

Evil and 'the Other'

Levinas on the End of Theodicy

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Introduction

Brief Background

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

Levinas's Language

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

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

- Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 47

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

The Self is called into the relation to the Other through the Other's "face." The

God is to know what must be done.” (*Difficult Freedom*, 17). To Levinas, this demand is a continual responsibility and commitment that is never complete. Levinas uses different words and analogies to articulate and rearticulate the continual taking up this new way

Argument

This paper aims to clarify Levinas's complex and intriguing ways of thinking about evil. This paper examines Levinas's thoughts on the Other and our relation to the Other in order to show Levinas's unique contributions to our ways of thinking about evil.

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

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

Levinas's Life

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

Early Life

Emmanuel Levinas was born on January 12th, 1906, in Kaunas³, Lithuania, a city at the center of the country, which is between Poland and Russia. He was the oldest of three boys, and his family was a part of the Jewish community, which Levinas referred to as feeling “natural.” In 1915 both WWI and the Communist Revolution struck the city, an

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

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

In 1930, Levinas became a French citizen and enrolled in his required military service in Paris. Malka describes, "Becoming French meant entering into a contract of language, civilization, and values embodied by the republic, coupled with the demands of a general humanism." (Malka, 53). In 1930, he also married Raissa Levi, his

Middle Life

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

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

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

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

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

In 1967, Levinas was appointed Professor of Philosophy at a newly establ

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

- Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 81

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The ontological event accomplished by philosophy consists in suppressing or transmuting the alterity of all that is Other, in universalizing the immanence of the

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

- Polt, *Heidegger an introduction* , 5

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In 'God and Philosophy' (1975) Levinas expands upon his ideas of alterity and sameness and his description saying and the said. Levinas presents a sort of non-ontological philosophy and explains the saying (the action of speaking, verb) always precedes the said (past participle, noun). The saying must be taken up and occur as a particular encounter (occurred in

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

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

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

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

The Problem of Evil and Theodicy

The Problem of Evil

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

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

- Larrimore, *The Problem of Evil*, xiv

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

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

Theodicy as “Justice of God”

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

“Theodicy”— ~~IBPWK~~~~EHNWK~~~~RR~~~~RGDQGLN~~~~M~~~~LFH~~

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Leibniz and "The Best of Possible Worlds"

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

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

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

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

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

Leibniz describes that since humans are created inferior to God, we commit evils as we lack God's wisdom and knowledge. According to Leibniz, God is all-knowing and has reasoning behind all his decisions that we are incapable of understanding. This supreme knowledge is established in morality, and Leibniz argues that all decisions God makes are rooted in what is best for the world as a whole. Leibniz describes, "For we must consider the original imperfection in the creature before sin, because the creature is limited in its essence; whence ensues that it cannot know all, and that it can deceive itself, and commit other errors." (Leibniz, 'Theodicy' in Larrimore,

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

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

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

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

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

Taking on the Suffering of the Other

Levinas turns the Self outward and describes meaning that can only come from suffering when the Self takes on the suffering of the Other. Levinas describes “the unjustifiable suffering of the Other, opens upon suffering the ethical perspective of the inter-

overwhelms the subject, bringing out a sort of nothingness, the *il y a*. The *il y a* overwhelming absent nature of the *il y a* reveals an existence with no existent. Levinas explains that any attempt to excuse, explain, or give meaning to suffering is an evil. It has allowed humans to excuse suffering rather than seeing

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

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

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

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

Alternative to Theodicy

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

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

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

harshness to echo that this relationship is a demand. We are called into ourselves through something outside of ourselves. For Levinas, it is actually what is outside that

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

Evil as Nothingness

Levinas explains the *il y a* as a kind of evil that lacks any sort of existent (or the holder of that experience does not experience the evil consciously). This *there is suffering*, an existence stripped of existents. This nothingness of evil is necessary to

understanding Levinas's as a need to call for a change in the way we think about the world

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

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

Buber and I-Thou

In Martin Buber's *I and Thou* (1923) the world is a place of relation. Buber

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

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

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

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

With the I-Thou lens, Buber sees the tree in its “wholeness” and writes, “The tree is no longer It. I have been seized by the power of exclusiveness.” (Buber, *I and Thou*, 23).

To Buber, the relation to the tree “seizes” the self, establishing a similar sense of invasion to self that Levinas describes. However, this encounter “seizes” the self in a direct and sudden moment. Levinas hopes to establish a more determinative relation to

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

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

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

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

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

In ‘The Dialogue between Heaven and Earth,’ (1967) Buber explains a God who conceals Himself, *Hester Panim*

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

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

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

Ethical as Exceptional

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

suffering, wherein “sensitivity” becomes a “vulnerability” that takes over any sort of

Works Cited

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