidence, argumentation, or recognizable descriptions) to be made for Levinas's account of subjectivity—something that goes

against much of what Levinas says about the impossibility of capturing saying in a said; or one mimics Levinas's own hyperbolic style, and repeats his formulations as if they could become self-evident through repetition. Neither option is satisfying.

What I propose to do instead is to look to Levinas's references to *skin* to tease out two key points in the analysis of subjectivity. The notion of skin serves this purpose well since it is employed in ways that make clear that it is meant both literally and as a figure of speech; that is, it functions as both an example and a metaphor and in moving from one to the other performs as much as indicating a certain meaning. Consider first the passage immediately following the quotation above:

Responsibility for the other...is a passivity more passive than all passivity, an exposure to the other without this exposure being assumed, an exposure without holding back, exposure of exposedness, expression, saying. ... Not saying dissimulating itself and protecting itself in the said, just giving out words in the face of the other, but saying uncovering itself, that is, denuding itself of its skin, sensibility on the surface of the skin, at the edge of the nerves, offering itself even in suffering – and thus wholly sign, signifying itself. Substitution, at the limit of being, ends up in saying, in the giving of signs, giving a sign of this giving of signs, expression oneself. (Levinas 1998, 15)

The first passage above is a complete paragraph, followed immediately by the passage above. It is striking how these paragraphs pile one description onto the next in a chain of signifiers that moves from vulnerability to responsibility. The former term is linked to exposure, wounding, passivity, trauma, suffering, and saying, while the latter is linked to those same terms and also to substitution, expiation. It would be tempting to think of vulnerability as (somehow) giving form to or calling for responsibility, but what we might call the infinitizing grammar of the passages resists any such logical movement from the one to the other. Indeed, in these passages vulnerability merges with responsibility or suggests it by proximity rather than entailment. And the vulnerability-responsibility pairing mirrors (or perhaps is the same as) a proximity-substitution pairing that occurs in the structure of the main chapters of the work.

I would suggest that *skin* serves Levinas's purposes both literally and figuratively as he limns a subjectivity constitutively vulnerable and responsible—moreover, not by turns, not as a body plus a will, but always both at once. Three aspects of Levinas's references to 'skin' bear consideration. First, he invokes skin in places where there is a certain liminality in subjectivity. The skin is the bearer of caresses but also wounds; it is enjoyment but also suffering (Levinas 1998, 90); the underside of the skin is where pain occurs and where the body is acted upon, but the outer side is where we palpate

and act on the world (Levinas 1998, 49). At the edge of me and not me, marking the border where I stop and the world begins, skin is the "divergence" between the visible and the invisible (Levinas 1998, 89). This liminality is reminiscent of Merleau-Ponty's account of touching, in which any touching is also a being touched, in which there is a reversibility in any *interaction* with the world. Levinas clearly has the latter's philosophy in mind as he writes of sight and hearing as forms of *contact* (Levinas 1998, 80). They are not at a distance from the things seen or heard as they would be in the Husserlian account where, although consciousness is always consciousness of something or perception a perceiving of the perceived, consciousness and perception on the side of noesis are separable from the representation or grasp of the things perceived or grasped. Husserl's account is not entirely inaccurate on the Levinasian view, but it needs to be supplemented by an analysis of the underlying sensibility *qua* vulnerability that animates it (Levinas 1998, 69-70). The liminality of skin serves the account insofar as it illustrates and promotes the view that proximity must be understood as an exposure *to* that is also a coiling back upon or recurrence *to* oneself. This structure captures the dynamism of subjectivity, neither renouncing interiority (making of the subject *only* an outside—the complaint about 'death of the subject' philosophies and social sciences) nor positing a pre-existing subject who then has to make its way over to a world (the Cartesian picture dismantled so effectively by Heidegger).

Skin further supports the analysis of *Otherwise Than Being* by providing an image and example of how we might conceive 'vulnerability' and 'responsibility' as two sides of a single phenomenon—so close that one cannot say where the one ends and the other begins, not identical but not separable either. *Vulnerability*, here, is not used in the way we ordinarily use it, as when we see vulnerability as a product of circumstances, which it was in a certain way in earlier work. The orphan is vulnerable because she has lost her parents, the widow because she has lost the social protections afforded by a husband in a patriarchal society. In the later work, vulnerability is tied to embodiment, exposure, exposure 'despite' oneself, exposure to the other in such a way that one is 'too tight' in one's skin, pushed to the point of expiating for the other. Lived human corporeality, says Levinas, is "a possibility of pain, a sensibility which of itself is the susceptibility to being hurt, a self uncovered, exposed and suffering in its skin" (Levinas 1998, 51). To be in one's skin in this way is to be "stuck in its skin, not having its skin to itself, a vulnerability" (*ibid.*). Subjectivity is a subject 'despite' itself both in aging, that is, in never being able to go back to the beginning, to its own origin, and to *be* the origin of itself, but also in the sense of not being able to close itself off, not being able to not

be exposed. "Subjectivity is vulnerability, is sensibility. Sensibility, all the passivity of saying, cannot be reduced to an experience that a subject would have of it, even if it makes possible such an experience. An exposure to the other, it is...signification itself, the-one-for-the-other to the point of substitution" (ibid., 54). Substitution here trades in a slippery way on ideas of one thing standing in for another (like a metaphor, like all language when it represents, or signifies, or is meaningful) but also of someone being committed to, being *for* another, standing up or standing in for the other. Perhaps one way to understand this, and to see how skin works in such instances, is to think about how recognizable sensations are on the skin. We learn not to touch the stove because it is hot, but we don't similarly have to learn what 'hot' is, or what a tickle or an itch are. The body does not receive, it *produces* sensations and produces them as already meaningful. To be a subject is just to live in the midst of this kind of meaning making, this kind of one-for-the-other-ness.

Throughout the history of Western philosophy, affectation, being affected through sensation, has been thought on the model of the eye seeing an object. The distance of the eye from what it perceives makes perception analogous to the thought that thinks. Affectivity remains, as Levinas says, "information" (Levinas 1998, 66). What he wants us to imagine instead is affectation on the skin—contact, so close as to be indistinguishable from oneself, from one's own skin. The approach of the other, me being affected by the other—by her pain, her suffering, but also just by *her*—is so close as to be indistinguishable from being myself. I cannot imagine who *I* would be if I could not be thus affected. The ego would have to be a stone in that case. It is because of my 'always already' vulnerability to the other that Levinas turns to the trope of maternity, but the latter also neatly carries along with it a sense of responsibility. It is arguable that the latter metaphor smuggles in what Levinas then purports to find: a self who says 'here I am' or who is always already *for* the other before the other can be seen or known or cognized.

"The tenderness of the skin is the very gap between approach and approached, a disparity, a non-intentionality, a non-teleology" (Levinas 1998, 90). And if proximity indicates exposure to the other, Levinas adds, "I can enjoy and suffer by the other only because I am-for-the-other, am signification, because the contact with skin is still a proximity of a face, a responsibility, an obsession with the other, being one-for-the-other, which is the very birth of *signification* beyond *being*" (Levinas 1998, 90). Skin serves as a figure of subjectivity because of the manner in which liminality, corporeality, signification, and affectation by another are inseparable melded in the lived reality

of skin. Subjectivity and corporeality are not opposed to one another in this case, but are inseparable for the kind of being which we are and have, the kind of being that is an exception in being.

Levinas admits an "insurmountable ambiguity" in subjectivity conceived in this way. The "incarnate ego" can be seen as 'mere' animality, or as the complacency Levinas attributes to it in his analyses of enjoyment in *TI*, but such complacency and disregard for anything but oneself is possible only for a subjectivity already in proximity, already out of phase with itself, already 'despite' itself, "from the first backed up against itself, up against a wall, or twisted over itself in its skin, too tight in its skin" thus "in itself already outside of itself," already *for* another (Levinas 1998, 104). The expression 'in one's skin' "is not a metaphor for the in-itself," which would presumably be like Master Gaster—a hungry stomach with no ears, that is a being reduced to need. In the expression 'in one's skin' the "body is not only an image or a figure...it is the distinctive in-oneself of the contraction of ipseity and its breakup" (Levinas 1998, 109). Skin, then, is a figure but also the exact condition of being oneself and being exposed despite oneself to another, to others. "The ego is not an entity 'capable' of expiating for the others: it is this original expiation—involuntary—because anterior to the initiative of the will (anterior to the origin) [...]" (Levinas 1998, 118). There is here a recognition—consistent with the earlier work—that the will is not enough to produce ethics, not enough to ensure goodness within being, or to say 'no' to violence without imposing further violence. But there is also the recognition that the 'exception in being' which simply *is* human subjectivity on this view is likewise no guarantee of specific ethical outcomes. In what way, then, can we look to this later work for an 'ethics' in some recognizable sense?

4. An Ethics for Today?

Suppose we were to distinguish small, medium, and large ethical issues. The smaller ones involve the application of particular ethical principles where the 'stakes' are relatively small. For example, if my friend asks what I think of her new haircut, and I don't think it flattering, can I fib and say it looks great? Or, is it unethical to help my nephew get a job interview by pulling strings, given that he will still have to ace the interview to move on to the next level of consideration? Medium sized questions are a

step up from these and might ask why, ethically, I should keep promises or show compassion, or sacrifice current comforts and conveniences for the sake of a cleaner and more livable planet for future generations. The largest ethical issues are those concerning persons, actions, or policies that deprive others of their humanity and dignity—cases of systemic or individual racism, sexism, xenophobia, homophobia, and other forms of biased hatred. Typically, we expect an ethical system to answer all of these kinds of questions with a similar approach. Kantians can ask, for example, whether the action in question respects reason in myself and in others. For utilitarians, the response lies in whether an action, on average or in a given instance, goes more good than harm. Levinas's 'ethics' arguably does not answer the smaller or medium-sized questions at all. His conception of a subjectivity 'vulnerable' and exposed to the other, tight in its own skin, and committed in a passivity more passive than receptivity to the other, simply cannot produce an algorithm that would tell me positively what I *ought to do* in a given instance. As is well-known, Levinas classes any number of what we term 'practical' ethical questions as matters of politics. They involve "comparing incomparables," that is, if we were in relation to only one person then we would owe them everything, but given that there are always multiple others we need to consider who has done what to whom or whose claims should have the most weight.

Where Levinasian ethics does seem to have something to say—and this despite his own limitations, perhaps—is in the third category of major social ethical failings. What is at issue in those sorts of moments is a failure to enact humanity and to recognize and affirm it in the other. Recognizing the humanity of the other here does not mean literally recognizing that I share certain capacities, traits, or qualities with another—whether that be reason, or virtue, or even second-personal competence (as it would be for Darwall's view; cf. Darwall 2006). It is not a matter of some quality or characteristic. To have humanity is to be an exception in being. It is to be called—*despite oneself*—to responsibility, which is to say we are called to *enact* humanity rather than understand or recognize it in ourselves or others.

What does this mean or where might we see it concretely? Levinas's famous example—'After you, sir!'—where I cede my place to another is potentially misleading since it is such a small gesture. Likewise, it is somewhat misleading to think that Levinas's ethics *requires* or *compels* us to care for the suffering of others. Rather, it is to identify the *possibility* of this compulsion as an action *in the world* as the core feature of human subjectivity. Levinas's thought reminds us not of *what* we owe one another, but of the possibility of *owing* that defines us.

Imagine a world in which no one ever felt they owed anyone else anything. We might imagine this as the dystopian world created by a corrupt and narcissistic regime, as the inflated egoism of a philosophy that recommends only that each look out for her own self-interest, or as a Hobbesian or Machiavellian war of all against all. But all of those examples fail since to claim to owe the other nothing is already to live within a subjectivity that understands, that is already in the grips of, *owing-ness*. The moon owes nothing to the sun or to the earth. Gravitational pull is not the same as obligation. But when Cain pretends to doubt whether he owes *anything* to his fellow man—his brother even—it cannot be a sincere protestation. By the time one asks, it is too late to pretend that one is fully outside the bounds of *owing*. Of course, one can still fail to institute a world in which the dignity of others is held up as an ideality, let alone a reality. But mistreatment in this sense is every bit as telling of one's responsibility in a Levinasian sense as the pretense of having none.

Levinas's philosophy reminds us of the possibility of our humanity. To be obsessed by the other is to have the possibility of creating a *humane* world, of cherishing it, of asking again and again whether we have realized it fully enough in relation to the other and to other others. This is why Levinas excels at the big question. He does not silence the skeptic but shows that our skepticism is the trace of an exposure that, were we truly to lose it, would mean we were no longer recognizably the sorts of beings that we patently are.

What does this mean for our time? In the United States in 2025, we have a president who calls other human beings 'garbage', a vice president who fabricates lies about immigrant communities stealing and eating cats and dogs in order to foment hatred, any number of cabinet members enriching themselves and their families while they enact policies that impoverish others. Levinas does not provide a *rule* to prove that these actions are unethical. But, in fact, we do not need a rule. We need something broader—a moral conscience, and an account of what that *is* and why it is so easy to dissimulate like Cain and pretend that one may, after all, not be responsible at all.

Reflecting on this idea of a subject whose very subjectivity consists in not being able to rest in itself because it is exposed to the other, Levinas writes that this is not "a philosopher's construction: it is the unreal reality of men persecuted in the everyday history of the world, whose dignity and sense were never retained in metaphysics, a reality to which philosophers veil their faces" (Levinas 1987, 67-68). To say that philosophers ignore this reality is not to say that they are by nature or intentionally callous, but it does suggest that the manner in which philosophers both ancient and modern

valorized reason above embodiment, above sensibility, indeed above all else, means that they tend to downplay the 'unreal reality' and horrors of tyranny and violence—and worse yet if they glorify the egoistic and violent behavior of men as natural or normal. When Levinas finds extraordinary moments within the philosophical tradition—Plato's Good beyond being or Descartes notion of infinity—or small gestures of civility, he is looking not merely for a reason to hope, but for an escape from the unremitting valuelessness of being, its deafness to all calls, to all suffering, which is to say its violence. A Levinasian ethics does not reassure us that all is well, instead it reminds us of where our humanity lies and how fragile it is. Levinas writes that freedom means only knowing that freedom is in peril. And we can say the same of ethical life, our ethical life consists in knowing that ethics is in peril, that it requires our effort, our vigilance, our voices, and the bread out of our own mouths.

*Prof. Dr. Diane Perpich,
Department of Philosophy and Interdisciplinary Studies,
Clemson University, dperpic[at]clemson.edu*

References

- Darwall, Stephen. 2006. *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 1969. *Totality and Infinity*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 1987. *Collected Philosophical Papers*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.
- Levinas, Emmanuel et al. 1988. "The paradox of morality: an interview with Emmanuel Levinas." An Interview conducted by Tamara Wright, Peter Hughes and Alison Ainsley. In Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (eds.). *The provocation of Levinas: rethinking the other*. London: Routledge, 168-180.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 1998. *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 2003. *Humanism of the Other*. Translated by Nidra Poller. Urbana, University of Illinois Press.
- Lingis, Alphonso. 1998. "Translator's Introduction." In Levinas, Emmanuel.

Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, xvii-xlv.

Manning, Robert. 2022. "Emmanuel Levinas as Post-Holocaust Philosopher," *Tikkun* May 22. <https://www.tikkun.org/emmanuel-levinas-as-post-holocaust-philosopher>.

Peperzak, Adriaan T., Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi, eds. 1996. *Basic Philosophical Writings*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Perpich, Diane. 2008. *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Perpich, Diane. (forthcoming). "The Vulnerability of Dignity: A Levinasian Perspective." In Golob, Sacha and Karen Ng, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Continental Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ricoeur, Paul. 1997. *Autrement : Lecture d'autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence d'Emmanuel Levinas*. PUF.

Weil, Eric. 1996. *Logique de la philosophie* Paris : Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin.