

Bruce Young: An introduction to Levinas

Emmanuel Levinas is considered by many to be one of the most important philosophers of the twentieth century and perhaps of the entire philosophical tradition. He has commented on many strands of the Western philosophical tradition, including the thought of Plato, Descartes, Hegel, and Heidegger, all of whom he has critiqued, but also sought to find value or insight in. Levinas has had great influence on other thinkers, including Jacques Derrida, who owes some of his most important concepts (including "the Other" and "the trace") to Levinas. Levinas himself is often called a "postmodernist" (because along with other recent philosophers he has questioned the tradition's privileging of reason, conceptual knowledge, and certain kinds of metaphysical systematization); he is sometimes called a "phenomenologist" (because he uses some of the methods of Husserl and Heidegger in observing and analyzing human consciousness).

But, though he has been given many labels, Levinas is most often associated with the word "ethical" (and is sometimes called "an ethical postmodernist") because of his emphasis on and concern with what he calls the "ethical" or "social" relation: the relation with "the Other" (meaning "the other person"). Levinas shows persuasively how the various aspects of human experience are founded upon, and bear traces of, the primordial relation with the Other, who brings the self into being by calling it to responsibility and service. By speaking—or even before audible speech, by facing me, looking at me—the Other reveals to me his or her exteriority and infinity: the Other cannot be reduced to a concept. Further, the face of the Other reveals to me the injustice—as well as the impossibility—of my claim to sovereign freedom and egoistic enjoyment. Though Levinas's thought has some affinities with Martin Buber's, the relation with the Other as Levinas describes it is to be distinguished from Buber's I-Thou, since what Levinas describes is not a relation between preexisting entities (according to Levinas, the relation itself makes possible both the interiority of the self and a world held in common with others) and since the relation of the "I" and "the Other" is not self-contained, but involves and from the first reveals the "third party" and the whole of social life. The presence of the Other calls me to service—not only to him or herself, but to all other Others.

According to Levinas, I must accept my relationship with and responsibility toward the Other in order to escape isolation and solipsism and become fully myself. Yet, as Levinas skillfully shows, this relation is not something that comes into existence *because* I have chosen or initiated it. It had to be there already so that I could be in a position to choose. I have never *not* been in relation to someone other than myself. It is this relation with the Other that makes possible and gives rise to my very consciousness. The presence of the Other—with its implicit call to responsibility and service—thus brings me fully into being, reveals to me my separation from what is other, hollows out my interiority, initiates discourse, and makes possible a world I have in common with the Other.

Emmanuel Levinas was born in January 1906 in Kaunas, Lithuania. He died in Paris on December 25, 1995, just short of his 90th birthday. A couple of years or so earlier, Ralph Hancock (of BYU's Political Science Department) met with Levinas and his wife in their Paris apartment and found them warm and charming. Levinas, who is Jewish, grew up in Lithuania and Russia, studied at the University of Strasbourg (France) from 1923-30, spent some time in Germany studying the philosophy of Husserl and Heidegger, became a French citizen (1930), spent six years in a prisoner of war camp during World War II, lost relatives to the Holocaust, and has taught at several French universities, including the Sorbonne.

Through his writing on Husserl, Levinas helped introduce the philosophy of Husserl and Heidegger to France and in particular sparked Sartre's interest in Heidegger (leading to Sartre's writing *Being and Nothingness*). In the late 1940s Levinas gave an influential series of lectures titled "Time and the Other" which, among other things, provoked criticism from Simone de Beauvoir for associating "otherness" and "the feminine." In the late 40s Levinas also published a slim book, *Existence and Existents*, a brilliant but difficult response to Heidegger's claim that anonymous and impersonal "Being" is the fundamental reality or process, a process or reality that gives rise to but then, as it were, swallows up again all individual, ephemeral beings. Levinas, refusing to give priority to a single, anonymous entity or process ("Being"), argues that existence is irreducibly plural. He shows the significance and value of being an "existent," an individual being, especially a personal one, with a separate, unique identity. "To

be" means, among other things, to actively maintain one's separation from all other beings and from the apparently impersonal "background" of being (what Levinas calls the "*il y a*"=the "there is").

Levinas published a number of important articles during the 1950s. His first major book was published in French in 1961; the English title is *Totality and Infinity*. If I had to summarize the book in a nutshell, I'd say that Levinas demonstrates the tendency of the philosophical tradition (as well as academic disciplines and consciousness generally) to try to encompass all of reality in a single vision, reducing it to a single comprehensive system or essence that can be grasped by the mind. He calls this activity "totalizing" and associates it with self-satisfaction, control, and possession. But "totalizing" is not simply evil; it describes, in fact, how the mind necessarily works, even how each of us as an organism necessarily functions, maintaining our separation from everything else by trying to be a complete, self-sufficient entity. Yet Levinas demonstrates over and over that "totalizing" is never entirely successful and that in all of our efforts at self-sufficiency and self-satisfaction there are traces of *something other* than ourselves, something on which we depend, or from which we live, or which we seek. Even the anonymous "there is" is haunted by the very absence of a voice we know we have heard somewhere.

For Levinas, the clearest and most potent revelation that I am not everything—that everything does not belong to me and that my consciousness does not encompass everything—is the face of the Other. "Other" here (especially when capitalized) means "someone else," "the other person," "the person I encounter"; it translates the French "autrui" (the personal other, as in "Aimez autrui comme soi-même"="Love the other person as you love yourself"). If it were not for the face of the other person, I might indeed maintain the illusion that everything I experience and enjoy (food, landscapes, things) is indeed mine. But once I encounter the Other, I realize that there is something absolutely and irreducibly other than myself and that the world that I enjoy and seem to possess also belongs to the Other; my possession and sovereignty are contested. But this does not limit my freedom, for freedom would have no meaning in a world that belonged entirely to me. The Other "invests" my freedom, gives it meaning, makes it possible for me to make moral choices. I become "responsible," for the Other invites me (simply by his or her presence) to respond. The Other, through his or her neediness and vulnerability, invites me to offer myself and what I have in service and sustenance. At the same time, the Other commands, not by words but simply by the vulnerability of his or her face, "Thou shalt not kill."

Besides introducing me to moral responsibility, the Other also makes the world "real." That is, I know the world is not just an illusion because I have it in common with the Other. Reality thus becomes genuinely "exterior"—and at the same time, I become genuinely "interior," because I am now truly differentiated from the external world and because I have been called upon to turn to my resources (what belongs to me and is in some sense a part of my "interior" world) so as to respond to and serve the Other. This "calling upon" and "responding" is the basis of language or conversation; and through language (discourse, conversation) the world becomes "communicable," something that can be shared.

The Other is identified with "infinity" (hence the title *Totality and Infinity*): because I cannot contain or possess the Other or reduce the Other to a finite concept or image, the Other is, in that sense, without bounds. The Other thus produces in me "the idea of Infinity": the idea of something more than I can contain. Since I can never fully satisfy my obligation to the Other, my responsibility for the Other is also "infinite." Ethics is thus not first of all a matter of "reciprocity": I do not owe certain things to the Other only in return for what has been done for me. The obligation toward the Other comes with the relationship itself, which precedes any actions performed or even any thoughts by which I would be able to measure my own and the other's relative obligations. Furthermore, I can never get out of myself in such a way as to "objectively" (from the outside) compare the relative obligations of myself and the other. My unique position as a self depends on *my* responsibility to the other, which (as far as I am concerned) always precedes and exceeds any obligation the other may have toward me.

Another way to summarize Levinas's thought is to say that, though I am necessarily separate, I must (to be separate) also be in relation to something other than myself. Though enjoyment, work, and knowledge partly put me into relation with something other than myself, they do so only imperfectly,

since I can always (at least mentally and attitudinally) reduce what I enjoy, create, or know to "the Same"—to what belongs to me: myself, my consciousness, the totalizing system or essence I identify with reality. Only "the social relation," which Levinas also calls "the ethical relation," brings genuine transcendence: that is, makes it possible for me both to be myself (maintain my separate individuality) and also be in relation with something genuinely (and infinitely) other than myself—the other person. (A comment Levinas makes on *Robinson Crusoe* nicely captures the quality of this transcendence, this escape from isolation achieved while still remaining oneself—or, as Levinas puts it: **"the situation Robinson Crusoe is privileged to experience when, in a magnificent tropical landscape, where he has continued to maintain civilization through his tools and his morality and his calendar, he still finds in his encounter with Man Friday the greatest event of his insular life. It is the moment when finally a man who speaks replaces the inexpressible sadness of echoes"** [*The Levinas Reader* 148].) Levinas explores how this relation with the Other involves (and in some sense, is) language; how it involves (in special senses he uses) truth and justice, or goodness; and how it makes possible the fullness of my individual being, since I am unique and irreplaceable only insofar as *I* am the one called upon at this place and this moment to respond to the Other. Levinas associates this response I can make with the biblical phrase, "Here I am," or—to more precisely translate the Hebrew—"Behold me here."

(Another way he makes the same point: **"I am defined as a subjectivity, as a singular person, as an 'I,' precisely because I am exposed to the other. It is my inescapable and incontrovertible answerability to the other that makes me an individual 'I.' So that I become a responsible or ethical 'I' to the extent that I agree to depose or dethrone myself—to abdicate my position of centrality—in favor of the vulnerable other. As the Bible says: 'He who loses his soul gains it'"** [*Face to Face with Levinas* 27].)

As these and other details in Levinas's works indicate, there is a religious dimension to his thought—and in fact, he makes it quite clear that he believes ultimately the Other who is calling us to service and responsibility is God. He argues, however, that God does not do this directly, but rather through the face of the Other—i.e., through the neighbor ("near one"), whoever it may be, that I encounter—as well as through scripture (i.e., the Bible) and through "testimony," that is, the response within ourselves that (even before we have a chance to analyze or choose it) is aroused by the Other.

By the way, Levinas wrote another book (yet more difficult than *Totality and Infinity*) titled *Otherwise Than Being*, in which he explores some of these matters of responsibility, interiority, testimony, and so on. The title *Otherwise Than Being* is associated with one of Levinas's central claims: that "ethics precedes ontology." By this, he means several things: that the ethical relation makes "being" possible, and that my responsibility to the Other precedes and is more important than my knowledge or use of "being" or of "beings." Furthermore, where Heidegger argues that authentic being means heeding the call of anonymous and all-encompassing "Being," for Levinas "to be" most truly means to be "for the Other," the personal Other. In testifying that there is something more important than "being," Levinas is thinking not only of "Being" in Heidegger's sense, but also of individual being—the self as an entity that sustains and protects itself by grasping and possessing the world. In calling me to responsibility, the Other in this sense interrupts the order of being, calls me "beyond being," commands me to "be otherwise"—i.e., to be "for the Other."

One more thing worth noting: besides the ethical and religious dimension of Levinas's thought, there are what might be called "the familial" and "erotic" dimensions. Levinas argues that the family is "an ineluctable structure"—that is, one that human beings must have to be fully human—and that the family makes possible the ethical relation by allowing human beings to learn responsibility and by opening up spaces in the social landscape that do not belong to the "totality" represented by the State. For Levinas, "the erotic" not only makes the family possible, but also makes time possible by bringing human beings together in desire for "the not yet": the future that belongs to the self but that the self does not possess or control; in other words, "the child."

Levinas's thought is thus wide-ranging, but its most influential feature has been his emphasis on the ethical relation. Among the consequences of his analysis is his making us aware that any view

pretending to "see" the ethical relation (the relation between the self and the Other) from the outside must be erroneous. A third party can never "see" this relation; it must be experienced by being part of it. The relation between one person and another (which always means the encounter between a "myself" or "I" and someone Other) can never be totalized, can never be reduced to an element in a totalizing vision. Levinas thus brilliantly shows that no philosophical view—or political or historical or sociological analysis—is ever adequate to the reality it attempts to represent. What is more, such views and analysis testify to their own inadequacy by always being offered by *some person to other persons*. This offering—the essential gesture in all intellectual and political life of presenting one's views—is itself an instance of the social or ethical relation, which therefore always transcends any attempt to represent and analyze it.

Levinas's books (published in French from 1930 on) began to be published in English in 1969 with *Totality and Infinity*, followed in the 1970s by collected essays and some of the earlier books, and in 1981 by *Otherwise Than Being*. Meanwhile (back in French), Levinas had begun writing on Judaism and the Talmud, but always with his philosophical thought present at some level. Further translations and collections continued to be published during the 80s and 90s, and are still coming.

As Levinas's work comes to be assessed, I believe it will be recognized that he is one of the most important thinkers of the century on virtually every philosophical topic (and some apparently not so philosophical) and that he offers remarkably helpful and insightful responses to the questions that have arisen in modern thought. His influence is strong (though relatively quiet) in many fields; I hope and believe it will continue to grow. As we keep looking at his work, I'm sure we'll also become more and more aware of the flaws; but that would not surprise or disturb Levinas. He did not conceive of his works as outlining a complete and flawless system; rather, they are *his* words addressed to those others who choose to read them, and they thereby bear witness to the priority of the Other and of the social relation over any encompassing vision or system of thought.

Recommended reading:

Ethics and Infinity: This is a relatively short introduction to Levinas based on radio interviews. I recommend reading the whole thing. If you read only part, I'd recommend reading the 3-page "Interviewer's Preface," skipping the translator's introduction, and then reading chapters 1 (to get a feeling for Levinas and the background of his thought), 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8—especially chapters 6, 7, and 8. [For classes, see the exact assignments: usually, interviewer's preface, translator's note, chapters 1, 4, 6-10.]

A brief essay by Levinas (from his book *Difficult Freedom*) titled "Signature," in which he summarizes his life and thought

Interview with Levinas in *Face to Face with Levinas*

When you feel you're ready for it: *Totality and Infinity*

Other: By the time you get through the above, you should be able to navigate your way through other items by Levinas. Here's a very short guide: (a) *Time and the Other* (a series of lectures from early in his career; it has a different emphasis from *Totality and Infinity* but covers some of the same ideas); (b) *Existence and Existents* (a short, early, but dense and difficult book; for the philosophically informed it gives a helpful sense of where Levinas started from); (c) *Collected Philosophical Papers*, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, and *The Levinas Reader* (collections of essays mainly from the 1950s, 60s, and 70s; see especially "Freedom and Command" and "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity" in *Collected Philosophical Papers*); (d) *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence* (usually considered Levinas's other major philosophical book, besides *Totality and Infinity*; it is even more difficult, but introduces ideas of extraordinary importance in Levinas's thought, including exposure, substitution, and testimony); (e) various writings on Judaism and the Talmud (*Difficult Freedom*, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, *Beyond the Verse*, *New Talmudic Readings*, etc.); (f) other recent collections or translations (*Outside the Subject*; *Proper Names*; *God, Death, and Time*; *Of God Who Comes to Mind*; *Entre Nous*; *Alterity and Transcendence*; *Is It Righteous to Be*; *In the Time of the Nations*; etc.).