

Evil and 'the Other'

Levinas on the End of Theodicy

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Introduction

Brief Background

Emmanuel Levinas was a Jewish philosopher, thinker, and educator who, in response to his experiences during WWII and the Holocaust, offered a new theory of ethics, one that rethought the relationship between "the Self" and "the Other." While serving as a translator for the French in WWII, Levinas was captured as a Prisoner of War (POW). His experiences as a POW, losing most of his family during the Holocaust, and living in this state of horror infiltrates his writings. In response, much of Levinas's works are getting at a similar idea of criticizing an irresponsible version of the Self. Levinas writes with complexity and perhaps even harshness that calls the reader to grapple with this fundamental responsibility. This paper interprets Levinas's ideas of evil and the Other to establish a compassionate alternative to theodicy. It examines Levinas's critique of theodicy as "the source of all immorality"¹ and his attempt to establish an alternative to theodicy, which would place ethics as "first philosophy." Central to understanding these pursuits, I argue, is Levinas's idea of the *il y a*, which emerges in his earliest writings but is absent from his work on theodicy. By examining Levinas's ethical theory, his critique of philosophy, and his conception of the *il y a*, this paper develops a comprehensive interpretation of Levinas's theory of evil and how we should respond to it.

¹ Levinas, 'Useless Suffering' in Larrimore, *The Problem of Evil*, 378

Levinas's Language

Before we can begin an interpretation of Levinas's philosophy, a few words about his manner of writing should be discussed. Levinas's work is known to be notoriously difficult to read, as seen in an excerpt from his book *Totality and Infinity* seen below,

The effort of this book is directed toward apperceiving in discourse a non-allergic relation with alterity, toward apperceiving Desire-where power, by essence murderous of the other, becomes, faced, the consideration of the other, or justice.

- Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 47

Why does Levinas write this way? Levinas develops a new language that undercuts the philosophical preoccupation with clarity and understanding. That is, Levinas's anti-philosophical language aims against clarity. For Levinas, clarity is that which renders an object of knowledge to a given consciousness, making that object the possession of that consciousness. Knowledge is in this way reductive of any object of knowledge, reducing what makes it foreign, different, or "other." He explains all philosophical frameworks have produced an *egology*, our natural habitual inclination to turn towards the inward Self. Levinas uses language to describe this reality of being out of consideration of the Other's Otherness. His complex language requires a continual taking up and interpretation of the Self that reflects the unknowability of this relation "to the Other." The purposeful lack of clarity and harsh language seen in Levinas's works speaks to what is at stake for Levinas, whether the other can truly be other, or whether it will be a possession of an ego or self.

The Self is called into the relation to the Other through the Other's "face." The face of Other signifies the depth and demand of the relation to the Other that calls the Self into this commitment. Levinas's interpretation of evil as a nothingness exposes the extreme demand of this relation. Levinas's conception of evil (and useless suffering) is seen in his conception of the *il y a* ("there is"). The *il y a*, existence without an existent, the anonymous chaos before the created world.. The call to responsibility, the call to respond to the other, is a call to affirm the existent in the face of this nothingness that would undo the world of created thing. In *A Convent of Creatures*, philosopher Micheal Fagenblat discusses Levinas attempt:

Just as "the point of creation is . . . the emergence of a stable community in a benevolent and life-sustaining order," so, too, Levinas's point is to show "how the particular and the personal" emerge from il y a existence to form an ordered moral world (TI, 26/ Tel, xiv).

- Fagenblat, *A Convent of Creatures*, 87

In order to respond to this demand that calls on us, the mind must remain open. Ethics as "first philosophy" is necessary because of the presence of the *il y a*. Levinas describes that creation itself occurred as a sort of response to this chaos preexisting void. For this reason, evil can no longer be thought of as a "deprivation" of good as this would attribute some sort of essence to it.

Creation is itself a response to the void and ethics as "first philosophy" thus must be a response to the nothingness of evil. Interestingly, what exactly the void or the *il y a* refutes is what ends up fueling the response. The act of creation as a response to a chaotic void is a sort of anti *il y a* response. This relation is fundamentally asymmetrical

as it ties the self into the beings of all beings as a sort of responsibility for the Other. This relation forces the Self out of their egology and into this inter-human.

This inter-human realm involves a “building” of love that is transcendent. The responsive nature of this continual and never-ending relation opens the self-up to be ready to approach this Other. The absence of selfhood- of all existents- in *the il y a* ignores the call to ethics. acting as . Levinas’s “nothingness’ of evil greatly differs than previous thinkers, such as Augustine’s interpretation of evil as “deprivation of good.” Whereas Augustine’s evil can be seen as lacking an existent, Levinas’s evil is a “positive negativity” of evil is the reality of an anonymous existence. For Levinas, evil and suffering can only be taken up through the face of the Other (as this signifies their Otherness) which Levinas describes as “the very vision of God.”

This relation is a demanding call as it must always be answered. Levinas is critical of other interpretations of evil, such of Augustine’s “deprivation of good,” as they have excused evil to be a part of “God’s Plan” and ignore this obligation of the Self. Levinas writes for us to grapple with this responsibility to the Other and how we are constituted by an inalienable relation to it. Levinas wants to move us out of the Self that is concerned only for its Self – an egology - and into this relation of responsibility. Such a response to evil is a never-ending demand placed on the Self. Levinas places ethics as “first Philosophy” where he places the Self in a primordial relation to the Other that forces the Self to come out of itself and encountering of a fundamental responsibility.

Through the “face to face” encounter with the Other, the ethical relation is demanded and occurs. This interaction is where the Self is there *for* the Other. Levinas describes this relation with the Other as a continual enactment as phrased, “To know

God is to know what must be done.” (*Difficult Freedom*, 17). To Levinas, this demand is a continual responsibility and commitment that is never complete. Levinas uses different words and analogies to articulate and rearticulate the continual taking up this new way of ethical thinking requires. This paper will examine Levinas’s rethink the basic terms of philosophy through his conceptions of the Same, egology, and totality. Levinas thinks about totality and infinity, the Same and the Other, and the saying and the said to add dimensions to this relation as it lacks the simplicity to be directly communicated. Levinas establishes ethics as “first philosophy,” *not* as a systematic framework that can be “known,” but instead as a responsibility that must be continually taken up.

Levinas explains the Other “persecutes” any inward sense of being or autonomous sense of the Self. To Levinas, the relation to the Other is primordial and draws the Self out of their habitual egology and into this fundamental relation where they are *for* the Other. He describes, “The goal of my communication was to insist on the irreplaceable function of the I in a world of peace...” (Levinas, ‘Transcendence and Height,’ 24). The function of the “I” is “irreplaceable” because the Self is placed in an asymmetrical relationship where they are obligated to respond to the Other. The Self is drawn into an irrefutable responsibility that is both “fundamental” and a “horror” as it exposes a vulnerability of the Self while also calling the Self into a responsibility. Levinas writes to expose this primordial relation to the Other and call people into this obligation to the Other.

Argument

This paper aims to clarify Levinas's complex and intriguing ways of thinking about evil. This paper examines Levinas's thoughts on the Other and our relation to the Other in order to show Levinas's unique contributions to our ways of thinking about evil. Levinas produces an alternative to theodicy, placing an inescapable and fundamental responsibility on the Self to the Other. He explains this continuous relation as a demand that is never fulfilled. I hope this paper shows how Levinas shifts the focus on being from the Self and places the Other, the existent, at the center of being. Levinas's experiences during World War II and as POW echo in his writings. He explains that the horrors of WWII go beyond anything that theodicy could ever potentially explain. He criticizes theodicy for allowing humans to find meaning in suffering and excuse the evils around them. To Levinas, theodicy has served as the "source of all immorality,"² allowing for the continuation of evil by trying to explain others suffering (and thus giving meaning to something that enters the realm of unmeaning). Thus, suffering can only hold meaning when the Other's suffering is taken on as a responsibility of the Self for the Other.

Levinas's establishes ethics as "first philosophy" and explains this responsibility as religion itself. From the *il y a* Levinas reveals the "horror" of an existence without an existent. To Levinas, the *il y a* exposes the particularity as the subject as stripped it of its existence. This concern for the Other's particularity reveals a continual responsibility of the Self for the Other As Levinas claims "Ethics is not the corollary of the vision of God,

² Levinas, 'Useless Suffering' in Larrimore, *The Problem of Evil*, 378

it is that very vision.” (*Difficult Freedom*, 17). To Levinas, religion is the enactment of this ethical relation. This paper focuses on our relation to “the Other” and how the demand for this Other calls for the end of theodicy and a new sense of responsibility. That is, how can we act ethically towards the Other in the presence of evil (and what is evil?)?

I hope this paper reveals how Levinas’s philosophy serves as a productive response to the horrific events of WWII and the Holocaust, and shows how Levinas’s establishes a primary concern and indisputable demand within the Self for the Other.

Levinas's Life

The intention of this section is not to “summarize” Levinas’s life but rather to show how Levinas’s personal experiences of horror produced a conception of evil— the *il y a*, or “there is”— that permeates the rest of his work. In his concluding essay ‘Signature’ Levinas begins with a brief overview of events in his life. At the end of this list of his life experiences regarding his family, education, and writings, he concludes, “It is dominated by the presentiment and the memory of the Nazi horror.” (*Difficult Freedom*, 1963). While Levinas does not always explicitly discuss the horrors of WWII and being a POW, these experiences are addressed in his writings.

Early Life

Emmanuel Levinas was born on January 12th, 1906, in Kaunas³, Lithuania, a city at the center of the country, which is between Poland and Russia. He was the oldest of three boys, and his family was a part of the Jewish community, which Levinas referred to as feeling “natural.” In 1915 both WWI and the Communist Revolution struck the city, and Levinas and his family were forced out of Kaunas and took refuge in Kharkiv, Ukraine. They remained there until they could return to Kaunas in 1920. Once back in Kaunas, Levinas was admitted to and attended a Hebrew *Gymnasium*.

In 1923, Levinas began his studies in France at the University of Strasbourg, majoring in philosophy and studying psychology and sociology. While at Strasbourg,

³ Russian spelling: Kovno. For simplicity reasons, this paper will use the English spelling for geographical locations.

Levinas met another student, Maurice Blanchot, who would become a French philosopher and lifelong friend to Levinas. In 1927, Levinas graduated with his degree in philosophy, focusing on Edmund Husserl's theory of intuition for his dissertation topic.

In 1928, Levinas continued studying under Husserl in Freiburg, Germany (where he met Heidegger). As Levinas describes, "I went to Freiburg because of Husserl but discovered Heidegger." (Malka, xvii). Much of Levinas's work is an "undoing" of Heidegger's ontology as "first philosophy." This paper discusses Levinas's critique of Heidegger's primacy of ontology and how it has led to "violence against the Other."

In 1930, Levinas became a French citizen and enrolled in his required military service in Paris. Malka describes, "Becoming French meant entering into a contract of language, civilization, and values embodied by the republic, coupled with the demands of a general humanism." (Malka, 53). In 1930, he also married Raissa Levi, his childhood neighbor in Kaunas, who he had reunited with in Paris. In 1932, Levinas stopped working on a book he was writing about Heidegger as it had become known that Heidegger had become committed to National Socialism. In the early 1930s, Levinas spent much time writing and attending lectures along with monthly philosophical soirees of Gabriel Marcel (where Levinas was introduced to Sartre and other "intellectual avant-garde" members). In 1935, the Levinas's⁴ had their first daughter, Simone.

⁴ Levinas's will now used to describe Emmanuel and Raissa rather Emmanuel's parents

Middle Life

In 1939, Levinas was drafted into the army and served as a German and Russian translator. In 1940, he was captured as a prisoner of war and was held captive in Frontstalag for several months until he was transferred to a military prisoner of war camp close to Hanover, Germany. As a POW, Levinas and other Jews were separated into living situations where they were prohibited from exercising any sort of religious practice. As a French officer, Levinas was sent to a POW camp rather than a concentration camp. During the five years as a POW, most of Levinas's family was murdered by the Nazis. His mother, father, and two brothers were believed to have been shot by Nazis close to Kaunas. Raissa's mother was also deported from Paris and was also murdered.

Levinas's wife and daughter, Raissa and Simone, remained in Paris and received protection from French friends, including Blanchot. They took refuge at friends' apartments and eventually in a monastery. Blanchot also helped sneak letters between Levinas wrote letters back to his wife during the war years and described this period in Paris as an existing "carnet de guerre" (which seems to best translate to "war culture"). Levinas vowed never to step foot in Germany again.

At the end of WWII, Levinas returned to Paris and became the Director of Ecole Normale Israelite Orientale (ENIO), a prominent Jewish school where he had previously taught. In 1931, Levinas translated Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations* with his peer Pfeiffer. Levinas focused on the fourth and fifth meditations, including Husserl's focus on intersubjectivity. Levinas continued Talmudic studies with Monsieur Chouchani.



*Maurice Blanchot and Emmanuel Levinas
in the 1920s during studies at Strasbourg*



*The Levinas with their daughter
Simone after the war*

In 1947 Levinas's first book, *Existence and Existents*, was published after writing during his time as POW. This paper will later examine *Existence and Existents* as Levinas shifts the focus of being onto *the existent*, the Other, and moves away from the primordial sense of Self. Existence has led to a focus on being that ignores the particularity of other beings. In 1949, the Levinas's had their son Michael and in 1951, Levinas published 'Is Ontology Fundamental?' a more explicit critique of Heidegger's primacy of ontology. In 1960, Levinas began giving his yearly Talmudic commentaries *Colloque des intellectuels juifs de langue française* (which he would continue throughout the 1980s). In his annual commentaries, Levinas would use the Talmud to interpret and discuss current social and political events.

Later Life

In 1961, Levinas published his thesis for his doctorate, *Totality and Infinity (TI)*. This groundbreaking work inspired later writings by Blanchot. Levinas claims it was

thanks to the support of Jean Wahl for *Totality and Infinity*. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas criticizes Heidegger's idea of totality for its inwardness as he describes it as a form of self-enclosure, which ignores our primal relationship to others. Levinas describes how placing ontology as "first philosophy" has led to an egology, a philosophy that is always, inevitably, about "the ego," the self or the subject.

In 1963, Levinas published *Difficult Freedom*, a collection of Levinas's works on Jewish topics. The essays in *Difficult Freedom* were a shift in Levinas's philosophical writing to include a more religious-oriented context. In papers such as 'God and Philosophy' and 'A Religion for Adults,' Levinas more explicitly uses religious ideas and references to expand upon philosophical thoughts of infinity, the Other, and our relation to the Other.

In 1967, Levinas was appointed Professor of Philosophy at a newly established university in Paris, the University of Paris-Nanterre. While teaching there, he gave his lecture 'Substitution,' (1968) where Levinas sees substitution in terms of persecution. In this lecture Levinas moves away the traditional language in ontology it's desire "to possess" the Other's Otherness. In 1973, Levinas began working at Sorbonne as a philosophy professor. He continued teaching his seminar through the 1980s and publishing philosophical works, including *Otherwise than Being* (1974), until his final work 'Alterity and Transcendence' (1995). Levinas passed away on December 25th, 1995, in Paris.

Comprehensive Critique of Philosophy

To understand Levinas's entire philosophy of ethics as "first philosophy," it is essential to first understand Levinas's critique of philosophy, particularly his critique of idealism. As noted above, Levinas is critical of this desire to "know" and explains this as a language of possession. Levinas explains how philosophy has promoted an anti-ethical relation, and criticizes this desire to understand something infinitely different from the position of the self.

Levinas criticizes philosophy, particularly idealism, for attempting to produce universal truths, which can completely account for and apply to the collective. This concept of being is produced from the world to the Self and is painted over the particularity of others. Levinas explains philosophy as an unethical end. He argues that philosophy is, traditionally, always tied to the Self and what the self can understand or know, rather than an Other who exists outside that self. He comprehensively critiques these fixed and totalistic systems of thought, which he believes are fundamentally flawed and have excused, and even produced, evil as they ignore the Other's Otherness (as it is infinitely Other and cannot be interpreted in terms of totality). This unethical end is clearest, for Levinas, in the world of Martin Heidegger, whose conception of ontology as the "first philosophy" was ultimately deeply tied to the philosopher's own allegiance to National Socialism. To Levinas, this ability to see all things from the realm of the Self is to deny the existence of the Other as Other (the Other as a reality/as an existent).

Levinas responds to Martin Heidegger's argument that ontology is the true "first philosophy." For Levinas, Heidegger's preoccupation with Being - or, more specifically,

the question of Being (the question of what Being truly “is”) – distorts the fundamental ethical reality that determines all human life. Levinas’s philosophy focuses on an “undoing” of Heidegger’s insistence on being, and it explains how what actually constitutes “being” human is something beyond the self, the Other. However, before proceeding any further with Levinas’s critique of Heidegger, we must first consider Levinas’s larger critique of philosophy, specifically his critique of idealism.

Idealism and Critique of Idealism

In *Discovering Levinas*, the philosopher Michael Morgan describes Idealism as “the view that assimilated the world to the self or to a cosmic spirit or mind.” (Morgan, *Discovering Levinas*, 41). That is, idealism is the attempt to render the outside, material world to the terminology of the thinking subject, self, or ego. Levinas thus criticizes idealism as a form of assimilation that determines all “reality” as known by its ideational context. Levinas explains that idealism always misinterprets reality through the tinted lens of the self. That is, idealism has always reduced what is true about reality (the Other) to only merely the ideas of the Self or the ego, ideas that are distinctly its own. *The ideas that the mind thinks, and the ideas that constitute what things truly “are,” are identical, an identity that Levinas calls the same.* For Levinas, the reduction of all that is “other” to “the self” is most clearly articulated in Descartes’s *Meditations* (1641). Descartes attempts to find an absolute, unquestionable basis for all knowledge. Below Descartes explains the idea of the infinite coming from in the self.

And from the mere fact that such an idea is in me, or that I who have this idea exist, I draw the obvious conclusion that God also exists and that my existence depends entirely upon him at each and every moment. This conclusion is so

obvious that I am confident that the human mind can know nothing more evident or more certain.

- Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 81

For Descartes, reality is rooted in ideas (thoughts in the mind the self). Descartes explains the self as a thinking thing and thus able to produce rational and true sense of reality. Levinas is critical of the primacy Descartes places on the self. Morgan describes how Levinas interprets idealism through its attempts to “tame” and “domesticate” the world “to my capacities and venue, as of my capacities were wholly general and detached and impersonal.” (Morgan, *Discovering Levinas*, 42). Levinas discusses idealism in association to his ideas on totality, the same, and the Other to examine this critique of “violence.”

What is most interesting to Levinas, however, has not just to do with Descartes’s mistakes but also with what he gets right in terms of infinity. Levinas explains that though Descartes begins from the Cogito (‘I think therefore I am’), he later explains God as “primary.” (Levinas, *‘Transcendence and Height,’* 20).

The idea of God was prior to the Cogito, and the Cogito would never have been possible if there had not already been the idea of God. Consequently, for Descartes as well, it is in the direct act and not in the reflective act that philosophical critique begins. This is what I also wanted to retain from Descartes.

- Levinas, *‘Transcendence and Height,’* 25

Levinas adopts Descartes' idea of the infinite and places it on the Other. He explains Descartes' thinking of infinity “...simply followed the admirable rhythm of Cartesian thinking, which only rejoins the world by passing through the idea of the Infinite.” (Levinas, *‘Transcendence and Height,’* 20). In Descartes's philosophy, he ends up placing God (the infinite) as what precedes the Self (presupposing the notion of the Self,

or the 'I'). Similarly, Levinas's notion of the Self is constituted by the infinite Other and presupposes the Self as a being in terms of itself. Levinas places the Self in a primordial relation with the Other and explains the Other in terms of infinity.

Similar to Descartes's primary sense of God, Levinas applies this framework to expose a primordial relation to the Other. Levinas applies Descartes's concept of infinity to the Other and exposes an asymmetrical relationship where the self is responsible for the other. Of course, Levinas still ultimately criticizes Descartes and other philosophers of idealism for producing a reality from the realm of ideas. Levinas sees this as reducing reality and the Other's otherness.

The ontological event accomplished by philosophy consists in suppressing or transmuting the alterity of all that is Other, in universalizing the immanence of the Same (le Meme) or of Freedom, in effacing the boundaries, and in expelling the violence of Being (Entre).

- Levinas, 'Transcendence and Height,' 11

To Levinas, philosophy as ontology is fundamentally flawed. He explains that even asking the ontological question of being is a search for "truth" is a pursuit of possession. Levinas describes, "...assimilation which occurs in philosophy qua philosophy is fundamentally a search for truth." (Levinas, 'Transcendence and Height,' 13). To Levinas, this pursuit of knowledge is a sort of pursuit of possession for the Self. As much as Descartes might have briefly noted how the infinite might affect and determine the finite ego, he ultimately concluded that the infinite could be "understood," if not known, and thus, in the fifth Meditation, reduced the transcendence he originally attributed to it. Levinas sees this as a sort of assimilation of the infinite other - the truly

other - to consciousness. Put differently, Descartes enterprise constitutes a "making same of the Other," a sort of violence.

Ontology and it's Critique

This section examines Heidegger's ontology as "first philosophy" and what it is trying to do. Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) was a German philosopher specifically concerned with phenomenology and existentialism. In *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, Heidegger moves away from idealism and places *being* as a philosophical question (rather than as a philosophical framework). This is clear in his *Introduction to Metaphysics*, where Heidegger begins by asking, "Why are there beings at all instead of nothing?" (Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, 1). For Heidegger, this question exposes the ultimately mysterious, and unanswerable, question of why beings exist, and what their existence ultimately means. That is, for Heidegger, this question exposes just how impenetrable the nature of being really is, and how philosophers have tried to avoid dealing with this central impasse.

While philosophers have traditionally sought to understand the specific "being" of sense perceptions or the "being" of a specific idea, they have ignored the fundamental ambiguity that rests under all of these attempts. A true ontology, for Heidegger, poses this question to itself and grapples with all of the ways in which this question manifests itself in human life. In *Heidegger an introduction*, philosopher Richard Polt describes:

How does Heidegger answer the question of Being then? What is his philosophy? He replies, "I have no philosophy at all". But he is a philosopher nonetheless- because philosophy for him, is not something one has, but something one does. It is not a theory or a set of principles but relentless and

passionate devotion to a question, In a Heideggerian formula: “questioning is the piety of thought”.

- Polt, *Heidegger an introduction* , 5

Levinas's criticizes the centrality of the Self in the asking of this question of being. Though Heidegger moves away from fixed philosophical frameworks that were produced from the Self and assumed knowledge of, or over, the Other, posing the question being does not remove the Self from the centrality of its concern – it accentuates it. To ask the question of being to place the Self at the centrality of this question of being, While Heidegger moves away from idealism, his ontology is still centered on the self, as it examines being as a question that concerns the individual. Heidegger's concern of the authentic dasein, that which is concerned with the question of being, is also leading to an egology for Levinas.

The centrality of self in this question “Why are there beings at all instead of nothing?” is a primary concern for Levinas as it interprets the self as autonomous and ignores the Other *being* of other *beings*. Heidegger explains, “Thus if we properly pursue the question “Why are there beings at all instead of nothing?” in its sense as a question, we must avoid emphasizing any particular, individual being, not even focusing on the human being.” (Polt, *Heidegger an introduction* , 4). Heidegger's dasein, German for “being there,” regards being or existence as something that only concern the self. Levinas explains this priority of the self ignores our primordial relation to the Other.

In *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1953), Heidegger explains learning and knowledge as something that pertain the self. To Levinas, even if there is no truth to be known or possessed, philosophy still determines the Other by its relation to itself. Levinas continues to build on this critique of the primacy of the self and shows that it is

a central part of Heidegger's philosophy, even though the philosophical "knowledge" it attains is only ever a question. For Levinas, Heidegger's question of being implies that this is a question that is a concern for the individual. To ask this question is to send the individual on a "building" out of the Self as it ignores the primordial relation to the Other. This assumption of an autonomous Self assumes a conscious self where out actuality is also out potentiality. In this sense, Heidegger's philosophy is still an egology as it places being in terms of the Self rather than vulnerable to their sensibilities.

To ask the question of being itself is to place the Self as the primary concern and as completely independent of all other beings and things (the existent could exist without existence). Levinas explains this misperceived perception of reality as placing this primacy on the Self ignores the fundamental relation the Self has to the external world (and to the Other). To Levinas, ethics must come as "first philosophy" since we are constituted by this Other.

Heidegger describes this being brought into question as a sort of opening up of the self. "For through this questioning being as a whole are first opened up as such and with regard to their possible ground, and they are kept open in the questioning." (Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics* 5). Levinas is concerned with Heidegger's persistence on the Self as this functions as a "building" out of the self.

In 'Judaism and the Feminine' Levinas uses the idea of the feminine to describe to contrast with Heidegger's idea of being. Levinas explains that the feminine takes up their environment with concern to the external, thus contrasting with Heidegger's concern for the self within itself. For Levinas, the feminine is responsive to their environment and takes it up as responsibility of the self for others. Levinas explains:

The return of the self, the gathering or appearance of place in space, does not result, as in Heidegger, from the gesture of building, from an architecture that shapes a countryside, but from the interiority of 'the House' - the reverse [l'envers] of which would be place living there, which is habitation itself. She makes the corn into bread and the flax into clothing.

- Levinas, 'Judaism and the Feminine,' in *Difficult Freedom*, 33

To Levinas, the feminine energy carries a life affirming ability to transform. He explains that this taking up of something as a concern for the Self contrasts with the assertive nature of the self in Heidegger's philosophy. Heidegger's philosophy is a sort of "building out"(or "architecture") of the self that invades the Other (or "countryside").

Levinas criticizes this reduction of the Other as it places the Other in terms of the Self and removes their Otherness. Levinas explains philosophy and other systems of thought have produced an egology, where Other is taken as the Same. Levinas explains this as a "violence of the Other," as it attempts to paint over the Other's alterity (that which defines our experience of them).

In 'God and Philosophy' (1975) Levinas expands upon his ideas of alterity and sameness and his description saying and the said. Levinas presents a sort of non-ontological philosophy and explains the saying (the action of speaking, verb) always precedes the said (past participle, noun). The saying must be taken up and occur as a particular encounter (occurred in certain time, place, audience) before any claim can be made over it. To Levinas, the said always reduces the saying. Levinas explains, "Language understood in this way loses its superfluous and strange function of doubling up thought and being. Saying as testimony precedes all the said." (Levinas, 'God and Philosophy,' in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 145). To Levinas, the saying gives a necessary movement to the subject and dialogue that the said claims as fixed.

Levinas thinks about the said in terms of sameness and totality. He explains the saying in a similar manner to infinity and allows it to maintain its separateness. Levinas explains the saying allows for a continual sort of movement to the language and describes, "Saying is a way of signifying a prior to all experience. A pure testimony, it is a martyr's truth which does not depend on any disclose or any "religious" experience; it is an obedience the hearing of any order." (Levinas, 'God and Philosophy,' in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 145). To Levinas, the saying is an acknowledgment of the Other and their Otherness.

To Levinas, saying is an expression to the Other where the Other is brought into relation while maintaining their Otherness. In contrast, the said "thematizes" and thus assigns a sort of static quality to what is really only an expression. The said implies a sort of claim over the Other and dissipates the Other's Otherness. Levinas explains that philosophy separates the ethical from the ontological.

Levinas thinks about totality, the Same, and egology all in a similar sense and criticizes this primordial sense of Self. Levinas wants to untie this knot that has left humans to see the Self as autonomous and independent from this responsibility to others. He seeks to create a "philosophy" where the self does not impose itself onto the Other as that would dissipate their otherness. Levinas hopes to create a relation of separation that preserves the Other's Otherness while keeping the Other in the fundamental relation to the Self.

Existence and Existents

In *Existence and Existents* (1947), Levinas explains the dangers of this upsurge of the Self. He criticizes ontology and describes it as "...the upsurge of an existent into existence, a hypostasis" where the Self takes the Other and is taken into the world of the Same (in terms of the Self) (Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 25). Levinas describes this making of the Other into the Same as a sort of violence or "murder." Levinas explains Other's Otherness is something the Self can never know and thus must be maintained through separation.

One of the main ideas that Levinas is thinking about in *Existence and Existents* is the *il y a* ("there is"). Levinas writes in opposition to Dasein, the being whose being is an issue for itself. Levinas hopes to reverse this primacy of being and place it on the Other (referring to the relation between the Self and all other beings). Levinas describes the primacy of the *il y a*:

The discovery of the materiality of being is now a discovery of a new quality, but its formless proliferation. Behind the luminosity of forms, by which binds already relate to our "inside," matter is the very fact that there is...

- Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 47

Regardless of how close to the Other one is, it is something that can never be "known." Levinas's idea of infinity is linked to this continuously demanding and unknowable relation and the *il y a* ("there is").

Levinas introduces the *il y a* as an external primordial existence that is a fundamental horror. He describes the existent's existence as overwhelmed by the *il y a* as it is an evil that exceeds what can be consciously experienced by the subject (or

existent). Levinas describes the *il y a* precedes consciousness as its unabsorbable yet inescapable nature taking over an individual's own existence. As Fagenblat describes,

The il y a describes the menacing possibility of an erratically de-created world, without bearings or dimensions, without particulars or persons- a world become mere existence, impersonal, neutral, and anonymous, and utterly indifferent to particular existents.

- Fagenblat, *A Convent of Creatures*, 38

Levinas sees the world as not how it “ought to be.” He uses the *il y a* to explain existence without existents as an evil that destroys the Other. Levinas reveals that it is existents – the Other – that is our reality. He explains totality tried to do away with this world with creation and this “building” out of the Self.

Totality and Infinity

Levinas critique of this primacy of ontology and Heidegger is plainly seen in *Totality and Infinity* (1961). Levinas criticizes Heidegger's sense of totality and explains totality brings the Other into the Same and removes the Other's Otherness. Levinas thinks idealism, the Same, and egology in terms of totality. At the beginning of *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas describes:

This book will present subjectivity as welcoming the Other, as hospitality; in it the idea of infinity is consummate. Hence intentionality, where thought remains as adequation with the object, does not define consciousness as its fundamental level. All knowing que intentionality already presupposes the idea of infinity, which is preeminently non-adequation.

- Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 27

Morgan describes Levinas calls out the human “heteronomous impulse, to our grasping something that is wholly other.” (Morgan, *Discovering Levinas*, 91). Levinas explains the

dangers of this assimilating of the Other into the Self and explains the Other in relation to infinity. Levinas expands upon this idea of infinity and describes,

Its definition is produced as revelation, as a positing of its idea in me. It is produced in the improbable feat whereby a separated being fixed in its identity, the Same, the I, nonetheless contains in itself what it can neither contain nor receive solely by virtue of its own identity. Subjectivity realizes these impossible exigencies- the astonishing feat of continuing more than it is possible to contain.
- Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 27

The Other's Otherness is entirely Other to us and must always maintain this separateness in relation. This separateness allows the Other to without being assimilated into the terms of the Self. Similar to Descartes relation with the self-linked to an infinite source (God), Levinas places the Other as a "positing of its idea in me." This relation of separateness and infinity preserves the Other's Otherness in this relation.

This morally ordered world is produced, Levinas argues, out of response to the *il y a*. Existence with no existents is an anti-ethical world as it destroys any particularity. The nothingness of evil can be seen through the *il y a*. Levinas explains this existence with no existents as the chaotic void that came before creation through the anti-morally ordered world. Similar to creation as the sort of "nothingness" contains in itself what it can neither contain it solely by virtue of its own identity.

Levinas's philosophy does not remove the idea of the Self; rather, it opens the Self up to reveal this fundamental relation to the Other. Levinas relates the transcendent nature of revelation to that of infinity as its "Its infinity is produced as revelation" (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 27). He continues, "The idea of infinity (which is not a representation of infinity) sustains activity itself." (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 27). Levinas describes infinity acknowledges these differences: "Subjectivity realizes these

impossible exigencies- the astonishing feat of continuing more than it is possible to contain.” (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 27). To Levinas, the infinite calls the Self into an obligation that must be acted upon. For Levinas, sensibility precedes consciousness as it is at a vulnerability to the outside. That is, what is assigned to us to experience exceeds what can consciously be experienced. Levinas thinks about the implications of this seemingly paradoxical way of being where the self is taken over by something external that which we can never grasp.

The Problem of Evil and Theodicy

The Problem of Evil

The section investigates the problem of evil, the epistemic question of how evil can exist if we have a God that is omnipotent, omnibenevolent, and omniscient. Different philosophers and theologians respond to this question and how it pertains to philosophy, religion, and ethics. At the beginning of the *The Problem of Evil*, Mark Larrimore describes why the problem of evil concerns us.

Evil is a practical problem. Even the person who is a witness to evils finds her sense of agency challenged. In explaining or consoling, narrating or exorcising, praying or raging, we assert human agency in the face of the appearance of malevolence or indifference of the cosmos - or our human fellows. A religious studies approach to the “problem of evil” does not prejudge what responses to evils should look like, or what should count as an adequate response.

- Larrimore, *The Problem of Evil*, xiv

For Larrimore, the question of evil — and, by extension, theodicy — permeates a broad number of concerns. Though it may seem like an abstract philosophical consideration,

the problem of evil gets to the core of who we are, what we can do, and what we owe to one another. Larrimore wants us to think about how we can think about the problem of evil in a productive manner where we become involved. To think about evil, is to take up thinking of the self in relation to evil and how one can concern the self with it. To Larrimore, the problem of evil itself is a sort of drawing out the self that challenges human freedom.

Theodicy as “Justice of God”

Gottfried Leibniz, German mathematician, diplomat, and philosopher (1646-1716) coined the term “theodicy” in 1690s. He uses the term to explain evil occurs to either protect from a larger evil or to contribute to later, larger good.

“Theodicy”— from the Greek theos (God) and dikē (justice).⁵

Larrimore describes that though Leibniz never defined the term it is simply to have meant “justice of God” rather than “justifying the ways of God to man.” (Leibniz, ‘Theodicy’ in Larrimore, *The Problem of Evil* 191). Leibniz’s optimistic response to the problem of evil explains our world as “the best possible world,” not as a perfect world or world without evil but rather the world with the least evil in it. Leibniz in this sense excuses evil by claiming it’s a part of “God’s Plan.”

⁵ Larrimore, 191

Leibniz and "The Best of Possible Worlds"

In *Theodicy* (1709), Leibniz begins by criticizing the argument that there are infinite better possible worlds. According to Leibniz, since God is all-knowing, he can identify the best possible world, and because God is all-powerful, he holds the ability to create this best possible world. Leibniz argues God has the power to make whatever he wants, and since God is omnibenevolent, He chose to create this best possible world.

Leibniz describes "As in mathematics, when there is no maximum nor minimum, in short nothing distinguished, everything is done equally, or when that is not possible nothing at all is done: so it may be said likewise in respect of perfect wisdom, which is no less orderly than mathematics, that if there were not the best [optimum] among all possible worlds, God would not have produced any." (Leibniz, 'Theodicy' in Larrimore, *The Problem of Evil*, 197). Essentially, God would not have created any world if this world was not the best possible. Leibniz explains that it is in God's nature to create the best possible result

God created this best possible world for reasons that humans are incapable of understanding as we lack wisdom. Leibniz describes, "God is the first reason of things: for such things as are bounded, as all that which we see and experience, are contingent and have nothing in them to render their existence necessary..." (Leibniz, 'Theodicy' in Larrimore, *The Problem of Evil*, 196). Since God created all beings, including humans, all things are bound to Him. Leibniz explains that God is able to see potential outcomes and consequences of His actions.

Leibniz describes that "Therein God has ordered all things beforehand once for all, having foreseen prayers, good and bad actions, and all the rest; and each thing as

an idea has contributed, before its existence, to the resolution that has been made upon the existence of all things..." (Leibniz, 'Theodicy' in Larrimore, *The Problem of Evil*, 197). God makes decisions as though He is playing a game; He thinks strategically about his next move and how each decision could influence other factors and events. Leibniz describes God as a strategic planner focused on preserving the morality of the world as a whole.

Leibniz describes that since humans are created inferior to God, we commit evils as we lack God's wisdom and knowledge. According to Leibniz, God is all-knowing and has reasoning behind all his decisions that we are incapable of understanding. This supreme knowledge is established in morality, and Leibniz argues that all decisions God makes are rooted in what is best for the world as a whole. Leibniz describes, "For we must consider the original imperfection in the creature before sin, because the creature is limited in its essence; whence ensues that it cannot know all, and that it can deceive itself, and commit other errors." (Leibniz, 'Theodicy' in Larrimore, *The Problem of Evil*, 198). Leibniz explains humans are limited, and since we are below God, we lack the knowledge that would allow us constantly to make the right decisions. This hierarchical pyramid which God created, separates humans from God and makes us prone to failure.

When Leibniz describes that we live in the "best possible world," he is not implying that every little thing in the world is perfect, but rather that the world as a whole is filled with the "maximum" amount of goodness. It is impossible to create an ideal world as it is natural for humans to desire control and predictability. This stability is unattainable as all things in the world are dependent on other things and thus are ever-

changing. However, Leibniz explains "...God has chosen the world as it is..." Leibniz, 'Theodicy' in Larrimore, *The Problem of Evil*, 199). Leibniz describes that having a greater plan provides relief for humans encourages them to believe that everything is a part of a grand plan.

Leibniz describes theodicy has allowed for the self to find meaning in the way things are (rather than respond to what's wrong in the world). Through Leibniz's eyes, having trust in God's plan allows one to cope with suffering and loss more easily as they can find a reason behind it and hope for better days ahead. Leibniz describes,

And as for evil, God wills moral evil not at all, and physical evil or suffering he does not will absolutely. Thus it is that there is no absolute predestination to damnation: and one may say of physical evil that God wills it often as a penalty owing to guilt, and often also as a means to an end, that is to prevent greater evils or to obtain greater good...

- Leibniz, 'Theodicy' in Larrimore, *The Problem of Evil*, 200

Leibniz thereby excuses evil claiming it as a part of a larger, greater plan that we cannot know. Levinas explains theodicy as always, an attempt to justify the suffering of the Other.

In 'Useless Suffering' (1982) Levinas explains suffering can only be described as useless. Relating to his concept of *il y a*, the "positive negativity" of the *il y a* is seen in useless suffering as it is an existence with no existent. Since the *il y a* cannot be consciously experienced by the existent, it holds no intrinsic value. The only value suffering can hold is when it is taken on by another existent (the Self) as a responsibility. Theodicy ignores this responsibility as Levinas explains, "The justification of the neighbor's pain is certainly the source of all immorality." (Levinas, 'Useless Suffering,' in Larrimore, *The Problem of Evil*, 378). To justify suffering is to detach the

self from responding to the suffering. Levinas explains the demand of the Other's suffering as what calls the Self into this ethical relation. This responsibility moves towards a theology without theodicy.

Useless Suffering

All evil refers to suffering. It is the impasse of life and being, their absurdity, where pain does not come, somehow innocently, 'to color' consciousness with affectivity. The evil of pain, the harm itself, is the explosion and most profound articulation of absurdity. Thus, the least one can say about suffering is that in its own phenomenality, intrinsically, it is useless. 'For nothing.'

- Levinas, 'Useless Suffering' in Larrimore, *The Problem of Evil*, 373

Suffering as Meaningless

In "Useless Suffering" Levinas describes suffering, that is innocent suffering, as a negation that is forced onto us that extends beyond the realm of meaning, to a realm of unmeaning, going beyond the absurd. He describes suffering as "the impasse of life and being their absurdity, where pain does not come, somehow innocently, to color' consciousness with effectively." (Levinas, 'Useless Suffering' in Larrimore, *The Problem of Evil*, 373). Levinas explains that this overwhelming and undoing unconsciousness does not contain any of its own.

With suffering "sensibility" is a "vulnerability" that overwhelms any consciousness or sense of being. Levinas explains the existence of suffering is an assigned existence as it does not attach to or get taken up by then experiencer (it just exists). This lack of interaction between the existent and existence is the root to evil.

The experience of the il y a can only be taken as a *given* rather than a *received experience*. Levinas describes that "Suffering, in its hurt and its in-spite-of-consciousness, is passivity." (Levinas, 'Useless Suffering' in Larrimore, *The Problem of Evil*, 372). The negativity passivity of suffering ("in-spite-of-consciousness"). To Levinas, there is no inward excuse, explanation, or meaning that can be derived from suffering.

Levinas sees this introverted way of living and perceiving the external world as a sort of evil itself as it produces an irresponsible Self.

Taking on the Suffering of the Other

Levinas turns the Self outward and describes meaning that can only come from suffering when the Self takes on the suffering of the Other. Levinas describes “the unjustifiable suffering of the Other, opens upon suffering the ethical perspective of the inter-human order.” (Levinas, ‘Useless Suffering’ in Larrimore, *The Problem of Evil*, 374). Levinas explains that when the Self takes on the suffering of the Other as their own responsibility, they are, in a sense, acting ethically.

This extroverted sense of religion/ethics turns the Self outward and engaged in the world. Levinas describes this “non-useless” suffering (or love) as “inspired by the suffering of the Other person to its compassion.” (Levinas, ‘Useless Suffering’ in Larrimore, *The Problem of Evil*, 379) This infinite nature of this ethical relation that places the self as the solution to the others suffering and can only respond to suffering by taking up the Other’s suffering as a responsibility, “no longer suffering “for nothing”...” (Levinas, ‘Useless Suffering’ in Larrimore, *The Problem of Evil*, 379). Levinas's alternative to theodicy places a “dawning” responsibility on the Self for the Other (Levinas, ‘Useless Suffering’ in Larrimore, *The Problem of Evil*, 379). Levinas explains it as the primary impulse to leave this ego to become closer to what one may perceive as their “true Self.”

To Levinas, suffering is an overwhelming lack. It is a lack, or nothingness, that takes over and defines any. Levinas thinks about suffering as evil as it is a lack that

overwhelms the subject, bringing out a sort of nothingness, the *il y a*. The *il y a* overwhelming absent nature of the *il y a* reveals an existence with no existent. Levinas explains that any attempt to excuse, explain, or give meaning to suffering is an evil. It has allowed humans to excuse suffering rather than seeing it as a responsibility. Levinas turns Other people's suffering into a concern and responsibility of the Self and calls for an alternative to theodicy that calls this Self outward into this relation.

Levinas describes the intolerable nature of suffering exposes a fundamental relation to the Other. Levinas explains in suffering, "sensitivity" is a "vulnerability," as the given experience cannot be received as a taken experience by the subject. Levinas explains that the *il y a* of suffering as it enters the body with no "exit," leaving one helpless and overwhelmed. He explains in this state of *il y a*, existence overwhelms the existent so that the Self is forced outward. Levinas explains this cry as both an attempt to release the suffering and a call on something external for help. Levinas describes suffering in regards to "extreme passivity, impotence, abandonment, and solitude" to also expose the "possibility of half opening" (Levinas, 'Useless Suffering' in Larrimore, *The Problem of Evil*, 373). Levinas explains that suffering holds meaning when it is taken as a responsibility of a Self.

Though he does not explicitly describe the *il y a* in "Useless Suffering," Levinas references the *il y a* in his description of evil as a sort of nothingness. Levinas explains the paradoxical nature of the *il y a*, "positive negativity," This overwhelming deprivation that cannot be escaped or eased by the Self. This is seen in Levinas's depiction of suffering as a sort of existence or presence that lacks any existent or subject This suffering "the impasse of being," that which does not take place consciously to the

existent as it is a negativity that exceeds what can be absorbed by the subject. This overwhelming lack of something external “persecutes” the Self and turns us back outward towards the Other. Levinas articulates the dangers of looking at the problem of evil as a “philosophical problem” to make sense of,

The philosophical problem, then, which is posed by the useless pain which appears in the fundamental malignancy across the events of the twentieth century, concerns the meaning that religiosity and the human morality of goodness can still retain the end of theodicy . According to the philosopher we have just quote, Auschwitz would paradoxically entail a revelation of the very God who nevertheless was silent as Auschwitz: a commandment of faithfulness... The Jew after Auschwitz is pledged is to his faithfulness to Judaism and to the material and even political conditions of its existence.

- Levinas, 'Useless Suffering,' in Larrimore *The Problem of Evil*, 379

The End of Theodicy

Theodicy Excusing Evil

To Levinas, theodicy similarly comes out of this critique as seen on the Self in the critique of ontology as first philosophy. Levinas describes humans choosing to believe in theodicy to ease the sense of “anxiety” that constitutes human existence. The anxiety of being, that is, our existence being constituted by something outside of the Self, reveals a primordial relation to the Other. Levinas explains since the Other is fundamentally the root of our being, the Self must live actively and dynamically in response to the Other. To Levinas, this continuous and demanding responsibility calls for an alternative to theodicy where Levinas places the Self as constituted by and always at the demand of this overwhelming call to the Other. Levinas describes that the passivity of suffering makes a lack, a sort of nothingness that extends beyond what can be explained or derived meaning from.

Levinas calls us to wake up this relation to the Other and draw them into this relation of responsibility. Have theodicy excusing evil by giving it meaning or an explanation? And how can we instead place ourselves in the solution. Levinas explains that the evil in the world has gone beyond what can be explained or derived meaning from. He explains evil as entering the realm of “unmeaning.” Levinas describes, “The disproportion between suffering and every theodicy was shown at Auschwitz with a glaring, obvious clarity. Its possibility puts into question the multi-millennial tradition of faith.” (Levinas, ‘Useless Suffering’ in Larrimore, *The Problem of Evil*, 379). To Levinas, the

world is not how it ought to be, and theodicy allows us to escape the responsibility of the Other.

Alternative to Theodicy

Levinas seeks to reverse the primacy of this sort of introverted sense of being in the world and place attention on something outside, “the Other.” Heidegger’s ontology as “first philosophy” has placed the Self as the locus of all relations, ignoring our fundamental relation to the Other. This primordial relation to the Other constitutes the Self and describes that collapses any sense of the autonomous Self. This Other precedes the autonomous Self, the infinitely unknowable and inescapable relation to the Other.

Levinas explains this relation is rooted in the separation between the Same and the Other in order to maintain the Other’s Otherness. Levinas describes it as a “violence” when one places the Self at the locus of being as it assimilates the external world to the Self and “murders” any alterity. To Levinas, this demanding relation calls the Self further into their “true” Self as the individual is turned outside from the inwardness of ontology.

To Levinas, theodicy serves as an evil itself as it justifies the suffering of the Other. He explains, “For an ethical sensibility- confirming itself, in the inhumanity of our time, against this inhumanity- the justification of the neighbor’s pain is certainly the course of all immorality.” (Levinas, ‘Useless Suffering’ in Larrimore, *The Problem of Evil*, 378). Levinas writes with the intention of waking people up and calling them to understand acting out this relationship of responsibility. Perhaps he writes with a certain

harshness to echo that this relationship is a demand. We are called into ourselves through something outside of ourselves. For Levinas, it is actually what is outside that determines this internal self. The responsibility for the Other will always come before our own freedom.

Levinas describes this relation as asymmetrical, placing the Self at the demand for the Other. He explains, "Is in the inter-human perspective of my responsibility for the Other person, without concern for reciprocity, in my call to help him gratuitously, in the asymmetry of the relation of one to the other, that we have tried to analyze the phenomenon of useless suffering." (Levinas, 'Useless Suffering' in Larrimore, *The Problem of Evil*, 380). Levinas shifts the Self outward of their habitual "egoism" and into the "inter-human."

Levinas explains this relation to the Other as not existing as a space created between two beings. To Levinas, there is something at stake in this relation that is drawing the Self into an obligation. Levinas explains, "For there is transcended inwardness as well as exteriority: it does not even make it possible to distinguish these." (Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 52). To Levinas, our relation to the Other is what comes first, it is something demanded out of the Self.

Levinas plays primacy on the existent and explains, "The very positivity of love lies in its negativity. The burning bush that feeds the flames is not consumed." (Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 37). To "consume" the Other would be to bring it into our own existence or in terms of the Self. Levinas explains that the taking up of love rests in "negativity," this negativity is a lack that is unable to ever be filled, satisfied, completed, or done. Levinas exposes an asymmetrical relation that places a demand on the Self for

the wellbeing of the Other. Levinas explains this responsibility confronts the nothing of the *il y a*.

Evil as Nothingness

Levinas explains the *il y a* as a kind of evil that lacks any sort of existent (or the holder of that experience does not experience the evil consciously). This *there is suffering*, an existence stripped of existents. This nothingness of evil is necessary to understanding Levinas's need to call an end to theodicy and demand a more responsible alternative. The "nothingness" of evil makes it lack any meaning for the one suffering and thus cannot only hold meaning when the Other's suffering is taken up as a responsibility of the Self. In fighting against the suffering of the Other and claiming suffering as useless, Levinas shifts the focus of the question of evil from presence of evil to instead place the Self at the concern and call of the existent to alleviate this suffering.

Conclusion

Religion for Adults

To Levinas, human beings' relationship with God is intertwined with their relationship to the Other. He interprets religiosity in terms of ethical responsibility. This responsibility comes first and before any pursuit of knowledge. It can only be experienced in life and expressed. It is private (or personal) as its enactment is unique to each encounter with Other, This responsive nature of the relation also makes it universal in that it extends to all human beings and a general concern for the world

(through each Other). This ethical command and commitment is never-ending. Levinas places the Self in an asymmetrical relationship with the Other, waiting to answer the call of the Other (without consideration of reciprocity). The complexity of Levinas's language echoes that this relation is a continual enactment. After all, this is a "religion for adults," so how could the depth and demand of this responsibility be put into simple terms?

Other philosophers have similarly looked at religion relationally. Martin Buber similarly writes about our relation to Other. He sees this relation rooted in directness and reciprocity. This section is here to show how Levinas's relation to the Other holds a unique sort of responsibility that is directly responding to the nature of the world and instigating a response in each individual

Buber and I-Thou

In Martin Buber's *I and Thou* (1923) the world is a place of relation. Buber describes how humans live their relationships to nature, others, and God through either the "I-it" or the I-Thou relationship. With the "I-Thou" relation, humans can see their relationships within these three spheres in their wholeness. Buber's relation to the Other is rooted in its direct nature, describing a sort of "lens" we put on in the moment of these encounters.

Buber emphasizes the "I-Thou" lens requires one to look at their encounters with spontaneity rather than through the lens of the past or for the purpose that can be served in the future. The "I-it" lens ignores spontaneity, preventing I-Thou relationships from developing. The "I-it" lens interprets the Other through their utilization and what value they can generate to you, classifying the Other within the boundaries of time and

space and defining them through preconceived notions. Operating constantly in this limited realm is would be to ignore the call of the Other that Levinas describes as “primordial” to the Self.

Buber similarly writes about a relational religion that calls for a new way of thinking about our relation to the external world and our involvement in it. Buber describes the “I-Thou” lens is rooted in mutuality. He explains that one must be presented with the opportunity and choose to apply both “grace” and “will” to adopt the sense of mutuality necessary for “I-Thou” relationships. The “I-Thou” is rooted in a sense of reciprocity where it is an intentional effort that is both passive and active at once. Buber describes a tree in the I-Thou relation:

I consider a tree...I can perceive it as movement: flowing veins on clinging, pressing pith, suck of the roots, breathing of the leaves, ceaseless commerce with earth and air- and the obscure growth itself...I can subdue its actual presence and form so sternly that I recognize it only as an expression of law- of the laws in accordance with which a constant opposition of forces is continually adjusted, or of those in accordance with which the competent substance mingle and separate... It can, however, also come about, if I have both will and grace, that in considering the tree, I become bound up in relation to it. The tree is now no longer It. I have been seized by the power of exclusiveness... There is nothing from which I would have my eyes away in order to see, no knowledge that I would have to forget. Rather is everything, picture and movement, species and type, law and number, indivisibly united in this event.

- Buber, *I and Thou*, 22-23

With the I-Thou lens, Buber sees the tree in its “wholeness” and writes, “The tree is no longer It. I have been seized by the power of exclusiveness.” (Buber, *I and Thou*, 23). To Buber, the relation to the tree “seizes” the self, establishing a similar sense of invasion to self that Levinas describes. However, this encounter “seizes” the self in a direct and sudden moment. Levinas hopes to establish a more determinative relation to

the Other, one where it continuously and fundamentally determines our notion of the Self. Levinas this responsibility of the Self as a continual and never-ending encounter of the Other and our responsibility for the Other. Levinas places the Other as primordial to explain the “depth” of the demand we are called into.

Levinas places the self in an asymmetrical relation with the Other where the self is responsible for the care and maintenance Other. Levinas is indirectly critical of Buber for rooting this relation in reciprocity and explains it ignores the primordial relation to the Other that is fundamentally inescapable. Levinas explains that with the reality of WWII and other horror in our world, this responsibility must call the self into action. The depth of this responsibility becomes clear in *Difficult Freedom*, where Levinas thinks about this relation in regards to Jewish ideas and texts.

Levinas explains when we are concerned with how the Other is going to respond to us, we end up placing ourselves the center of this relationship. Levinas pivots this relationship rooted in mutuality to a responsibility of the self to overcome evil in the case of *il y a*. Levinas explains this responsibility of the self surpasses the direct and mutual relation Buber describes through his tree analogy. Levinas states, "Man, after all, is not a tree, and humanity is not a forest." (Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 23). Levinas explains our relation to the Other must extend to a responsibility beyond reciprocity. Perhaps Levinas is worried that Buber's "I-Thou" lens cannot and could never capture the Other in full (as they are characterized solely by their "Otherness"). Buber explains the I-Thou relation is rooted in reciprocity and thus must be taken up by the self. Whereas Levinas sees this relation as a demand, Buber describes it must be "taken up." Buber explains that one must need "grace" and "will."

Buber interprets a more autonomous Self that exists outside of these relations to the external. While Levinas similarly sees a Self, the Self is constituted by something external to it. For Levinas, the Other calls the Self into a fundamental relation that presupposes any sense of individual freedom. Levinas explains the Self as obligated to answer this call. For Levinas, is not if I take up this relation and respond to the Other, but rather *how* do I respond to the Other. calls us into a relation. In comparison, Buber explains the Self initiates and maintains the relation to the Other. To Levinas, the relation is intrinsically a part of the Self and to ignore this relation is to ignore the fundamental terms of reality. This relation to the Other precedes and presupposes any sense of individual freedom (for we do not have the choice). While as Buber explains this relationship as requiring a taking up, Levinas describes it as a demand.

For Levinas, this relation is maintained in separateness whereas for Buber this relation exists in a more direct proximity. Levinas explains the Other pushes the self out of it's natural egology and draws us it into this continual responsibility for the Other. Buber, brings the Other into the "direct relation" where this relation does not exist in relation to the individual outside of the direct encounter.

In 'The Dialogue between Heaven and Earth,' (1967) Buber explains a God who conceals Himself, *Hester Panim*, God who hides His face. Buber explains, "But man is no blind tool; he was created as a free being — free also vis-á-vis God, free to surrender to Him or to refuse himself to Him. To God's sovereign address man gives his autonomous answer; if he remains silent, his silence, too, is an answer." (Buber, 'The Dialogue between Heaven and Earth, 63). Buber explains the taking up of the I-Thou relationship as needing both "grace" and "will." To Buber, the Self must be called into

this relation and have the “will” to enter it. In Buber’s I-Thou relation, the Self and Other are connected, forming a sort of unity between the two. In contrast, Levinas maintains a separateness between the Self and the Other (necessary so that the Other can maintain their Otherness). Levinas in this way maintains a sense of responsibility in the Self that forces this relation to always be asymmetrical.

For Buber, love exists as a mutual and direct feeling between two beings (it exists in the moment, rather than always being there). This love exists in encounters. For Buber a God that hides His face, *Hester Panim* is also a God to be found. While Levinas also perceives a God who can hide his face, Levinas turns to the Other to find this source of infinity (and trace of God). Levinas explains that we find God through the encounters with the other. Levinas describes that the face signifies the priority of the Other and brings us into this relation of responsibility.

In this way the face the Other signifies us, For Levinas, this responsibility comes before freedom (in an autonomous sense). By experiencing the presence of God through one's relation to man. The ethical relation will appear to Judaism as an exceptional relation: in it, contact with an external being, instead of compromising human sovereignty, institutes and invests it.” (Levinas, 16). Levinas pivots the Self towards the Other to respond to the evils in the world.

Ethical as Exceptional

Levinas places the Self in a relation of responsibility for the Other where the Self is constantly determined and responding to the Other. Levinas explains the self is called into this relation by the Other’s suffering. Levinas describes the *il y a* (there is) of

suffering, wherein “sensibility” becomes a “vulnerability” that takes over any sort of consciousness. Levinas exposes a notion of the Self as having a sort of fundamental and continuous relation to this infinite source that requires continual care.

Levinas describes that Judaism’s focus on ethical relationships defines its universalism. Levinas describes that,

It is a particularism that conditions universality, and it is a moral category rather than a historical fact to do with Israel, even if the historical Israel has in fact been faithful to the concept of Israel and, on the subject of morality, felt responsibilities and obligations which it demands from no one, but which sustain the world.

- Levinas, ‘Judaism and the Feminine,’ 22

Our relationship to “the Other” connects us to God through “opening” us to others.

Levinas sense of responsibility produces a deep sense of compassion that naturally places our relation to Other as a part of our essence that we are obligated to take on and take upon ourselves.

Levinas ethics as “first philosophy” places a unique responsibility that is motivated by the continuous upkeep of the Other. This concern for the Other places the self in a unique relationship where responsibility precedes freedom. Levinas calls the Self to realize this fundamental and continual obligation for the Other. This never-ending demand and constant preoccupation of the Other functions is both an anxiety and a compassionate love. It forces the self to respond to evils in the world and place themselves in it to help find a solution. This form of ethics requires a sort of continual concern for the Other helps connect us to all humans.

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