Response to Levinas

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Context
Who is this man, this thinker who haunts my own thoughts, Emmanuel Levinas? Born a century prior, Jewish, in Lithuania, so far away from here, from now, from me. A life unsettled, witness to and uprooted by the October Revolution, then again unsettled by his own search for meaning, taking him so far away from his own home, to France and philosophy where he settled-unsettled. And again unsettled by that horror that robbed him of his family, his people, and that continues to unsettle us all. Is there something in all this unsettlement that can give understanding?

Can it explain why he unsettles me? But who am I, and why do I matter here?

Infinity
He speaks to us, to me, and his words unsettle. But in the saying, there is borne a warning:

In the critique of totality borne by the very association of these two words [totality and infinity], there is a reference to the history of philosophy. This history can be interpreted as an attempt at universal synthesis, a reduction of all experience, of all that is reasonable, to a totality wherein consciousness embraces the world, leaves nothing other outside of itself, and thus becomes absolute thought.¹

There is violence in totality, in totalizing thought that attempts to settle all experience in a closed synthesis. To synthesize is to exclude, not to embrace a movement that is infinite and so unknowable. But to call into question the history of philosophy must also call the philosopher into question. Does Levinas commit violence upon himself? And me? Am I not implicated in this violence?

The ‘I’
But, again, who am I and what do I matter now? Can he teach me this?
Responsibility for the Other, for the naked face of the first individual to come along. A responsibility that goes beyond what I may or may not have done to the Other or whatever acts I may or may not have committed, as if I were devoted to the other man before being devoted to myself. Or more exactly, as if I had to answer for the other’s death even before being. A guiltless responsibility, whereby I am none the less open to an accusation of which no alibi, spatial or temporal, could clear me.ii

Yes, I am implicated. But I am only by way of this implication. Responsible before I am, in an immemorial time that never was present, though its absence makes me possible. Always already unsettled. Not guilty, but accused, called to be just so that being can be justified.

Il y a
But is this thought possible? Can I conceive of this being before being? What is there before being?

There is horror of being and not anxiety over nothingness, fear of being and not fear for being; there is being prey to, delivered over to something that is not a ‘something’. When night is dissipated with the first rays of the sun, the horror of the night is no longer defineable. The ‘something’ appears to be ‘nothing’.iii

This thought is nothingness, but it is not always thought that matters most. As a being, an I, I awake from the there is, no longer quite sure what there is. But there is experience, of the horror of being, of fear. This there is cannot be defined but also cannot be denied. It is felt, unsettling.

Sensibility
But how does one live with this horror? How can this horror from which I awaken not overwhelm my sensibility, making life itself unbearable, without enjoyment? What is left to nourish me, to free me from my fear?

Nourishment, as a means of invigoration, is the transmutation of the other into the same, which is in the essence of enjoyment: an energy that is other, recognizes as other, recognized, we will see, as sustaining the very act that is directed upon it, becomes, in enjoyment, my own energy, my strength, me. All enjoyment is in this sense alimentation. Hunger is need, is privation in the primal sense of the word, and thus precisely living from … is not a simple
I am nourished by the other, by what is outside of me but enters me. This is what sustains me, this is what I live from. And this is enjoyment, invigoration, exaltation. My liberation is my dependence upon what I am not, but from which I live, my very enslavement to the other.

**Dwelling-Intimacy**

The other enters me as nourishment from which I live. But is it possible to live *with* others, if, in their infinity, I cannot know them?

The relationship with the other, taken at the level of our civilization, is a complication of our original relationship; it is in no way a contingent complication, but one itself founded upon the inner dialectic of the relationship with the Other.

The other enters me, but I do not subsume it. This would be to fall into the violence of totalization. We are left with a strange dialectic. And I am once again left *unsettled*, through a relationship with the Other that renders something in my own self as other, ungraspable and un-subsumed. Dwelling with is to be thrown into an economy of alterity that displaces me, calling me into question.

Am I not hopelessly alone in this economy? Is love not itself a necessary nourishment without which life would only ever be despair?

The pathos of love, however, consists in an insurmountable duality of beings. It is a relationship with what always slips away. The relationship does not *ipso facto* neutralize alterity but preserves it. The pathos of voluptuousness lies in the fact of being two. The other as other is not here an object that becomes ours or becomes us; to the contrary, it withdraws into its mystery.

Love has also fallen prey to totalization. We have thought it in terms of appropriation, a thinking not only violent to the other but also to love itself. Desire exceeds itself, it does not want to posses, nor does it seek an *end*. Behind your face is the beyond, infinite, as desire itself. Love is possible, it continues, but the beauty of love lies in its very way of *unsettling*.
Alterity Again
Is this enough, have I understood? How does one go from the ego, the self, me, to alterity, to the Other? What access do I have?

Total alterity, in which a being does not refer to enjoyment and presents itself out of itself, does not shine forth in the form by which things are given to us, for beneath form things conceal themselves. 

Altered is concealed beneath the form in which it is given. My access is indirect. Alterity is beyond form, exceeding it, without horizon or context. But it haunts me nonetheless; its trace is a ghost. Without containment, it reveals itself as openness, disrupting me in its infinity, summoning me to vigilance, unsettled, open.

Responsibility for the Other: Asymmetry
In this summoning there is communication. There is teaching. But what is taught?

The face with which the Other turns to me is not reabsorbed in a representation of the face. To hear his destitution which cries out for justice is not to represent an image to oneself, but is to posit oneself as responsible, both as more and as less than the being that presents itself in the face. Less, for the face summons me to my obligations and judges me. The being that presents himself in the face comes from a dimension of height, a dimension of transcendence whereby he can present himself as a stranger without opposing me as obstacle or enemy. More, for my position as I consists in being able to respond to this essential destitution of the Other, finding resources for myself.

I am taught I, myself, my task. The full weight of my responsibility reveals itself in my enslavement to the Other, for I am dependent upon and obligated to her. And she judges me. But here I find myself, my resources, my power, revealed by my being questioned by the Other: ‘I am destitute, impoverished, will you come to me and help?’

The identity of the I comes to it from its egoism whose insular sufficiency is accomplished by enjoyment, and to which the face teaches the infinity from which this insular sufficiency is separated. … Multiplicity in being, which refuses totalization but
takes form as fraternity and discourse, is situated in a ‘space’
   essentially asymmetrical. ix

I am hearing but I have not heard what. The what is to come, it is
my task. Mine, my responsibility. I cannot shirk it, as it is I who
am summoned; nor can I impose myself and make demands of the
Other. My failure to respond would be a failed response. A
response of failure. That would be my guilt. An act of violence,
dis-regarding.

**Hope**

Now I know, not what but how. The call awakens me and warns
me that something is to be done, something must be done.

    Does not lucidity, the mind’s openness upon the true, consist in
catching sight of the permanent possibility of war?x

The threat of war lingers, it is there. It will not go away, leaving
me in comfort, settled. But unsettled-ness teaches us that being is
not enough. There is more, something beyond things, for being
must justify itself, I must justify being, my being. Can I do it?

    This ‘beyond’ the totality and objective experience is, however,
not to be described in a purely negative fashion. It is reflected
within the totality and history, within experience. The
eschatological, as the ‘beyond’ of history, draws beings out of the
jurisdiction of history and the future; it arouses them in and calls
them forth to their full responsibility. Submitting history as a
whole to judgment, exterior to the very wars that mark its end, it
restores to each instant its full signification in that very instant: all
the causes are ready to be heard. It is not the last judgment that is
decisive, but the judgment of all the instants in time, when the
living are judged.xi

Every instant, every moment, I am called. And only through this
calling can each instant take on its full importance. The glory of
life is restored, here, now. Hope recurs, again and again, because
time is messianic. Every moment is thrown open, and I am
terrified. But through my terror I come back to this moment, this
instant. It is all I have, but it is enough, because it is life. Life
matters, I matter. What will I do? I am called, a-live, I respond.

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1 *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo.* Trans. R. Cohen, Pittsburgh:
Duquesne University Press, 1994. P. 75

iii “There is: Existence without Existents,” in The Levinas Reader, p. 34.


v “Time and the Other,” in The Levinas Reader, p. 47.

vi Ibid., p. 49.

vii Totality and Infinity, p. 192.

viii Ibid., p. 215.

ix Ibid., p. 216.

x Ibid., p. 21.

xi Ibid., p. 23.