

Emmanuel Levinas' Philosophy of Responsible Subjectivity

By

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Emmanuel Levinas is one of the leading contemporary thinkers and he draws inspiration for his thought both from his Jewish experience as well as from the great literary and philosophic traditions of the West. He is thoroughly familiar with recent phenomenology and existential philosophy. While pursuing studies on philosophy, he followed closely the teachings of two great philosophers - Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger.¹

His first published work was his dissertation on *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology* which is considered as the first important French analysis of Husserl's thought.² His two major philosophical works - *Totality and Infinity*³ and *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*⁴ - express his original philosophical position and strike along new lines going beyond the transcendental idealism of Husserl and the hermeneutic phenomenology of Heidegger.

In the development of his original and comprehensive philosophy, Levinas leaned on the Western tradition of philosophy for his sources. But he also had deep roots in the Jewish tradition and had developed a reputation as an interpreter of

¹A. Peperzak, "Emmanuel Levinas: Jewish Experiences and Philosophy," *Philosophy Today*, 27 (March, 1983), 298.

²R. Blum, "Emmanuel Levinas' Theory of Commitment," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 44 (December, 1983), 145. Levinas also helped to translate Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations* into French soon after the original lectures were delivered at the Sorbonne in 1929.

³E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, c1969). Henceforth, this work will be cited in the notes as *Totality and Infinity*.

⁴E. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, c1981). Hereafter, this work will be cited as *Otherwise than Being*.

Talmudic thought.⁵ These two diverging sources no doubt contributed to the shaping of a philosophy that is peculiarly and uniquely his own. Levinas, however, tries to develop a philosophy that rises above the particular experiences and traditions in which it is rooted and addresses itself to the whole of humanity.⁶

But what is precisely Levinas' philosophy? What essential truth or meaning is he communicating in his works? There is no doubt as to the "vast originality of outlook" in his thought.⁷ But the complexity of his thought and the wealth of insights contained in his writings make it difficult for us to define his philosophy. Nevertheless, one particular idea may be singled out as a central theme in his works. This is the significant insight into the Self as a responsible subject. Levinas' philosophy of responsible subjectivity is presented in this study.⁸ As an introduction to his philosophy of the Self as a responsible subject, his critique of Western philosophy is first discussed.

Critique of Western Philosophy

Any philosophy possesses a historical dimension and stands in a certain relation to the philosophies of the past or arises as a reaction to previous philosophies. It either continues a prevailing philosophical tradition, tears it down without replacing it, or attempts to move away from an established tradition and redirect the course of philosophical speculation. Unless it proceeds from a critical reflection on past philosophies and their significance to recurring and current philosophical issues, an emerging philosopher's work may turn out to be gratuitous, repetitious or simply naive.

Levinas, on his part, made critical reflections on the history of Western philosophy and hoped to introduce innovations through his own development of phenomenological philosophy.

Western Philosophy as Ontology. For Levinas and other French thinkers in his time, the expression "Western philosophy" refers to the knowledge of the average French university professor about European traditions. This knowledge identifies the Greek heritage with the works of Heraclitus, Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus; it ignores for the most part medieval philosophy and emphasizes the modern character of the present culture. Levinas' critique of Western thought is

⁵Blum, *op. cit.*, 145.

⁶Peperzak, *op. cit.*, 298.

⁷L. Gilkey, "Comments on Levinas' *Totalite et Infini*," *Algemeen Nederlands Tijdschrift voor Wigsbegeerte en Psychologie*, 64 (1972), 26.

⁸Cf. Jayme, "Totality, Infinity, and the Intersubjective Relation in the Philosophy of Levinas," *Sophia: Journal of Philosophy*, 18 (Sept. - Dec., 1988): 16-30. In this earlier article, I presented some of the themes taken up in this study. However, the treatment of the same themes here takes into consideration the innovations in Levinas' later work, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, which represents the self-critical phase in Levinas' thought.

directed not only to the classical texts of philosophers but also to the whole ideology implicit in the Western life-style, planning, practice and technology.⁹

For Levinas, Western philosophy is a way of thought that reflects a particular attitude and perspective. He thinks that it has been or is dominantly an ontology,¹⁰ and more often it considers ontology as the first philosophy.¹¹

Ontology is the philosophy of being - the grasping of reality or the comprehension of being. This implies at the same time "the reduction of the Other to the same by interposition of a middle and neutral term that ensures the comprehension of being."¹² This middle term or "neutrum" is either history, logos, matter, the highest existent or Being itself.¹³

It is the Self as a conscious or as a thinking subject that considers all phenomena in their unity and distinction against one horizon. It is the Self that reduces the multiplicity of beings or existents to a common ground or totality that bears everything.¹⁴ And much of the history of European philosophy can be interpreted as an attempt on the part of self-consciousness to arrive at a universal synthesis: i.e., a reduction of all experience and of all that is reasonable, to a totality. Self-consciousness tries to embrace the world, leaves nothing outside and thus becomes absolute thought. Hence, the consciousness of the Self is at the same time the consciousness of the whole.¹⁵ Since the totality or the whole is centered on the thinking subject, Levinas sometimes refers to the totality as the Self and he speaks of Western philosophy as ontology both as a philosophy of totality and philosophy of the Self or an geology.¹⁶ And this philosophy is characterized by the word "ontology" since the intentional correlate of the Self or the ego coincides with the totality of all beings considered as one being. In this context, even God is seen either as "the Ground, as first or deepest of all beings or a synonym for the totality insofar as it originates and gathers the parts or 'moments' of which it is composed."¹⁷

Ontology is viewed as a theoretical or cognitive relationship. But theory or knowledge can denote the comprehension of being as a way of approaching the known being in such a manner that it effaces the alterity or otherness of the Other.¹⁸ This process of cognition is the work of the knower, which recognizes nothing in the Other that could limit it. This mode of depriving the alterity of what

⁹Peperzak, *op. cit.*, 298.

¹⁰*Totality and Infinity*, 43.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 46.

¹²*Ibid.*, 43; See also Levinas' "Signature," *Philosophy Today*, 10 (Spring, 1966), 35.

¹³L. Bouckaert, "Ontology and Ethics: Reflections on Levinas' Critique of Hegel," *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 10 (September, 1970), 403.

¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. R. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 75.

¹⁶Bouckaert, *op. cit.*, 403.

¹⁷Peperzak, *op. cit.*, 300.

¹⁸*Totality and Infinity*, 42.

is known is accomplished only if the known is approached through a third and a "neutral" term, which cushions the shock of the encounter. This "neutrum" is not itself a being but may appear as Being which is distinct from the existent or as a concept that is thought of.¹⁹

Theory, cognition, thematization and conceptualization - all these terms designate the relationship of the Self with Being. This relationship is enacted as ontology, i.e., the neutralizing of the existent in order for the Self to comprehend or grasp it. It is the relationship not with the Other as such but the reduction of the Other to the Self as the *Same*. Thematization and conceptualization involve the possession or suspension of the Other; they affirm the Other but negate its independence.²⁰ The movement of thought in ontology points to the definition of freedom: to maintain the Self as the Same against the other, thereby ensuring the autarchy of the Self.

Involving as it does a knowledge whereby the Other is reduced to the Self, western ontology grants primacy to the Self as the Same. One can see everywhere the nostalgia for totality in the form of an egology in Western philosophy - from Parmenides to Hegel, to Husserl and to Heidegger.²¹

Levinas strongly opposes a philosophy that posits totality as the essential structure of reality because it involves the negation of alterity and its reduction to the immanence of thought. And this ontological imperialism of reducing everything to Self-consciousness ultimately leads to the exploitation and appropriation of reality. It is the "verbalization of Western power politics and will for power."²² For, "I think" comes down to "I can."²³ Ontology, as first philosophy, is a philosophy of power; it is also a philosophy of injustice. It does not call into question the freedom of the Self; hence, it gives primacy to freedom (be it freedom of theory) before justice. It is a movement within the Same before obligation to the Other.²⁴

Against a philosophy that apprehends totality as the ultimate structure of reality, Levinas proposes a philosophy that respects the multiplicity and uniqueness of existents in the totality while being radically withdrawn from it. In this pluralistic conception, a transcendent and infinite Other is recognized as irreducible to the Self. This Other is considered as better than being, an exception to essence, outside of being and non-being, or a good over and beyond being. As such, the Other who is absolutely and radically Other cannot be approached ontologically on the level of knowledge or against the luminous horizon of Being. The Other refuses to be comprehended and circumscribed by thought or grasped in terms of the freedom and power of the Self as totality.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid., 46.

²¹*Ethics and Infinity*, 46.

²²Bouchaert, *op. cit.*, 407.

²³*Totality and Infinity*, 46.

²⁴Ibid., 47.

The experience of the transcendent and infinite Other as radical alterity that breaks the rupture of totality occurs in a relationship that Levinas describes as ethical - an interpersonal relationship that is "not a matter of thinking the ego and the Other together . . . but a togetherness of face to face."²⁵ For Levinas, ethics rather than ontology is the first philosophy.²⁶

Ethics as First Philosophy. Levinas' thought deviates from the traditional notion of ontology as first philosophy, and proposes the innovative conception of ethics as the first philosophy. Here, ethics is not conceived as a set of norms or a system of values which are implicitly lived in a community; it refers to a concrete relationship with an irreducible alterity manifest in the face of the Other.²⁷

The presence of the Other who is irreducible to the Self, calls into question the egological orientation and totalizing moves of the Self, and awakens it to a life of responsible subjectivity. This experience calls into question the spontaneous egoistic moves of the Self, exposes the dogmatic and naive arbitrariness of this spontaneity and calls into question its freedom.²⁸ The term "ethics" is used to denote "this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other."²⁹ As first philosophy, ethics defines the concrete relation to an Other that cannot be encompassed by thought and consequently, inaccessible on the level of theoretical knowledge or ontology. It exposes the radical alterity of that which opposes the freedom and power of the Self as totality. It points to a movement of transcendence towards that which is itself transcendent and approachable only on the ethical level on the basis of responsibility and goodness.

The experience of the transcendent Other opens the way to the discovery of the Infinite as the epiphany, from which all other realities receive their definitive meaning. The experience of this transcendent and infinite Other signifies to the Self its essential reality as responsible subjectivity. This signification is conveyed to the Self prior to the meaning-giving act of the Self as consciousness.

It is in the ethical relation where Levinas situates "the most irreducible in experience and that which is the most irreducible of experiences."³⁰ In this stratum, we find the ultimate source of truth and meaning. And the meaning signified by the ethical relation is on the level of pre-originary signifyingness or of the saying that is primordial and an-archival, i.e., prior to the origin or beginning. This level subtend and animates the level of the said, of thematization, consciousness, knowledge, theory, ontology, inter-ested existence or totality.

²⁵*Ethics and Infinity*, 77.

²⁶*Ibid.*

²⁷Cf. Bouckaert, *op. cit.*, 402; A. Lingis, "Face-to-Face: A Phenomenological Meditation," *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 19 (June, 1979), 161.

²⁸*Totality and Infinity*, 43.

²⁹*Ibid.*

³⁰J. Burke, "The Ethical Significance of the Face," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, 56 (1982), 196.

Taking the side of Husserl as against Heidegger, Levinas perceives the task of the philosopher as one of "reduction."³¹ Philosophy involves a movement proceeding from the Self's experience of the totality back to a situation where totality breaks up, a situation that conditions the totality.³² It entails a movement from the order of the said, consciousness and intentionality, theory or ontology, to the order of a more primordial signification or saying. More concretely, it carries us to the experience of the "strangeness of the Other" and his irreducibility to the thought or the possession of the Self."³³ This experience conveys to the Self the ethical demand of leaving the life of inter-ested existence for that of dis-interested existence as one-for-the-Other involved in obligations and responsibilities.

The reduction does not intend to nullify or deny the reality or the necessity of that which is submitted to it; rather, the reduction must be viewed as the only way of coming to understand and to ground it.³⁴ Subjectivity or the Self can be understood if we begin with the order of the said, being, theory or ontology; but the meaning of this order can be correctly interpreted only, if we start from the subjectivity of the saying that nourishes it. The reduction works in both directions and allows for the understanding of both.³⁵

Levinas claims that he is moving methodologically within the spirit of Husserl's intentional analysis in his philosophical account of the experience of the Self in relation to that which is other than itself.³⁶ However, he recognizes the limitations of phenomenology in the face of the Ego's experience of the alterity and infinity of the Other. Here, Levinas acknowledges the inadequacy of phenomenological description and finally categorizes phenomenological language as one with the other egological and totalizing languages of Western philosophy.³⁷

The philosophy of Levinas which begins as a critique of ontology eventually develops into a "phenomenology" of subjectivity which is carried out more specifically as a description of the ethical relation between the Self and the Other which ruptures the totality. It is at the same time carried out as a "phenomenology" of the event of meaning since the ethical relation conveys to the Self the primordial meaning of its subjectivity not in terms of egoism and totality but in terms of obligations and responsibilities to the Other who also bears the trace of Infinity.

Thus, Levinas says that his philosophy apprehends "subjectivity not at the level of its purely egoist protestation against totality . . . but as founded in the idea

³¹*Totality and Infinity*, 28; See also *Otherwise than Being*, 43ff; C. Vasey, "Emmanuel Levinas: From Intentionality to Proximity," *Philosophy Today*, 25 (Fall, 1981), 193.

³²*Totality and Infinity*, 24.

³³*Ibid.*, 43.

³⁴*Otherwise than Being*, 45.

³⁵Vasey, *op. cit.*, 193.

³⁶*Otherwise than being*, 183.

³⁷C. Vasey, *op. cit.*, 193; Lawton, "Levinas' Notion of the 'There is'," *Philosophy Today*, 20 (Spring, 1976), 68.

of infinity."³⁸ This philosophy of subjectivity is treated more fully in the following discussion.

Perspective on the Self

The exposition of Levinas' philosophy of subjectivity in this study is guided by the understanding that, for Levinas, the reality of the Self cannot be actually accounted for and fully understood apart from its relation to an Other. The interiority of the Self (what is truly the Self) is explainable ultimately and solely on the basis of its relation to an alterity or exteriority (what is other than the Self). This is shown in the following discussion of the emergence of the Self, the egoistic relation, and the ethical relation between the Self and the Other.

The Emergence of the Self. The initial insight into Levinas' philosophy of subjectivity is attained by following his thought on the Self emerging as a subject by constituting its inner life in the process of separation. But separation presupposes the relation of immersion into what Levinas calls the "elemental" or the "there is" (*il ya*). A preliminary consideration of this notion is made before proceeding to a description of subjectivity emerging from the "there is" in the event of separation.

1. *The "Elemental" or the "There Is".* The expression "there is" refers to the "elemental", the "indeterminate" or Being as the ground in which the Self finds itself as a Self and from which it emerges in the course of realizing its separate existence.³⁹

Levinas thinks that phenomenological description which results in an eidetic intuition cannot adequately account for the "there is" for it cannot be appropriated in a concept. It refers to a situation "where no one is and nothing is," i.e., to a situation prior to the cognitive relation and consequently prior to the opposition between the knower and the known.⁴⁰ The "there is" points to a pre-personal event in the existence of the Self and consequently inaccessible to reflection or thought. To describe this event or situation, the use of figurative expressions, suggestions and negative propositions is more appropriate than that of expositions or definite assertions.

One may describe the "there is" as sheer being-there or Being that does not refer to any Being, but imposes itself as an anonymous, absurd and upsetting presence.⁴¹ It is neither nothingness nor an existence without an existent and which no negation of a particular being can overcome.⁴²

³⁸*Totality and Infinity*, 26.

³⁹Lawton, *op. cit.*, 67.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 68.

⁴¹*Totality and Infinity*, 143; Bouckaert, *op. cit.*, 410-411.

⁴²*Ethics and Infinity*, 48; Levinas, "Signature," 31.

In one of his earlier works, Levinas tries to describe the "there is" "horror and panic", and points to its shadow, where there is "a dread before being, an impotent recoil, an evasion."⁴³ He also refers to it as the nocturnal dimension of the future.⁴⁴ Metaphorically, he speaks of the determinate being or existent emerging from out of the sphere as a dawn of clarity in the horror or darkness of the "there is."⁴⁵ Furthermore, he says that one who could point to "something" or a "particular being" has mastery over the "there is."⁴⁶

Levinas attempts to approach the "there is" in terms of a spatial dimension by describing the configuration of the elemental as "content without form" or as "having one side." Yet, the elemental is not like a thing or an object. For one can circle around an object and see its total configuration even if it presents just one side. But when we consider the elemental as having one side, its depth, for example, *mit* extends indefinitely until one loses sight of it and comes to a point where "nothing ends, nothing begins."⁴⁷ Hence, the metaphorical expressions just given does not strictly apply to the elemental, and Levinas qualifies the description by referring to the elemental as if it were a medium like water and specifying the proper relation of things or elements in it as bathing or immersion.⁴⁸

The elemental is the ground from which things and subjects detach themselves; it is the milieu in which the Self first discovers itself as a Subject of existence.⁴⁹ The emergence of the Self as a separate existent is an escape from the "there is"; it is a deliverance from the anonymity and indifference of Being. This emergence of the Self is accomplished in the event of separation.

2. *Separation as Inner Life.* The development of the Self which is at the same time the constitution of its inner life is synonymous with its separation or the realization of its separate existence. It is a process of self-identification and self-affirmation which consists essentially in a relation to the Other.

The Self is a Subject of existence and the subjectivity of the Self goes beyond mere substantiality or independent existence.⁵⁰ The Self possesses an inner life - an interiority or ipseity that cannot be fully conceptualized. The constitution of this

⁴³*Ethics and Infinity*, 51; The work cited here is Levinas' *De L' Existent a l' existence* (Paris; Vrin, 1947).

⁴⁴*Totality and Infinity*, 142.

⁴⁵*Ethics and Infinity*, 51.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*

⁴⁷*Totality and Infinity*, 131.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 131-132.

⁴⁹In his article, "Levinas' Notion of the 'There Is'," Lawton says that Levinas explicitly relates the notion of the "there is" with Heraclitus' idea of the flux of Being, Levy Bruhl's prelogical participation, and Bergson's idea of nothingness as being crossed out or the presence of an absence. And he adds that Levinas refuses to identify this with Sartre's idea of *en soi* (which is already 'at peace' while the 'there is' is absence of any self - a *sans soi*); moreover, he says that Levinas does not want the notion to be confused with Heidegger's *Geworfenheit* (for *il ya* as primordial milieu in which one bathes is prior to the relation between Being and a being).

⁵⁰*Totality and Infinity*, 113.

inner life is the process of realizing an identity for the Self or the subject that would set it off from other subjects and thereby define it as a separate existent.

Subjectivity is not given at the moment of existence. It is rather something that the Self has to achieve in life. One is *not* born a Subject but *becomes* a Subject, and subjectivity originates in the autonomous experience of enjoyment and the legitimate search for economy of existence.

An examination of enjoyment which is constitutive of subjectivity is made in relation to sensibility which is a mode of enjoyment.

3. *Enjoyment and Sensibility*.⁵¹ Enjoyment is an affective mode of the Subject;⁵² but it is an affectivity that is called forth by an Other. Enjoyment, then, is a mode of awareness which, for Levinas, is a form of intentionality. To enjoy is to enter into a relationship with what is other than the Self and to derive there from the experience of inward satisfaction and happiness. This is the way in which the Self relates to the contents of life. "Enjoyment," says Levinas, "is the ultimate consciousness of all the contents that fill life - it embraces them."⁵³

Sensibility is a mode and an instance of enjoyment;⁵⁴ it does not belong to the order of thought but to that of sentiment, i.e., to the affectivity wherein the I arises and pulsates.⁵⁵ "Sensibility is the very narrowness of life, the naiveté of the unreflected I, beyond instinct, beneath reason."⁵⁶ But it is neither blind reason nor folly; it is prior to reason.⁵⁷ Although intimately associated with affective states, sensibility is not to be regarded as inferior to theoretical or conceptual knowledge; its mode of awareness is that of satisfaction and contentment with the given.

Sensibility as sensation is not identical with "thought thinking of something"; it is rather a way of penetrating into the intimacy of things. The return to the things themselves does not first take place in the conceptual knowledge of something, but in sensibility or sensation which involves immediacy to things.⁵⁸ In sensation, there is some kind of an instantaneousness present which opposes the attempt of consciousness to hold it in thought.

The sense datum that nourishes sensibility comes to gratify a need or respond to a tendency of the Subject; it gives substance and fullness to life. Thus, sensibility or sensation is susceptibility to being affected by sense objects and not just awareness of the qualities of these objects.

⁵¹Levinas gives a new dimension of meaning to sensibility in his later work *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* where it is taken as a modality of the ethical relation.

⁵²*Totality and Infinity*, 135.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 111.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 135.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 138.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*

⁵⁸Vasey, *op. cit.*, 185.

Sensibility is a mode of enjoyment concretized by the body which is a sensitive being. Sensibility is corporeality, incarnate subjectivity or the incarnation of consciousness. And this mode of enjoyment is initially experienced in the satisfaction of the needs of corporeal existence.

4. *Need and Living From.* Life implies for the Self or the Subject a need for food and drink, for air to breath, or for shelter to protect it against the inclemencies of the weather. Arising from the subject's bodily existence or incarnate subjectivity, these needs are experienced as a lack or an insufficiency and they move the Self to reach out for things that would fill this lack.

The things in the world that satisfy the needs of life are other than the Self. But the "otherness" of these things is only "relative" and not "absolute" or "radical" for these are convertible or reducible to the Self. When reduced to the Self, these are no longer opposed to the Self but become part of the Self. Hence, Levinas describes the movement of the Self with respect to these things as the way of the *Same*, for what is other is transformed into the selfsame Self.⁵⁹

The things that satisfy the needs of the Self and give it satisfaction or enjoyment take form within the medium in which we take hold of them. They are found in space, in the air, on the earth or along the road. The things that can be possessed by the Self are in a milieu that nobody owns and which unfolds its own dimensions. This non-possessable milieu is identified with either the world or the elements which extend into the shadowy dimension of the indeterminate "there is."⁶⁰

"Living from" describes the mode of interaction between the Self and the world or the elements in it. This mode of interaction is necessary for the Self so that it can satisfy its needs. "Living from", therefore, implies the dependence of the Self on the things that support its life. But the Self lives not only from objects like food and drink but also from acts such as feeling, thinking, working or living itself "What I do and what I am is at the same time that *from which* I live."⁶¹

Although it is a need or a necessity for the Self, "living from" is not experienced as a harsh duty but as an enjoyable attachment to the things that support life and provide it with satisfaction and contentment. Since "living from" is called forth by the needs of the Self, enjoyment thrives because there are needs. Hence, the Subject is happy to have needs. And a being without needs is outside of happiness and unhappiness.⁶²

5. *Freedom and Enjoyment.* For the Self, the things from which it lives are not only seen as objects that answer a need but also as objects that offer enjoyment. This implies that in the satisfaction of its needs, the Self is not only preoccupied with his biological or physical existence. Its concern for existence can also be a

⁵⁹*Totality and Infinity*, 37-38.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 130, 142.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 113.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 144, 146.

concern for enjoyment for its own sake. And the Self can make enjoyment the fundamental motive of its concern with the things in life. It can attach meaning to something only insofar as they are objects of enjoyment. Enjoyment can be the ultimate relation to all the things in life.⁶³

Everything can be enjoyed and the Self is by what it enjoys. What the Self finds enjoyable shapes the Self into a particular kind of individual. Thus, enjoyment or happiness is the principle of individuation. But the individuality or personality of the Self is different from the particularity of the atoms or the purely material things for these are incapable of experiencing satisfaction or enjoyment. Furthermore, the individuality or ipseity of the "I" is more than that of animals which are also capable of experiencing satisfaction. For in the case of animals, satisfaction is necessarily tied up with the biological needs; but in the case of the Self, enjoyment may be sought for its own sake or associated with other concerns - social, political, philosophical or religious. "To enjoy without utility, in pure loss, gratuitously, without referring to anything else, in pure expenditure - this is the human"⁶⁴

In raising its life from the level of biological existence to that of enjoyment for its own sake, the Self asserts its freedom. The Self expresses its freedom in preoccupying itself with things not because they are biologically necessary, but because they are a source of enjoyment or happiness. Moreover, the Self shows its freedom in its choice of enjoyable things. But the freedom of the Self has its limitations. The Self cannot attain all the things that can bring happiness and enjoyment in life; and its possession of enjoyable things is insecure, for the things it possesses and enjoys can be taken away from it or they can cease to be enjoyable. For Levinas, the limitation of the freedom of the Self lies in the insecurity of its enjoyment rather than in the fact of its unchosen birth or its situated existence.⁶⁵

6. *Separation and Economy Existence.* In the course of living from the enjoyment, the Self establishes its identity and realizes itself as a separate existent. As pointed out already, enjoyment is the principle of individuation or the basis of identity. And the identity or the ipseity of the I makes it a reality distinct from other selves or subjects. This identity sets it apart from the others and makes it a separate existent. And the primordial mode of the separate reality of the Self is "economic existence." This refers to a life motivated by needs and centered on a home or dwelling. Thus, for Levinas, to be *separate* is to be *somewhere* - in a dwelling or a home - and to be economically.⁶⁶

The primary function of the dwelling or the home is to separate or detach the Self from the elemental and the elements. However, the dwelling remains open to the elements and the elements remain at the disposal of the Self.⁶⁷ The dwelling is

⁶³Ibid., 133.

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Ibid., 144.

⁶⁶Ibid., 175.

⁶⁷Ibid., 156.

a site or a place which is actually the primary possession of the Self and it makes possible for the Self to acquire other possessions through its labor. Dwelling or habitation, labor and possession altogether delineate separate existence in the form of economic independence.⁶⁸

The dwelling that makes labor and possession possible is likewise the condition for the recollection of thoughts. From the home, the Self gains access to the world and its elements not only as things to be possessed and enjoyed but also as objects for thoughtful consideration or disinterested and impassive contemplation.

The home that makes labor and possession possible reflects the egoistic orientation of economic existence which is a mode of the separate reality of the Self. The Self can extend to its relation to the Other, its egoistic and totalizing approaches to the things in the world. But the home also expresses the possibility of transcending egoism. For the Self can overcome its egoistic tendencies by responding to obligations and responsibilities towards the Other. As Levinas puts it, "the possibility for the home to open to the Other is an essential to the essence of the home as closed doors and windows."⁶⁹ This implies two possible modes of relation between the Self and the Other - one is egoistic and the other is ethical.

The Egoistic Relation. Levinas recognizes in the concern of the Self for satisfaction and enjoyment, a mode of consciousness or a form of intentionality which is egoistic and totalizing. For in the intentionality of enjoyment, the Self relates to an Other with the intention of absorbing or incorporating what is Other into the sphere of the Self. This is manifest particularly in such activities of the Self as nourishing itself, working on things, and accumulating possessions. In all these functions of life, what is Other is reduced to the Self. However, there is another form of intentionality which also has an egological or totalizing orientation towards the Other. This is the intentionality of representation or thought which is conditioned by the intentionality of enjoyment. For it is in enjoyment or in self-satisfying sensibility that the Self comes to representation as a mode of its concrete life.⁷⁰

In the following discussion, the essential structure of the intentionality of representation or knowledge is taken up and contrasted with that of enjoyment. Then, the relationships with the Other, which are modeled after representation and enjoyment, are taken into consideration.

1. *Representation and Enjoyment.* Levinas considers both representation and enjoyment as a necessary part of the movement of separation. However, he thinks that representation is oriented towards a direction different from that of enjoyment. He sees a contrast in the intentional patterns of enjoyment and representation.

⁶⁸Ibid., 150.

⁶⁹Ibid., 173.

⁷⁰Ibid., 169; See also Vasey, *op. cit.*, 185.

Representation is an act of consciousness or knowing. It involves thematization or conceptualization and aims at intelligibility, objectivity, truth or meaning. The act of representation intends an object (noema) viewed as something distinct from the act itself (noesis) that intends it.

In representation, an object that is exterior to the Self surrenders its whole being to the Self to bring about clarity and the thought of this object. In other words, this object is at first other than thought, but is given over to the consciousness or thought of the Self. And this object is made to appear as the work of the thought that receives it. The resistance to the Self on the part of the object as an exterior being vanishes when the conscious subject exercises mastery over the object by reducing it to the noema, i.e., the object endowed with a meaning constituted by consciousness.⁷¹

The intelligibility of the object of thought is characterized by clarity and it entails the total adequation of thought with that which is thought of. Representation is thus a kind of vision, which aims at this total adequation; it seeks to convert the objects or noemata into the immanence of the thought of the Self as a conscious subject.⁷²

Representation suspends the alterity of the object that is thought of. It entails a non-reciprocal determination wherein only the Self is determining the Other, while the Other introduces no alterity or otherness into the Self. The Self remains the Same despite the many objects that it knows and the diverse acts by which and in which it intends these objects of consciousness. To *represent* to oneself is to remain the *same*. Hence, we find in representation an orientation similar to, but not exactly the same as that of enjoyment, which has been earlier described as the *way* of the *Same*.

In representation, the exteriority of the object appears upon reflection to be a "sense" or a "meaning" with which the object is endowed by the representing subject making it a noema. Representational intentionality constitutes its object as a noema by endowing it with its meaning as this particular being. It reduces the thing represented to its proper meaning, the existent to a noema, and the intentional object to the very being of the conscious subject.⁷³ In short, what is Other to the Self is reduced to a meaning or truth constituted by the thought of the Self. The egological or totalizing orientation of the Self is evident in this intentionality of representation.

In a certain sense, the Self is also determined by its thoughts insofar as it has these thoughts about a particular thing. However, at the very moment of its representation, the conscious Self is "not *marked* by its past but it *utilizes* it as a represented and objective element."⁷⁴ This means that at the moment it has a

⁷¹*Totality and Infinity*, 123-124.

⁷²*Ibid.*, *Ethics and Infinity*, 60.

⁷³*Ibid.*, 124, 127.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, 125.

particular representation or thought, the Self is not described "as *having* this thought" but "as thinking of *something*." Moreover, the "T" which manages its thoughts may be conceived as *becoming* or *ageing* in time; but this becoming does not appear on the level of representation which involves no *passivity*.⁷⁵ For in representation, whatever is given to consciousness is reduced to the present; its object that flows on is captured by thought and it is reduced to the instantaneity of thought. Representation gathers the various temporal phases into the present by retention of the past and protention of the future. Levinas speaks of this as the synthesizing or synchronizing activity of consciousness. But to represent is for the Self not just to gather the various temporal phases into the present; it is also to reduce whatever appears as independent of it to the instantaneousness of thought.

In a sense, the intentionality of representation is different from that of enjoyment. For in the case of representation, there is non-reciprocal determination wherein the Self constitutes and determines the Other but the Other does not do the same to the Self. In the case of enjoyment, however, there is reciprocal determination. For the Self enters into a relation to what is other or exterior to it in such a way that the Self determines the Other while it is itself determined by it.⁷⁶ In the intentionality of enjoyment, the Self holds on to what is other and makes it a part of its corporeal existence. This is the case particularly in such activities as nutrition, labor and possession which manifest the intentionality of enjoyment.

The reciprocal determination involved in the intentionality of enjoyment holds true in the mode of relation described earlier as "living from". For in "living from", the Self relates to what is other than itself and transforms this other into a constituent part of the Self. The world from which the Self lives is not merely a spectacle for thoughtful consideration. Since the nourishes and bathes the Self, it is aliment and medium for it;⁷⁷ hence, it is neither a counterpart nor a contemporary of thought, but is its condition.

The world from which the Self lives is not given only after its act of representation has, so to speak, spread forth in its consciousness the spectacle of the world. Nor is it given to the Self only when the axiological intentions of consciousness "would have ascribed to this world a value that renders it apt for habitation."⁷⁸ Rather, the world from which the Self lives is not only *exterior* but also *anterior* to its representation or thought of it.

If one would apply "constitution" to the intentionality of enjoyment, one has to say that what is being constituted also becomes the condition or nourishment of the very act of constituting. Whatever nourishes life is a condition of the thought which would think of it as its condition. The conditioning is accomplished through the relation between the representing and the represented or the constituting and

⁷⁵Tbid.

⁷⁶Tbid., 128.

⁷⁷Tbid., 130.

⁷⁸Tbid.

constituted - a relation essential to the representational form of the intentionality of consciousness.⁷⁹

Representation is conditioned by life; but this relation could be reversed after the event of the Self's separation as a corporeal subject. The conversion of the representational act of constituting into the condition of its being is realized as soon as the Self opens its eyes and beholds a spectacle that it can gaze on.

Levinas, however, emphasizes that life moves and dominates thought. For what the subject represents in thought supports and nourishes the life of the Self and its activity as a conscious subject. Thought "lives from" the very being or object that it represents and thereby refers the Self to an exceptional possibility for separated existence; it points to the possibility for the Self to relate to the Other on the theoretical level.⁸⁰

Both representation and enjoyment belong to the intentional structure of subjectivity. Each has its peculiar features, but both reflect the movement of the Self as Totality; i.e., in their own ways, they aim at possessing the Other and reducing its otherness or alterity to the reality of the Self. These two forms of intentionality can serve as models in relating with the other Subject in an egoistic and totalizing way.

In the following discussion, the egoistic approaches to the Other is described, but it is also pointed out that in the encounter with the other subject, the Self meets an Other that is "absolutely other" or "radically exterior" and opposes the totalizing power of the Self both on the level of thought and of action.

2. *The Other's Opposition to Objectifying Vision.* There is a spontaneous move on the part of the Self to approach the Other by thought, to encompass his being in a kind of knowledge conceived as an objective gaze or an impassive contemplation. To approach the Other in such a manner is to circumscribe his being by the sum of determinative qualities that are open to the vision of a spectator. To say that the Other possesses these qualities is to know him objectively. But to say that the reality of the Other is exhaustively represented in the totality of these qualities, is to reduce his status to what of the qualities that can be known by the mere thought of an observer. Such knowledge is an objectifying knowledge of the Other, i.e., it reduces the Other to the status of a mere object of thought.

Levinas considers the intentionality of representation as an objectifying knowledge. This is implied in his notion of "vision" as "an adequation of the idea with the thing, a comprehension that encompasses."⁸¹ The attitude of representation or vision takes the Other merely as the theme of an impassive contemplation.⁸²

⁷⁹Ibid., 128.

⁸⁰Ibid., 168.

⁸¹Ibid., 34.

⁸²Ibid., 296.

It confines the reality of the Other to the idea that the Self has of him at any moment. Vision imposes or projects to the Other the preconceptions of the Self; it circumscribes the being of the Other, transforms it into a mere content or representation of thought, or reduces it reality to the meaning constituted by the Self. Insofar as the Self approaches the Other on the basis of mere vision or representation, it exercises a power that destroys the alterity or exteriority of the Other.⁸³

Relating to the Other, however, is not merely a matter of knowing him or taking him as the theme of the representational form of the intentionality of thought, for there is so much more to the reality of the Other than what can be represented in thought. The reality of the Other exceeds any image or idea that the Self can have of him. The *face* signifies the peculiar way whereby the Other presents himself as a reality overflowing any idea that the Self attributes to the Other.⁸⁴ In other words, the Other reveals himself as an inexhaustible center open to an infinite number of possibilities. The more one probes into the reality of the Other, the more it realizes the impossibility of achieving a full knowledge of him. The Other presents himself as really "Other" and irreducible to an object constituted by the thought of the Self thinking of him. The Other cannot be fully thematized or totalized because he is the revelation of infinity, i.e., of something that goes beyond all bounds. With respect to the Other, there can be no adequation of the Self's thought to the Other's being. And this non-adequation is not due to the obscurity of thought or to the irrationality of the Other; rather, it is due to the Other's manifestation of something transcendent and infinite. This infinity of the Other explains the opposition he offers to any attempt on the part of the Self to relate to the Other merely on the basis of the representational form of intentionality or to approach the Other merely on the level of knowledge or thought.

But the Other who refuses to be taken as the theme of an objectifying knowledge, likewise refuses to be taken merely as an object to be possessed and dominated by the Self. For the Other can call into question the freedom and power of the Self to do so, and the Other can oppose its attempts to approach and eventually destroy, or do violence to, the Other.

3. *The Other's Opposition to Violence.* Objectification does not only consist in a vision or representational knowledge of the Other, but also in dealing with the Other in the same manner that one deals with things, i.e., as objects. Objectification, in the latter sense, is the exercise of the violence on the Other in order to force him to work for the selfish ends of the Self.

Violence is manifest in the use of power that stifles the autonomy of the Other and reduces him to a mere tool recognized and valued only insofar as he fits well into the selfish projects of the Self. Violence also finds expression in the act of inflicting pain and suffering on the Other in order to force him to carry out actions

⁸³Ibid., 194.

⁸⁴Ibid., 50-51.

and to play roles in which he betrays his own beliefs or ideals and thus destroys his one Self. In deliberately inflicting pain and suffering on the Other, the Self objectifies the Other but keeps him conscious of this objectification whereby he is reduced to a mere object. The awareness that someone else is rejoicing in the suffering he is going through makes the suffering of the Other more painful and humiliating. Levinas thinks that this form of violence is worse than the complete negation or annihilation of the Other. Suffering rather than death is the supreme ordeal of the freedom of the Other.⁸⁵

But the Other can oppose the attempts of the Self to exercise power and violence on him. The Other can offer a firm and resolute opposition to the Self in the form of the "unforeseeableness of his reaction."⁸⁶ The Self can never be sure what the Other may conceal. Hence, the Self is not totally in control of the Other.

The Other may also offer a different kind of resistance which is no longer a physical force but an ethical force. This is the appeal of the Other, the moral summons which can be read in his face the "you shall not commit murder."⁸⁷ This moral order is the source of the ultimate strength of the Other. yet, this moral force is to actually stronger but *better* than the totalizing powers of the Self.⁸⁸

Thus, in meeting another subject, the Self recognizes the limitations of its egoistic or totalizing and destructive approach towards the Other. The Self acknowledges that the Other is neither initially nor ultimately "what is thematized" or "what is grasped,"⁸⁹ that need and totality are not the ultimate modalities of the subject, and that the egoistic relation to the Other is not constitutive of the essential reality of the Self. For the exercise of the freedom and power of the Self is called into question by the Other who approaches, as it were, from "above" in his height, majesty and transcendence. This approach of the Other initiates the Self into the ethical mode of relationship which is the theme in the following discussion.

The Ethical Relation. The egoistic approach towards the Other which was presented in the preceding discussion does not fully account for the relation between the Self and the Other. For there is another mode of the relationship between the Self and the Other which is described as ethical. In and through this ethical relation, the Self constitutes its essential reality as responsible subjectivity.

The ethical relation is not a relation between the Self and a being or an essence that can be thematized and circumscribed by thought. Rather, it is a relationship between the Self and the Other who is beyond essence, better than Being, and a Good over and beyond Being.

⁸⁵Ibid., 239.

⁸⁶Ibid., 199.

⁸⁷Ibid.

⁸⁸*Ethics and Infinity*, 14.

⁸⁹*Totality and Infinity*, 172.

The ethical relation is essentially a togetherness of the Self and the Other in the face to face encounter. This relation brings out the primary structure of subjectivity, i.e., the essential reality of the Self as a responsible subject answering to obligations and responsibilities towards the Other. This ethical relation is brought forth not by the subject's preoccupation with its needs and concern for possessions or enjoyment; rather, it is called forth by the Other who initiates in the Self the movements of desire and transcendence.

1. *Desire and Transcendence.* The encounter with the Other reveals to the Self modalities which are characteristic of its reality as an existent capable of overcoming its egoistic and totalizing inclinations. These modalities are referred to as desire and transcendence. These are considered as metaphysical movements which open the possibility of a kind of relationship between the Self and the Other which is described as ethical.

For Levinas, the Self is not characterized only by its needs which incline it towards an egoistic and totalizing relation to whatever is outside of itself. In addition to the needs of biological or physical existence, the Self also has higher-level needs which are identified as desire and transcendence.

As pointed out already, the needs of the Self are based on a lack or an insufficiency which moves the Self to reach out for things that would fill this lack. Because of its needs, the subject goes out of itself but eventually goes back to itself. Hence, need is a movement of immanence and it is centered on the Self.⁹⁰

Desire, on its part, comes from the Self but it is also called forth by the Other. It is the openness of the Self to an Other who invites it to go out of its own Self and to leave the limiting confines of its own world. It carries the finite reality of the Self towards an Infinite Other than cannot be fully grasped and reduced to the Self. Desire is, therefore, a metaphysical movement and transcendence oriented towards the Other - the Good that is beyond and better than Being.⁹¹ This reality which is the object of desire and transcendence cannot be approached theoretically and reduced to a concept or representation of thought or defined in terms of being or essence. The transcendent Other is accessible only on the basis of an ethical relation marked by responsible subjectivity.

2. *Responsible Subjectivity.* The Self as a responsible subject is not simply preoccupied with the practical concerns of satisfying its needs, accumulating possessions and seeking enjoyment. Neither, is it just absorbed in the theoretical concern of constituting the meanings of objects or comprehending Being. Rather, the Self as responsible subject is the separate existent maintaining a relationship with the Other on the ethical plane. This ethical relation between the Self and the Other is described in terms of the following modalities: signification, proximity, sensibility, de-position, dispossession, substitution, unicity, infinity and justice.

⁹⁰Gerber, "Totality and Infinity: Hebraism and Hellenism - The Experiential Ontology of Emmanuel Levinas," *Review of Existential Psychology and Psychiatry*, 7 (Fall, 1967), 181-182.

⁹¹Ibid., See also Levinas, "God and Philosophy," *Philosophy Today*, 22 (Summer, 1978), 135.

All these modalities are manifest in the face-to-face togetherness of the Self and the Other.

a. *The Face and Signification.* The meeting of the Self and the Other is a face-to-face relation. For the whole body of the Self expresses itself in the face.⁹² And the true reality of the Self breaks forth in the face.⁹³

The face approaches with a glance, a word, a gesture or a movement of the whole body. It addresses, expresses an appeal to, and makes demands of the Self. The face should not be merely taken as an object of impassive contemplation, represented by a concept and identified only with its meaning which is constituted by the conscious Self. "A face is not known; it is face."⁹⁴ And facing is a response that is non-representational, non-cognitive or non-reductive.

The face is pre-eminently an expression. The expression in the face is also referred to as a saying, signifyingness, meaning, discourse, speech or language. But what meaning does the Self signify and what response does it require from the Self? As the primordial expression, the face conveys the first word, the first signification and the first evidence.⁹⁵

What is immediately manifest in the face is its uprightness as it approaches without defense - i.e., with eyes that are defenseless and a voice that is disarming. The Other can, of course, wear a mask to hide the real expression of the face; but facing is actually unmasking.⁹⁶ The Other may try to put on posesor to take on a countenance in order to hide the poverty and the nudity of the face.⁹⁷ The Other, thus, can signify in his face an essential poverty and nudity.

The Other's face that is exposed without defense is menaced. Precisely because it is defenseless, it invites the Self to an act of violence; at the same time, it forbids the Self to kill.⁹⁸ An ethical exigency or a moral demand is, therefore, expressed in the face of the Other. Consequently, the relation to the face is straight away ethical. And the first word of the face is - "You shall not kill."⁹⁹ This is a commandment or an order that is spoken, as it were, by the Other as a master or an authority who judges the Self. But the Other's face which conveys this moral order or commandment exposes its essential poverty and destitution. Hence, the Other bears the countenance of "the poor, the stranger, the widow or the orphan"¹⁰⁰

⁹²*Totality and Infinity*, 262.

⁹³*Ibid.*, 290.

⁹⁴Lingis, *op. cit.*, 151.

⁹⁵*Totality and Infinity*, 178; *Ethics and Infinity*, 89; Burke, *op. cit.*, 201.

⁹⁶Lingis, *op. cit.*, 151.

⁹⁷*Ethics and Infinity*, 86.

⁹⁸*Ibid.*

⁹⁹*Ibid.*, 87.

¹⁰⁰*Totality and Infinity*, 251; Here, Levinas is referring to a biblical theme. See the following passages enjoining the Hebrews to do justice to "the poor, the stranger, the widow or the orphan" - Exodus 22:20-21, 23:9; Leviticus 19:33-34; Deuteronomy 10:17-19, 24:17-22, 27:19; Jeremiah 7:6, 22:3; Psalm 146.

as well as that of the master or the judge called to invest and justify the freedom of the Self. The face expresses both the humility and the height of the Other and situates him in a dimension of both abasement and transcendence.

What is, therefore, primordially communicated by the face of the Other is a contestation of the freedom and power of the Self and it is at the same time an appeal to the Self to live the life of responsibility and goodness. The appeal or contestation expressed in the Other's face is an ethical exigency which constitutes the primordial expression, signification or meaning. "Meaning is the face of the Other, and all recourse to words take place already within the primordial face to face of language"¹⁰¹

Since the face conveys the absolutely primordial meaning, it is the ground or foundation of language of discourse. Since the first evidence or rationality gleams forth in the face of the Other, it conditions reason or thought. Because the face of the Other calls into question the freedom of the Self, it justifies and promotes the responsible exercise of freedom. But although the face of the Other contests and opposes the power of the power of the Self, it also offers new powers to the Self by awakening it to other and better powers to the Self by awakening it to other and better powers: powers and welcome, of full hands, of gift, of hospitality.¹⁰²

The ethical relation is not a symmetrical but an asymmetrical relation. For the Other is not considered as an equal to the Self. Paradoxically, the Other is both *more* and *less* than the Self. This is signified by certain polarities in the Self with respect to the Other.¹⁰³

One polarity concerns the *height* and at the same time the *humility* of the Other. In his opposition to the egoistic and totalizing moves of the Self, the Other appears absolute, superior, and transcendent to the Self. In questioning the power of the Self and summoning it to its duties and obligations to the Other, he is the Self's master and judge. He appears as from a height far transcending the Self. Yet, this transcendent Other has his needs and suffers from a deprivation of the things that can satisfy his needs. This puts the Other in a state of destitution. And in destitution and humility, the Other draws forth from the Self the desire to transcend itself and to respond to the needs of the Other.

A second polarity is that of both *power* and *powerlessness* in the Other. The Other possesses power because he opposes the egoistic and totalizing attempts of the Self to take him as an object to be completely grasped and controlled. He also manifests his power in challenging the Self to assert its inherent sense for goodness towards Others. Yet, the Other is also powerless, for he approaches the Self without any weapon save the expression of need and destitution in his face.

A final polarity is that of the Other's being both a *stranger* and a *neighbor*. The Other is a stranger because the Self does not really know him and has no

¹⁰¹*Totality and Infinity*, 206.

¹⁰²*Ibid.*, 205.

¹⁰³Gilkey, *op. cit.*, 23-38; See also Jayme, *op. cit.* 23ff.

emotion for him personally. The relation that the Self maintains with the Other is not based on personal love but on the rigorous demand of justice and goodness. The strangeness of the responsibility imposed on the Self implies that justice and goodness must extend not only to the Self's family and friends but also to anyone else who has the face of Man. The brotherhood or fraternity between the Self and the Other is not based on biological oneness but on the recognition and acceptance of obligations and responsibilities to the Other. Yet,, the Other is also a neighbor, i.e., someone who is close to the Self and the concern of the activities of the Self as a responsible subject.

The polarities show that the Other is paradoxically both *less* and *more* than the Self. Less, for he appears as one in need and bears the countenance of "the poor, the stranger, the widow or the orphan." More, because the Other judges the Self and challenges it to make use of its power and resources in serving and helping the Other.

The appeal of the Other in his need and destitution arouses the Self's inherent desire for transcendence towards a life of responsible subjectivity. Thus, the Other's appeal does not only limit but also justifies the freedom of the Self and arouses its sense of goodness.¹⁰⁴

The Other who speaks to the Self solicits a response. He requires first that the Self answer in its own name. This brings to the Self the realization that its existence consists in obligations and responsibilities. And the Self which faces the Other exposes itself to these obligations and responsibilities; it finds itself in a situation which urgently calls for a decision - to accept or to evade an obligation or a responsibility. The Self has the freedom to shut itself open to the transcendence of the Other and to assume a life of responsible subjectivity. Any response given by the Self already acknowledges the approach and presence of the Other. When the Self responds as a responsible subject of all by proximity and sensibility.

b. Proximity and Sensibility. Proximity in the ethical relation does not simply refer to a modality of distance or space. It does not merely signify that two objects are beside each other. It is not a relation on the cognitive level whereby the Self is related to the Other as mediated by a concept. Proximity is essentially the face-to-face togetherness of the Self and the Other.¹⁰⁵ And this is accomplished by the Self which makes itself present to the Other who approaches the Self.

Proximity implies closeness that removes distance and establishes contact. But it is not only physical closeness in space; neither is it the intentional connection between consciousness and its object. Proximity attaches the Self to the Other but this attachment does not resemble the representational form of the intentionality of knowledge which attaches the object - even if this be the human subject - to the Self.¹⁰⁶ This relation of proximity is non-representational, non-cognitive and non-

¹⁰⁴*Totality and Infinity*, 200.

¹⁰⁵*Otherwise than Being*, 101.

¹⁰⁶*Ethics and Infinity*, 96-97.

reductive. It is a metaphysical and ethical relation with the Other as the neighbor and the brother whom the Self cannot ignore or abandon without having feelings of guilt that disturb the complacency of the Self in its possession and enjoyment of things in the world. Proximity is thus positively and concretely realized by the Other who approaches the Self, addresses it, questions the spontaneous egoistic exercise to its freedom and power, and summons it to establish a relation based on obligations and responsibilities.

Proximity gives birth to an essential signification. It signifies the difference between the Self and the Other. But his awareness of their difference immediately turns into the non-indifference of the Self with respect to the Other. Thus, proximity paves the way to communication, agreement, understanding or peace.¹⁰⁷

Proximity involves sensibility which is not just a cognitive but also an affective function. Sensibility is not so much apprehensiveness about one's own being as sensitivity, vulnerability and affectivity. It is sensitivity to the needs of the Other; it is affectivity in the sense of susceptibility to being wounded or outraged for the sake of the Other. As sensibility, vulnerability and affectivity, proximity is exposedness to, and passivity in, the presence of the Other. The passivity in proximity makes the Self truly a "subject" in its "exposure" and "subjection" to the Other to the point of giving up its very Self for the sake of the Other. This implies de-position and dispossession as essential modalities of the Self as a responsible subject.

c. De-position and dispossession. Responsible subjectivity also entails de-position and dispossession on the part of the Self. The de-position or de-situating of the Self implies first of all the recurrence or return of the Self to itself. Summoned by the Other who calls into question the egoistic and totalizing moves of the freedom of the Self, the Self goes back to itself, de-poses or displaces itself as absolute center of its world, and places its world and possessions at the disposal of the Other. De-position is "the form of a corporeal life devoted to expression and to giving."¹⁰⁸

The de-position of the Self actually means that it is outside of a situation, without a dwelling place, expelled from everywhere and from itself, extradited to its neighbor and reduced to the reality of one saying to the Other: "Here I am" - one-for-the-Other in responsibility.¹⁰⁹ Thus, the de-position of the Self implies null-site, restlessness and dis-interested existence in the sense of an existence that is not involved in the struggle of beings to persevere or persist in being.

Responsible subjectivity which involves the de-posing or de-situating of the Self is opposed to the egoistic and totalizing tendencies of the Self. It means setting limits to the selfish possession and enjoyment of things in the world; it is being more concerned with giving rather than with getting. For the Other cannot be approached with "empty hands" or a "closed home."

¹⁰⁷*Otherwise than Being*, 166.

¹⁰⁸*Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁰⁹*Ibid.*, 146, 149, 150.

But the act of dispossession or the positive sharing of possessions is not confined to the gift giving of material things. Through language or discourse, the Self and the Other can share each other's world. Real community is established when the Self takes the initiative of welcoming the Other and offering its world as a gift to the Other.¹¹⁰ Language or discourse puts in "common" a world which at first belongs only to the Self. It makes possible the disclosure of the uniqueness of the Self and the otherness of the Other. Hence, it accomplishes a pluralistic relation whereby the Self and the Other do not lose their identity and are not reabsorbed into each other while being in mutual relation.

Responsible subjectivity, however, may go beyond the sharing of possessions or the sharing of each other's world. It may ask the Self to give up its own life for the sake of the Other. Being responsible may entail giving to the Other "the bread out of one's own mouth and the coat from one's shoulder"¹¹¹ and "making a gift of one's own skin."¹¹² This implies the exposure of the Self to the responsibility of supporting and expiating for the Other as well as to an obligation which nobody else could assume. This points out to us two other modalities of responsible subjectivity, namely, substitution and unicity.

d. Substitution and Unicity. We have said that in the ethical relation, the Self finds itself faced with the moral exigency or demand to answer for another - for what he is and what he does. This moral demand puts the Self under the obligation to abandon not only its possessions but also its very own Self in substituting for the Other.¹¹³ In responding to this obligation, the Self not only plays host to the Other but becomes a hostage for the Other. In assuming the condition of being a hostage and one expiating for the Other, the Self expresses itself truly as a "subject", i.e., a total subjection to the Other to whom and for whom it is responsible. Hence, we find in the act of substituting for another the very heart of responsibility.

In substituting for another, the Self puts itself in the place of the Other. This means, first of all, that the Self displaces, de-poses or de-situates itself by leaving its privileged position and moving into a situation where the Other finds himself. Moreover, substituting for the Other means that the Self offers support to the Other with its very own substance. However, this does not imply the negation or annihilation of the Self; it is not "a flight into the void, but a movement into fullness."¹¹⁴ For the act of substituting or expiating for the Other constitutes the very meaning or reality of the Self as a responsible subject.

At the very core of its substance, the Self may be identified as a "lung"¹¹⁵ This means that the Self holds its life in its "lung". And the very breath of the Self, the

¹¹⁰*Totality and Infinity*, 173.

¹¹¹*Otherwise than Being*, 55.

¹¹²*Ibid.*, 138.

¹¹³*Ibid.*, 118, 125.

¹¹⁴*Ibid.*, 108.

¹¹⁵*Ibid.*, 180.

very "pneuma of its psyche", i.e., the inspiration of its life is in substituting for the Other. But this inspiration may eventually turn into expiation or expiration - the total sacrifice of the Self for the Other.¹¹⁶ Thus, the subjectivity of the Subject or the Self finds its fullest expression in its being persecuted and in submitting to martyrdom for the sake of the Other. The fear in the Self for the death of the Other lies at the basis of responsibility for him. And being responsible for the life and death of the Other is the very meaning of the Self as responsible subjectivity.¹¹⁷

In substituting for the Other or taking his place, the Self inhabits its own space, then opens itself as space and finally frees itself by leaving the "closure" of its own Self. In substituting for the Other, the Self frees itself from the feeling of "ennui" and the suffocating confinement to its own Self.¹¹⁸

The openness of the Self to space (which makes the openness of all space possible) also means that the Self is without a world, without a place and outside of walls. This implies "null-site" or "utopia" and brings about the experience of restlessness in the Self. This restlessness drives the Self outside of itself and holds it open to the Other.¹¹⁹

The identity or the unicity of the Self is not based on a unique trait of its nature or on a special character of the Self; neither is it based solely on the particularity of the Subject's enjoyment of things in life. The uniqueness of the Subject or the Self is in being "involved in responsibility" and responding to its obligations to the Other.¹²⁰ In holding itself responsible for the Other or in substituting for the Other, the Self is exposed to an obligation that nobody else could assume. For nobody can take away from the Self its share of obligations in life. The Self may give up certain responsibilities but it cannot give up its obligation to be responsible and good. And the irreplaceability of the Self in its obligations and responsibilities is the very source of its identity or unicity. Here, the Self is one without a double and, therefore, unique. The identity or unicity of the "I" thus comes from its inability to evade or escape from responsibility for what the Self has not wished either for itself or for the Other,¹²¹ The "I" is truly its own unique Self through being for-the-Other in responsibility and goodness.

In its being addressed and contested by the Other, the Self is summoned, singled out, accused for what the Other does, i.e., it is assigned to assume responsibility of the Other. This "accusation" or "assignation" weighs heavily on the Self and obliges it to respond in its own name. It awakens the Self to the realization that its very existence is exposure to the obligation of bearing responsibility even for the fault of the Other. And this moral exigency singularizes the

¹¹⁶*Ibid.*, 116.

¹¹⁷*Ethics and Infinity*, 119.

¹¹⁸*Otherwise than Being*, 124.

¹¹⁹*Ibid.*, 142.

¹²⁰*Ibid.*, 139.

¹²¹*Ibid.*, 103, 112, 114, 128.

Subject or the Self. The world "I" really means "Here I am" answering for everything and for everyone.¹²² And "the Self is a *sub-jectum*: it is under the weight of the universe, responsible for everything."¹²³

This exposure to the undeclinable obligation of being responsible for the Other shows the essential condition or unconditionality of the Self in the state of *passivity*. From the very start, the "I" is placed in a state of passivity before an undeclinable responsibility; hence, it is in the "accusative" and truly a "self".¹²⁴ And this passivity of the Self to the Other which is essential to its reality is reflected linguistically in the signification of the word "self" (*se, soi*) as an accusative without a nominative form.¹²⁵

The notion of the extraordinary or exceptional responsibility of the Self to the Other which entails the undeclinable obligation of substituting for the Other, may be made meaningful by relating it to the primordial, an-archival, unconditional, absolute and undeclinable responsibility of the Self to the Other.

The original or primordial responsibility of the Self to the Other is an-archival - i.e., "a plot without beginning", prior to every beginning", without an origin, without prior commitment, without a present or before every present, prior to or beyond freedom and non-freedom.¹²⁶ This means that the Self is assigned a responsibility before it can exercise its freedom to make a choice to accept or evade the responsibility. This puts the Self in a condition of "unavowable innocence."¹²⁷ This original condition does not refer to the Self in "a state of original sin" on account of which it is made to bear responsibility for what is beyond its fault. Rather, we must refer here to the condition of the Self in "the original goodness of creation."¹²⁸ And this original condition wherein the Self finds itself before an obligation it cannot decline actually refers to the condition of the Self as a creature.

Levinas accounts for the source of the exceptional responsibility of the Self to the Other by referring to the time of creation when the Self is in a condition of *passivity*. In creation, the Self is in a state of "passivity more passive still than the passivity of matter."¹²⁹ The passivity of matter is actually receptivity, for it presupposes an already existing substance receiving an activity. But in the case of creation, there is no pre-existing substance that receives the activity of creation. The Self in non-existent prior to its creation. Hence, there is no Self that could receive the activity of creation.¹³⁰

¹²²Ibid., 114; See also Levinas, "God and Philosophy," 141.

¹²³*Otherwise than Being*, 116.

¹²⁴Ibid., 139.

¹²⁵Ibid., 112.

¹²⁶Ibid., 116, 118, 135, 153.

¹²⁷Ibid., 121.

¹²⁸Ibid.

¹²⁹Ibid., 113-114.

¹³⁰A. Tallon, "Emmanuel Levinas and the Problem of Ethical Metaphysics," *Philosophy Today*, 20 (Spring, 1976), 65 (notes no. 31 and 32).

In being created as a particular creature, the Self is assigned a responsibility at the moment of creation. This responsibility is the very life of the Self; it is constitutive of the very meaning of its subjectivity. Consequently, this responsibility is not something chosen voluntarily; it is given prior to or before the exercise of freedom (as principle of responsibility), prior to any commitment or contract, or prior to the present or to every present. In this light, we understand that the initial exceptional or extraordinary responsibility which is the source of all other responsibilities is pre-originary, an-archival, undeclinable, unchosen, absolute or infinite responsibility.

In creation, the Self is already responsible to the Other as it holds itself answerable to the Other who is its Creator. The pre-originally or an-archival responsibility is, therefore, a subjection and an allegiance to the Good over and beyond Being.¹³¹ Thus, the essential reality of the Self is goodness. But goodness in the subject or the Self is itself an-archy, i.e., prior to the beginning, outside of freedom and non-freedom, prior to any act of goodness or any act of violence on the part of the Self. In this light, it is meaningful to say that "if no one is good voluntarily, no one is a slave to the Good."¹³²

Responsible subjectivity which implies the non-indifference of the Self to the Other and involves substitution which pushes the Self to put itself in the place of the Other also entails the putting of the idea of infinity in the Self by the Other. For the Other to whom and for whom the Self is responsible bears witness to the reality of the transcendent the transcendent and infinite Other.

e. The Face and Infinity. In and through the ethical relation, the idea of infinity comes to the Self. The Other who bears testimony to itself as an infinitely transcendent Other conveys this idea to the Self. This truth is an essential signification of the ethical relation.

Infinity breaks through the ethical structure in two ways. It is made manifest in the irreducibility of the Other to the Self as well as in the unsatisfiability of the ethical exigency.¹³³

Even as the Self penetrates gradually into the Other's world, it realizes the impossibility of knowing the Other exhaustively. Every meeting with the Other brings out the element of novelty and places him in a new light. The Other's revelation is a continuous unfolding and displacing of each image or idea that the Self has of him. For the Other is incessantly and infinitely withdrawing and surpassing its revelations. This is referred to as the movement of infinity on the part of the Other; and this signifies that the Other cannot be reduced into frozen concepts or congealed in words. The reality of the Other expresses a surplus of meaning that cannot be thematized or conceptualized and fully comprehended or

¹³¹*Otherwise than Being*, 126.

¹³²*Ibid.*, 138.

¹³³*Ethics and Infinity*, 105.

circumscribed by the intentionality of thought. And to enter into a relationship with the Other whose reality transcends his successive revelations and refuses to be fully contained and possessed in thought is to have the idea of infinity.

There is also infinity or unendingness with respect to responsibility or to the ethical exigency. At no time can the Self say that it has accomplished all of its duties and obligations. Every response it makes leaves the possibility of an exigency for another response. It finds that obligations and responsibilities increase in the measure that they are satisfied, and that the more it becomes just, the more it becomes responsible. The more the Subject or the Self becomes responsible, the more it responds to the Other, as though the distance between it and the Other is increased in the measure that their proximity is increased.¹³⁴

The Other bears witness to the reality of the infinite Other who is God. For the Infinite is there in the moral order whereby He orders the Self to answer for the Other. The Self who says "Here I am" before the Other actually manifests what the face of that Other signifies to him; and this is the moral command coming from the Infinite Other who is God.¹³⁵ This Infinite Other reveals itself through what it is capable of doing in the one who obeys the command, i.e., the Self.¹³⁶

In saying "Here I am" through the Self, the Infinite enters language. He is manifest as a voice that exposes the Self's exposedness to the Other. The Infinite passes its command to the one who obeys. Thus, the commandment is stated by the one who is ordered.¹³⁷ Here, there is an inversion of the order of revelation, for what is revealed is made by him who receives it.¹³⁸ The Infinite becomes a signification of the interiority of the Self.¹³⁹ But it is actually the nonphenomenal Infinite that utters the moral imperative. Hence, all responsibility bears testimony to the Infinite Other who is God.

The approach of the Other and his signification, expression or meaning cannot be thematized and conceptualized or reduced to a representation in consciousness because it is not really a phenomenon but the trace of "Illeity". What is referred to by "Illeity" is the "detachment of the Infinite from the thought that seeks to thematize it and the language that tries to hold it in the said."¹⁴⁰ The trace of "Illeity" manifests the invisible Infinite Other. But although the Infinite Other who is God is invisible, the visible Other renders testimony to His reality; although the Infinite Other is nonthematizable, He is attested to by the Other who is His manifestation.

To take the Infinite Other as a phenomenon and a presence would be to circumscribe it as a theme, assign it a beginning in the present of the representa-

¹³⁴*Otherwise than Being*, 105, 106, 139, 140.

¹³⁵*Ethics and Infinity*, 109.

¹³⁶*Otherwise than Being*, 147; See also *Ethics and Infinity*, 109.

¹³⁷*Otherwise than Being*, 147.

¹³⁸*Ibid.*, 156.

¹³⁹*Ethics and Infinity*, 109.

¹⁴⁰*Otherwise than Being*, 147.

tional form of the intentionality of consciousness. But as the infinity of infinity, the Infinite Other comes from a past more distant than that which is within the reach of memory and capable of being lined up with what is presented in consciousness.¹⁴¹ The idea of the Infinite Other breaks up the structure of consciousness or thought which synthesizes the various appearances of a phenomenon and encloses or reduces them to the present of consciousness.¹⁴²

Thus, the Infinite Other signifies enigmatically and diachronically. For the Infinite Other belongs not just to the present but to a remote past and a distant future that cannot be rendered present by a concept or representation in thought. This enigmatic reality of the Infinite Other is referred to as the diachronic disorder in the ethical. And this separates the Infinite Other from all phenomenality, appearance, being or essence, and renders it inaccessible to thematization, representation or the synchronic order of consciousness which attempts to synthesize the temporal phases into the present by retrospection and projection.

The essential movement of the Self as a conscious subject in the presence of being or essence is to thematize, re-present, synchronize, synthesize, integrate or totalize. But this movement or orientation is not possible in the case of the Transcendent and Infinite Other who is outside of being and beyond essence. In the presence of the Infinite Other, the Self experiences restlessness, transcendence or infinity. And the Self as responsible subject realizes that the Infinite Other is approachable meaningfully only on the ethical plane rather than on the ontological or theoretical level.

The ethical relation between the Self and the Other who reveals himself in his height, transcendence and infinity is metaphorically designated as a "curvature of the intersubjective space."¹⁴³ This curvature "inflects distance into elevation" and reflects the presence of God in the Other explains at a deeper level the asymmetry or dissymmetry in the ethical relation.

The relationship between the Self and the Other who is recognized in his eminence does not imply the subservience of the Self to this Other. For the "I" can feel itself to be the Other of the Other¹⁴⁴ And this responsibility of the Self for all the Others can and has to manifest itself also in limiting itself. The Self is thus called upon to concern itself with itself.¹⁴⁵ This implies an exigency for the mode of relationship which Levinas describes as justice.

f. *The Exigency for Justice.* Proximity was earlier described as an essential modality of responsible subjectivity. It signifies the asymmetry or the one-sidedness of the ethical relation. This asymmetry of the ethical relation implies the primacy of the Other over the Other, it does not necessarily mean that the Other

¹⁴¹Ibid., 144.

¹⁴²Levinas, "God and Philosophy," 133.

¹⁴³*Totality and Infinity*, 291.

¹⁴⁴Ibid., 84.

¹⁴⁵*Otherwise than Being*, 128.

can substitute for the Self. For in the ethical relation, the Other imposes on the Self an undecidable and unconditional obligation which even calls for the Self to sacrifice itself in substituting and expiating for the Other. But although the Self can substitute for the Other, it does not necessarily mean that the Other can substitute for the Self. This asymmetry in the ethical relation, however, is corrected in the relation marked by justice which entails the mutual concern of the Self and the Other for obligations and responsibilities to each other.

Justice is established when the "I" that is always for the Other becomes an Other like the Other. This is instituted with the entry of a third party. In the face of the Other that obsesses the Self, all the Others are already present, for "the other is from the first the brother of all the other men."¹⁴⁶ The third party is other than the Other and makes the "I" one among Others. And the one before whom and for whom the Self is responsible is in turn responsible to another one. The entry of the third party calls into question the asymmetry of proximity or the one-sidedness of responsibility, and signifies the exigency for an order among responsibilities. It calls for the order of justice which moderates or measures the substitution of the One for the Other.¹⁴⁷

If responsibility in proximity ordered the Self only to the Other, there would have been no problem, and no questions would have arisen, for consciousness. For the responsibility to the Other is precisely proximity - i.e., prior to every commitment, contract or freedom (as principle of responsibility) and consequently anarchical, i.e., without a beginning, immediacy and antecedent to all questions. But the entry of a third party disturbs the Self and raises problems or questions on the initial one-sidedness of the absolute or unconditional responsibility of the Self to the Other.

The third party is Other than the Other who is the neighbor of the Self; he is another neighbor to the Self, and also a neighbor to the Other. The Other and the third party, both being neighbors and contemporaries to one another, put a distance between the Self and the Other as well as the third party; this introduces a contradiction in the demand for a one-way street of absolute responsibility of the Self for the Other. In the proximity of the Other, all the Others aside from the Other obsesses the Self. This obsessive presence of the many Others to the Self cries out for justice. And Levinas says that justice necessarily requires "comparison, co-existence, contemporaneousness, assembling, order, thematization, the visibility of faces, and thus intentionality and the intellect, and the intelligibility of a system."¹⁴⁸ All these things refer to the work of intentional consciousness required by the exigency for justice. And this work essentially involves the ordering or prioritizing of responsibilities. For the obsessive presence of the Others pushes the Self to carefully consider its responsibilities towards them and to recognize which one calls for immediate attention.

¹⁴⁶*Otherwise than Being*, 158.

¹⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 159-159.

¹⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 157.

The neighbor who obsesses the Self is a face both comparable and incomparable; incomparable because it is a unique face, yet comparable because it is in relationship with other faces that become visible in the consideration of the Self's consciousness as called forth by the concern for justice. In turn, as a subject incomparable with the Other, the Self is approached as an Other by the Others, i.e., for itself. The "I" is an Other for the Others.¹⁴⁹ And every incomparable subject turns into a One among other members of society. Thus, the Self and all the Others appear together; because of contemporaneity, one can go from the One to the Other and from the Other to the One. Such an order where the Self and all the Others show themselves and appear together at the same time is the condition for the possibility of justice.¹⁵⁰

Out of the simultaneity of the Self and of the Other emerges the order of justice introducing an added dimension to the an-archic and pre-originary one way relation of the proximity of the Self to the Other and thereby making possible reciprocity or reversibility in the relation. But justice, in which One is an Other for the Other, is not the generation or limitation of an-archic responsibility; it is the institution of an order among responsibility and the plurality of ethical instances and situations.

Nothing lies outside of the control of the responsibility of the Self to the Other. Justice, society, the State and its institutions, exchanges and work are all comprehensible and justifiable on the basis of proximity.¹⁵¹ Institutions are inevitable and necessary for the exercise of justice, but they must be held in check by the initial interpersonal relation of proximity.¹⁵²

As already pointed out, the an-archic, pre-originary "saying" or "meaning" of proximity - the difference between the Self and the Other which turns into non-indifference and demands substitution, duty without end or unlimited responsibility - calls for the order of justice and the work of intellectual consciousness. Justice imposes a rational order on the unconditional and extraordinary commitment of proximity.¹⁵³ This implies that philosophy which imposes the rational order is called into thought by justice.¹⁵⁴ Philosophy serves justice "by thematizing the difference and reducing the thematized to difference."¹⁵⁵ More specifically, philosophy justifies and criticizes "the laws of being and of the city" by relating or grounding them once more to the meaning conveyed by the initial ethical relation between the Self and the Other, which consists essentially in the non-indifference of the One to the Other.¹⁵⁶

¹⁴⁹Ibid., 158.

¹⁵⁰Vasey, *op. cit.*, 191.

¹⁵¹*Otherwise than Being*, 159.

¹⁵²*Ethics and Infinity*, 90.

¹⁵³*Otherwise than Being*, 161.

¹⁵⁴Ibid., 162.

¹⁵⁵Ibid., 165.

¹⁵⁶Ibid.

The preceding account throws light on a relation between philosophy and the ethical relation. As already pointed out, responsible subjectivity is a response to the pre-originary ethical exigency signified in the ethical relation between the Self and the Other; but it also entails a response to the exigency signified in the ethical relation between the Self and the Other; but it also entails a response to the exigency on the ethical exigency is the task of philosophy. In this movement of justification, philosophy ensures that what is fixed in the "said", written as laws, or established as a theory, does not betray the original meaning expressed in the an-archival, pre-originary, unconditional responsibility or proximity, which consist essentially in the non-indifference of the Self to the Other; i.e., in the responsibility of the Self to-be-for-the-Other.

The foregoing discussion of Levinas' philosophy of responsible subjectivity is clinched with the following notes on the relation between the ethical relation and the event of meaning.

The Ethical Relation and the Event of Meaning

As emphasized in the preceding presentation, the ethical structure points to the essential and primary structure of the Self as a responsible subject. For the ethical relation which reveals to the Self an Other, who paralyzes its egoistic and totalizing moves, likewise conveys the meaning of the reality of the Self - namely, to be for-the Other more than to be for-oneself; in other words, to be responsible for the Other rather than to persevere in one's own being. The meaning of the Self's being lies not in inter-ested existence but in disinterested existence which is an existence that is not preoccupied with persevering or persisting in its own being. And this truth or meaning of the essential reality of the Self is conveyed in the ethical relation of proximity rather than in the theoretical relation of intentionality.

Responsible subjectivity as dis-interested existence has been described in terms of the modalities of desire, transcendence, signification, unicity, infinity and justice. At the basis of responsibility is the fear for the death of the Other. Hence, the responsible subject holds himself responsible both for the life and the death of the Other.¹⁵⁷

But if one fears for the Other more than for oneself, can one even live at all? Levinas says that most important question to be asked concerning being is not the question raised by Leibniz and so much commented upon by Heidegger - Why is there being rather than nothing? Rather, one must ultimately raise the following questions: Should I be dedicated to being? By being or persisting in being, do I not kill? Do I have the right to be at all? Is being in the world not taking the place of someone else? Each of these questions put into question the naive and natural perseverance in one's own being.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁷*Ethics and Infinity*, 119.

¹⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 120-121.

Contrary to what many reassuring traditions say, being is never its own reason for being, and the famous *conatus in suo esse perseverandi* is not the source of all right and meaning.¹⁵⁹ The true meaning of the Self lies in responsible subjectivity which entails the disinterested existence devoted to what is Other and better than being or to what is beyond essence, rather than the interested existence dedicated to the comprehension of being. And this meaning of the Self as responsible subjectivity gleams forth in the face of the transcendent and infinite Other.

The face of this transcendent and infinite Other is the primordial expression and the source of all significations. It is the first intelligible but it is not contemplated as a concept or an intelligible essence; rather, it is heard as language, i.e., a word or meaning coming from the Other and thereby originating from something exterior to the Self. Hence, it is a meaning or truth that is truly transcendent and irreducible to the immanence of thought in the Self.

Language or discourse is better and more appropriate than comprehension as a way of relating with what cannot be fully contained in thought and remains essentially and infinitely transcendent. For speech cuts across vision; and speaking rather than "letting be" calls forth the Other.¹⁶⁰

The face as the primordial saying or expression conveys the first word that founds language or discourse. It also signifies the first intelligible that conditions rationality or thought. Rather than awaiting meaning or deriving meaning from the Self, the Other conveys to the Self its identity as responsible subjectivity. This primordial expression conveyed in the ethical relation is prior to the meaning-giving act (*Sinngebung*) of the intentionally conscious subject. Thus, giving an account of the ethical relation is actually describing the event of meaning.

The account of the ethical relation brings to one's attention the incontestable fact that the synchronic order of intentionality and consciousness cannot completely surmount the diachronic dis-order in the ethical relation. As already pointed out, the intentional structure of consciousness or thought that synthesizes or synchronizes the various appearances of a phenomenon and reduces these to a concept or representation in thought, cannot adequately deal with the reality or meanings signified by the Other to the Self in the ethical relation. For the Other who approaches the Self is not a phenomenon that can be circumscribed by thought and reduced to the present of the representational form of the intentionality of consciousness; rather, he comes from a remote past and belongs to a distant future. The enigmatic reality of the Other suggests the diachrony of the time of the Other and points to the diachronic dis-order in the ethical relation, which opposes the synchronizing activity of consciousness or thought. For Levinas, the Other is actually the nonphenomenal trace of God as the Transcendent and Infinite Other who refuses to be thematized and fully encompassed by thought. In dealing with this nonphenomenality of the Other, Levinas ventures beyond phenomenology.

¹⁵⁹Ibid., 122.

¹⁶⁰*Totality and Infinity*, 195.

The primordial expression or signification that is made manifest by the Other to the Self in the ethical relation cannot be fully converted into thematic and systematic discourse. For the reality or the meaning of the Transcendent and Infinite Other which is originally, primordially and an-archically expressed in the ethical relation is continually transformed, dissembled or dissimulated by what is fixed in the "said". The reality of the Transcendent and Infinite Other cannot be fully expressed in words; it is never totally absorbed into the order of thought and discourse. What is "said" about this Other is incommensurate to His reality and what he signifies or "says". Hence, it is necessary to continually return from what is thematized or what is "said" to that of the pre-originary "saying" in order to be faithful to the profound manifestation of the Transcendent and Infinite Other in the ethical relation. Levinas thinks that it has always been a temptation for philosophy to exhaustively reduce the meaning which is conveyed by the Transcendent and Infinite Other into the order of thought and discourse. The attempt to do this betrays the fact that Western philosophy in general has failed to recognize the truth that the reality of the infinitely transcendent Other resists the assembling and synchronizing activity of consciousness or thought. Hence, Levinas thinks that "the history of Western philosophy has not been the refutation of skepticism as much as the refutation of transcendence."¹⁶¹

Western philosophy has been fundamentally an ontology - the comprehension of Being or the comprehension of the multiplicity of existents under a common term such as being or essence. And this is essentially the work of reason, consciousness or the totalizing Self. Levinas breaks from this tradition and proposes that ethics is the first philosophy. However, ethics is not a movement of Being, but of what is otherwise and better than being or of what is an exception to essence;¹⁶² it is the very possibility of a Beyond, i.e., of a transcendence towards Goodness.¹⁶³ Ethics is essentially an account of the ethical relation - the non-thematizable, the approach of the Other, the pre-originary and an-archival "saying" or meaning that is manifest in the face-to-face togetherness, the diachronic dis-order of proximity, dis-interested existence; i.e., responsible subjectivity in relation with that which bears the trace of infinity and transcendence. This account of what is essentially signified by the ethical relation actually provides the foundation on which one can build an ethics considered as a system of laws or a set of values that could serve as a guide in making decisions with respect to one's situation in life.

But as repeatedly emphasized by Levinas, the pre-originary and an-archival "saying" or signification of the ethical relation cannot be fully grasped on the basis of the "said", it is often betrayed or obliterated by what is "said". The pre-thematic

¹⁶¹*Otherwise than Being*, 169.

¹⁶²For Levinas, the essence of any reality can be fully encompassed by thought and approached on the theological or ontological plane. Since the Other cannot really be fully thematized and completely circumscribed by thought, Levinas says that the Other is an *exception to essence* and accessible only on the ethical level.

¹⁶³Levinas, "God and Philosophy," 137.

alterity or exteriority of the Other, the diachronic time of the contract with the Other or the non-presence of the Other to the Self is continually dissembled, dissimulated or transformed by what is "said". What are put forth in a text may be unfaithful to the "pre-text". Thus, it is necessary to go back to the pre-originary "saying" that is obscured in thematization of the "said".¹⁶⁴ This movement involves a reduction from what archaic "saying" or meaning in the ethical relation. And this reduction is the task of philosophy. The "saying" calls for philosophy so that what is beyond essence is not reduced or congealed into an essence or a being that can be circumscribed by thought. And the philosopher's effort of exposing an "exception to essence" or an "otherwise than being" brings home to the Self as a responsible subject the truth or meaning of what is non-thematizable, refractory to the assembling activity or synchronic time of intentionality and consciousness, and irreducible to the immanence of the thought of the Self. Thus, the "said" that signifies this pre-originary, diachronic and enigmatic "saying" remains an insurmountable equivocation. And the reality or meaning of the Transcendent and Infinite Other who signifies what is "said" refuses to be completely translated into systematic theory and discourse. Philosophy must recognize this enigmatic reality and "saying" of the infinitely transcended Other and acknowledge the impossibility of completely surmounting skepticism and attaining truth and certainty. Thus, Levinas points out to us the "invincible force of skepticism"¹⁶⁵ and the "skeptical essence of philosophy."¹⁶⁶

Skepticism is inseparable from philosophy and follows it like a shadow,¹⁶⁷ it is refuted but it returns. For the truth that is conveyed to the Self by transcendent Other is incessantly withdrawing and continually surpassing its revelations. And this truth exists only in moments that resist the assembling and synchronizing activity of consciousness. Consequently, it is not accessible on the basis of a life dedicated to the comprehension of being; it is attainable only on the basis of the ethical life devoted to the obligations and responsibilities to the Infinite Other who is the exception to essence and the Good over and beyond being.

The foregoing discussion is definitely not an exhaustive presentation of Levinas' philosophy of responsible subjectivity. It actually represents an attempt to express one's grasp of the profound expression of the thought of Levinas concerning the reality of the Self. And it holds itself open to other and deeper expressions of the meaning conveyed in this philosophy. The Ideas we have gathered from an examination of the works of Levinas may not reflect the depth of his thought on the Self. But these would certainly carry us along the way towards a fuller understanding and a better appreciation of who we are, who we can become, and what we can do for the Other.

¹⁶⁴*Otherwise than Being*, 43ff.

¹⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 169.

¹⁶⁶Levinas, "God and Philosophy," 144.

¹⁶⁷*Otherwise than Being*, 168.

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