

2013-10-02

# Towards Ethical Relations: Levinas, Care, Ricoeur

Mahoney, Connie

---

Mahoney, C. (2013). Towards Ethical Relations: Levinas, Care, Ricoeur (Doctoral thesis, University of Calgary, Calgary, Canada). Retrieved from <https://prism.ucalgary.ca>. doi:10.11575/PRISM/28480  
<http://hdl.handle.net/11023/1106>

*Downloaded from PRISM Repository, University of Calgary*

UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Towards Ethical Relations: Levinas, Care, Ricoeur

by

Connie Eileen Mahoney

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES  
IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE  
DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES

CALGARY, ALBERTA

September 2013

© Connie Mahoney 2013

## **Abstract**

The dissertation is a contribution to the field of ethics in philosophy. In particular it is a contribution to the topic of relational ethics. It is an examination and evaluation of the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, the feminist ethics of care and the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur. All three examinations are concerned with the significance of relationships in ethical theorizing. This is a significant advancement in the field because it is based on ethics as concerned with the concrete lived reality of human existence, rather than on a detached theoretical approach to moral philosophy.

## **Preface**

One morning while working in a community health clinic, I was asked to assist a physician in convincing an elderly woman to go to hospital. The woman whom I shall call 'Bertha' was well known in that she had been a so-called 'bag-lady' for many years in the city. Usually, she refused most attempts to help her and this was the first time she had ever ventured in to the clinic. The physician informed me that Bertha had to go to the hospital as she was clearly dying and that she could not die there in the clinic. Bertha refused. "She wants to die alone somewhere on the street, and that is not right," the physician said. When I approached her bedside, Bertha turned her face to me. I saw in her face, the face of suffering, aloneness, fragility and vulnerability. Something happened in me, I felt infinitely responsible for her. I told her that she had a right to die in a clean bed. She somehow agreed. It was impossible for me to let her die alone perhaps in pain, perhaps in a state of fear. I took her to the hospital and sat with her until she died peacefully, in a warm clean bed. In many ways, this dissertation is an exploration of my experience and relationship with Bertha. It seemed to me to be an important task.

## **Acknowledgements**

I wish to thank Alberta Health Services for their support in enabling to me to complete this project. Most particularly, I wish to thank and acknowledge Dr. Eric Wasylenko who was my Medical Director and mentor in my work as a Clinical Ethicist.

I wish to thank the University Of Calgary Department Of Religious Studies for their understanding of my difficult circumstances surrounding the completion of my studies.

Most importantly I wish to acknowledge and thank my academic Supervisor and mentor, Dr. Morny Joy. Dr. Joy taught me a very rich and meaningful body of knowledge. The breadth and depth of her scholarship continues to amaze me. She has carried me through some difficult times.

## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to my children: Jeff and Claudia; Meggie and Salar and Little Caspian. It is also dedicated to the memory of my beloved husband: Dr. Kent Mahoney.

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	ii
Preface.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Dedication .....	v
Table of Contents .....	vi
Epigraph.....	vii
 INTRODUCTION .....	 1
 CHAPTER ONE - LEVINAS.....	 5
Phenomenology .....	8
 CHAPTER TWO - THE OTHER.....	 30
The Feminine .....	43
 CHAPTER THREE - RESPONSIBILITY .....	 55
 CHAPTER FOUR - CARE.....	 78
 CHAPTER FIVE – RICOEUR’S “LITTLE ETHICS” .....	 102
 CONCLUSION.....	 135
 REFERENCES .....	 140
 APPENDIX.....	 145

## **Epigraph**

“It’s all about relationships” – Dr. Kent Mahoney.



## INTRODUCTION

It seems to me that a paradigm shift is needed in ethics. Rather than beginning with the question of how we can stop people from being cruel, perhaps we need to begin with the question of when and why people care for each other.<sup>1</sup>

It is critically important that the Philosophy of Religion and philosophy in general continue to grapple with the conundrums of ethics. Although both fields of inquiry have a long noble history of works devoted to the topic of ethics, we, as human beings, persist in causing great harm to one another. The lack of justice both in religions and in civil societies continues, seemingly unabated at times. In my view, the debates as to how to overcome such shortcomings are changing in subtle ways. This thesis is an attempt to examine these ways.

The examination of concrete lived reality and the experience of human beings, promoted in the phenomenological tradition, and feminist understandings, are changing the dialogue within the field of ethics. It is not satisfactory, in my view, to ignore the lived experience of those suffering injustice and pain. Nor can we ignore the experiences of those who provide comfort and care to ease human despair and suffering. Further, it is not enough to produce detached examinations and pronouncements of morality. We live in relation with others and are related creatures in deep and enduring ways. Therefore, the

---

<sup>1</sup> Groenhout, Ruth. Connected Lives: Human Nature and An Ethics of Care. (London: Roman and Littlefield). 2004. p .13.

experience of this vital reality is a lens through which new thinking in moral philosophy and the Philosophy of Religion must pass through in order to maintain a contemporary relevance. Hence to this end, my dissertation is a contribution to this new scholarship.

In Chapter One, I introduce a discussion of the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. Emmanuel Levinas argues that ethics rather than ontology should be considered as ‘first philosophy’. The chapter includes the historical and phenomenological background of his works. It highlights the horrors and moral wrongdoings that occurred in the heart of Europe during the Holocaust. Further, I discuss the philosophy of Martin Heidegger because of his enormous impact on Levinas and phenomenology. This is a necessary step in order to understand Levinas’s complex and engaging work.

Chapter Two discusses Levinas’s philosophy of the other. The other for Levinas is another human being who has priority over the subject. He takes great effort to give a high priority to the other in order to avoid the other being absorbed into a subject’s ego. For Levinas, if the other is absorbed into the subject, or the ‘same’, totality results. Totality, for Levinas, is a system of power which can lead to violence and war. This other is later expressed by Levinas as face. A face commands and demands the subject to utter responsibility. This, he argues, is the ‘ethical event’. For me, this is perhaps the most engaging part of Levinas’s philosophy. He attempts to describe what occurs when a subject encounters an other who is suffering or vulnerable. I also emphasize Levinas’s discussion of the feminine. He views the feminine as the other *par excellence*. Large portions of Levinas’s works are devoted to the female motif. Yet, this is in large part ignored by Levinasian scholars outside of a very few feminist scholars. This lack in the secondary literature is misguided it seems to me. If Levinas believed it was important

enough to devote chapters to the subject, it means it has significance both to him personally and to his philosophy. This chapter will examine its relevance.

In Chapter Three, I examine Levinas's arguments for the extreme responsibility that he demands a subject has for the other. He argues further that the motif of the mother or the maternal represents the ideal responsible subject. Yet again, this is for the most part ignored in the secondary literature, but highlighted in this dissertation. I include Lisa Guenther's attempt to reconcile an account of maternity with Levinas's philosophy. It is an interesting account and helps the Levinasian reader to understand the depth and the meaning for Levinas of the extreme responsibility one should have for another. It also assists in understanding how interpersonal relationships are considered as being prior to individualism in Levinas's thinking. The chapter also includes a survey of Levinas's brief statements on justice. Clearly, the principal aim for Levinas is to establish the ideal that ethics is 'first philosophy'. His brevity regarding justice seems only to provide simple answers to those who ask about the many others in need. Something further is needed.

In Chapter Four, I explore the ethics of care as espoused by women care theorists. My concern is to see in what ways it can help with certain deficiencies in Levinas. To this end, it addresses the lack of women's voices in Levinas's philosophy and moral philosophy in general. The chapter discusses both early and contemporary care theorists. Generally, the attention of such literature is placed on the significance of relationships in ethical theorizing. Further, the ethics of care emphasizes that all of us have been or will be in need of care at some point in our lives. We are fragile creatures. I include the view that care ethics is a virtuous activity and not necessarily a new and successful moral

theory. I will also underline two main problems of the ethic: gender-based thinking and the lack of examination of the self.

In Chapter Five, I introduce Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutical theory and his idea of the ethical self. Paul Ricoeur is an important philosopher both in the field of Religious Studies and in Continental philosophy. His large body of work indicates a clear and persistent building process towards ethics and justice. In the chapter, I highlight his self-named 'little ethics'. This is Ricoeur's ethical framework. It is 'to live well with and for others in just institutions.' His ability to include justice as integral to an ethics of relations is both an interesting and important achievement. Also of interest is Ricoeur's addition of the idea of care or 'solicitude' as the core value in his ethical framework. Hence, it seems fitting to end the dissertation with a philosopher who addresses the pleadings of Levinas and is prepared to include 'solicitude' in his program that also aims to include justice. I consider that Ricoeur's work on relational ethics has extremely valuable insights to offer to contemporary discussions in moving from abstract theoretical formulas to caring and just conduct, especially in the health care professions. It is this aspect of my thesis that I consider an original contribution to the discipline of philosophy and ethics.

## CHAPTER ONE - LEVINAS

It may be rightly argued that all modes of philosophy have developed in a cultural, institutional, and gendered context. The work of Emmanuel Levinas (1905-1995) is no exception. The evolution and publication of his work is located within, and between, the extraordinary historical and academic events of the last century. His body of work is influenced both by his survival of the *Shoah* or Holocaust of World War II and by the phenomenological movement in Continental philosophy. Levinas's œuvre is a philosophical response to these events, as well as a sincere attempt to move western philosophy in a new direction, that is, to have ethics prioritized as 'first philosophy.' Hermeneutical awareness of these factors allows one greater understanding of the provocative rhetoric and meanings situated in Levinas's body of work. To this end, this chapter will examine the more salient features of such expressions which have some bearing on the direction of Levinas's philosophy. Firstly however, a brief biographical sketch is in order.

Emmanuel Levinas was born in December 1905 to a middle class Jewish family in Kovna, Lithuania, which, at the time, was under Russian rule. The nuclear family of three boys and their parents spoke Russian in the home and in their day-to-day public life. As a child, Emmanuel Levinas was taught the usual requisite biblical texts as well as the Modern Hebrew found in contemporary newspapers and books. In 1915, Levinas and his family re-located to Karkov, Ukraine, in order to escape the conflict of World War I and its subsequent social upheavals. While living in Karkov, he was accepted into the Gymnasium or *lycée*. During this period, Levinas became interested in Russian literature,

and indeed, his favourite novelists at the time were the Russian existentialists. When asked by François Poirié as to what led him to study philosophy, Levinas answers:

I think it was first of all my readings in Russian, specifically Pushkin, Lermontov, and Dostoevsky, above all Dostoevsky. The Russian novel, the novel of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, seemed to me to be very preoccupied with fundamental things. Books shot through with anxiety – with an essential religious anxiety – but readable as a search for the meaning of life.<sup>1</sup>

In 1920, after the war and the Russian Bolshevik revolution of 1917, Levinas and his family were able to return to Lithuania where he completed his studies at the *lycée*. In the Russian tradition at the time, there was no teaching of philosophy as such; however, the Russian *lycée* milieu contained an “abundance of metaphysical anxiety.”<sup>2</sup> Moreover, he was, in his own view, predisposed to philosophical thought because of his study of Jewish texts in his early years.<sup>3</sup> The influence of the Russian existential novelists and the general metaphysical leanings of pre-revolutionary Russian culture stayed with him throughout his life.

Levinas chose to attend the University of Strasbourg (1923) because it was the closest French city to Lithuania. Moreover, Strasbourg had a large and established Jewish

---

<sup>1</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel. “Interview with François Poirié,” in Is It Righteous To Be?: Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas. Jill Robbins, editor. (Stanford: Stanford University Press). 2001. p. 28.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 28.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. However, Levinas did not pursue Talmudic studies until well into his adulthood.

community.<sup>4</sup> During his early years in Strasbourg, Levinas taught himself French and began his life long study of philosophy. Towards the end of his early studies however, he became disillusioned with philosophy, as such, until a friend and fellow student, Mme. Gabrielle Pfeiffer, introduced him to Edmund Husserl's work, Logical Investigations (1910-1911).<sup>5</sup> The impact of this work on Levinas was enormous as seen in his remarks to Poirié:

I had the impression of gaining access to not yet another speculative construction but to a new possibility of thinking, to a new possibility of moving from one idea to another, different from deduction, induction, and dialectic, a new way of unfolding "concepts" beyond the Bergsonian appeal to the inspiration in intuition.<sup>6</sup>

Levinas then decided to go to Freiberg, Germany, (1928-1929) in order to take classes in phenomenology from Husserl and subsequently from Husserl's infamous younger colleague, Martin Heidegger. What follows is a brief examination of early phenomenology as such, then a more thorough discussion of the influence of Heidegger

---

<sup>4</sup> Malka, Salomon. Emmanuel Levinas: His Life and Legacy. Michael Kigel and Sonja M. Embree, translators. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press). 2002. p. 20.

<sup>5</sup> Emmanuel Levinas is credited with helping to bring the German phenomenological project to France. Levinas, along with Gabrielle Pfeiffer, translated Husserl's Cartesian Meditations into French. See: Husserl, Edmund. Méditations Cartésiennes. Introduction a la Phénoménologie. Traduit de l'allemand par Mlle Gabrielle Pfeiffer et M. Emmanuel Levinas. (Paris: Librairie Philosophique. J.Vinn). 1947.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 31.

on Levinas's philosophy. As Levinas remarks: "I went to see Husserl and found Heidegger." <sup>7</sup>(It is helpful to note here that Levinas quickly became disillusioned with Husserl's unyielding emphasis on intentionality. For Levinas this unrelenting emphasis on intentionality eventually leads to a "possession or grasping of its object."<sup>8</sup> As will be seen in the next chapter, the possession of an object or other is for Levinas, what philosophy must try to go beyond.)

### **Phenomenology**

Phenomenology may be best described as a philosophical practice rather than a rigid system of philosophy. Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) inaugurated this new movement in western philosophy, that is, the phenomenological movement.<sup>9</sup> Initially, phenomenology focused on the concrete, lived experience of the subject, or, more succinctly, phenomenology attempted to describe the objective phenomenon as it

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 30.

<sup>8</sup> Moran, Dermot. Introduction to Phenomenology. (London: Routledge). 2000. p. 328.

<sup>9</sup> Husserl is not the first philosopher to consider the quandaries related to 'phenomena' (the appearance of an object). Joseph Kockelman notes that Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel in his book: Phenomenology of Mind (1807) "wanted solely to consider knowledge as it appears to consciousness." Joseph Kockelman. Phenomenology: The Philosophy of Edmund Husserl and Its Interpretation. (New York: Doubleday). 1967 p. 24.



presents itself to a subject's consciousness.<sup>10</sup> The practice includes not only the rational cognitive process, but also the experiential aspect of a subject's existence.

Husserl's goal in his new philosophy was to outline *scientifically* how the subject can know the object or phenomenon. He put forth the thesis that philosophy could become a science in a manner similar to the mathematical theories that were developing in Europe and abroad in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>11</sup> Husserl proposed that to understand the object, one must carefully examine the actual experience that one has of the 'object.' More clearly, this means that knowledge of a phenomenon, or of an object, is constituted in subjectivity. Philosophically then, knowledge or meaning is not to be found in the rational mind alone (as in the Cartesian Cogito) nor in the object alone (empiricism,) but in the relationship between the two. This idea, or proposal, foreshadows Levinas's initial understandings of the relationship to the other.<sup>12</sup> For

---

<sup>10</sup> A phenomenon, in common understandings, refers to a fact or an object as it appears to the senses.

<sup>11</sup> Joseph Kockelman explains that Husserl wanted to have absolute valid knowledge of things. The natural sciences have rigorous methods to assist in obtaining knowledge of the natural world. Hence, Husserl develops what he considers a rigorous philosophical method to assist in obtaining absolute knowledge of objects. See Kockelman, pp. 26-27.

<sup>12</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel. On Escape. De l'évasion. Bettina Bergo, translator. (Stanford: Stanford University Press). 2003.

Husserl, every act of consciousness or experience is thus of something and is intended as an object of consciousness (intentionality).<sup>13</sup>

Further, Husserl proposed that consciousness is open to the world and therefore, knowledge and ideas are formulated in an interactive participation of the subject and its intended object, or, in other words, there is an interactive relationship between the subject and the considered object. In order to demonstrate this thesis, Husserl developed a philosophical method of inquiry, which he named the phenomenological method. Husserl believed his phenomenological method enables philosophers to reach knowledge of the ‘thing in itself’ or the essence (*eidos*) of an object.<sup>14</sup>

The phenomenological method begins with a shift away from what Husserl termed “a natural attitude.” According to Husserl, the subject’s natural attitude contains the scientific, philosophical, cultural and everyday presuppositions he or she holds towards the object. Maurice Natanson explains further:

Major examples of philosophical presuppositions include what Husserl calls the ‘general thesis’ of the natural attitude: the tacit faith ordinary men have in the reality of their world, the assumption that the shared world has a natural history – a causal basis – that we can reasonably expect the world to continue in the future in much the same way it has in the past, and that value, symbolic significance, aesthetic worth, and religious

---

<sup>13</sup> Kockelman, Joseph. Ibid. p. 32.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p. 80.

commitments are elements of, or associated with the mundane world they transcend.<sup>15</sup>

The phenomenological method developed by Husserl involves a series of reflective reductions. It begins with the suspension of this natural attitude of the unreflective and unconscious assumptions.<sup>16</sup> He names this suspension as the phenomenological *epoché*. This is the first reduction of the phenomenological method.<sup>17</sup> The natural attitude is thus not eliminated but temporarily bracketed off by the phenomenological subject or knower. A subject is then enabled to let go of his or her preconceptions and reflect on the object (*phenomenon*) at hand as it presents itself to consciousness. A second reduction then takes place. The second reduction (*eidetic reduction*) is the phase when one intuits the essence of the object. However, *eidetic reduction* does not produce an immediate knowledge of an essence. Rather, it is a process of imagination and abstraction from many individual perceptions of the object.<sup>18</sup> Finally, the reflections and reductions can be refined in such a way as to communicate the meaning or essence of the phenomenon to others.

A major problem arising with the two reductions is that there are other subjects who may, and indeed most likely, have intuited a different essence. Hence, there is no

---

<sup>15</sup> Natanson, Maurice. Edmund Husserl: Philosopher of Infinite Tasks. (Evanston: North Western University Press). 1973. p. 12.

<sup>16</sup> Moran, Dermot. Introduction to Phenomenology. (London: Routledge). 2000. p. 11.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Natanson, Maurice. Ibid. pp. 65-68.

one absolute truth or essence but rather a variety of intuitions. This introduces the issue of inter-subjective communication and the problem of other subjects within such an idealistic framework. It is a major problem for Husserl. It is also one that is crucial for Levinas, as he will in time, criticize it and move beyond Husserl. In one way, it could be argued that this phenomenological method espoused by Husserl is only self-reflective. As a result it lacks an ethic, that is, it lacks any discussion on the moral responsibilities of a subject towards another person. Individuals can appear as merely objects among other objects that can be reduced to the subject's 'gaze' or '*apperception*,' as Husserl terms it.

Dermot Moran explains Husserl's approach on the matter:

When I experience another person, I *apperceive* them as having the kind of experiences I would have if I was over there (*in space*). On the basis of these kinds of pairing experiences (*Paarung*, CM: 51) I experience the other as another body like myself.<sup>19</sup>

We can empathize with other subjects as we are similar in our human empirical appearance but the process of inter-subjective ethical relations with others is absent in Husserl's abstract method. Nonetheless, Levinas is deeply indebted to Husserl. In an interview with Salomon Malka he remarks:

I studied Husserl and phenomenology a lot. In phenomenology -I still think so today - there is a method for philosophy. There is a reflection upon oneself which wants to be radical. It does not only take into consideration that which is intended by consciousness, but also searches for that which has been dissimulated in the intending of the object. From this moment on, the object in phenomenology is reconstituted in its world and in all the forgotten intentions of the thinking that absorbs itself into it. It is a manner of thinking concretely. There is in this manner a rigor,

---

<sup>19</sup> Moran, Dermot. Ibid. p. 177.

but also an appeal to listen acutely for what is implicit. Even when one doesn't apply the phenomenological method according to the recommendations by Husserl, one can call oneself a student of this master by special attention to what is allusive in thinking.<sup>20</sup>

Richard Cohen cogently describes Husserlian phenomenology as: "the attempt to faithfully describe the origin and constitution of reality in all its manifold and interrelated layers of meaning, without presuppositions".<sup>21</sup> Although Levinas is intellectually motivated by this new understanding that recognizes the presuppositions of a subject can influence knowledge of an object, it is Martin Heidegger who challenges Levinas to pursue phenomenology in a new direction of philosophical understanding.

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) not only had a profound influence on Levinas's philosophy, but he also arguably transformed the phenomenological project of the twentieth century by attempting to radically change the focus of philosophy. Indeed, according to Levinas, Heidegger's major work Being and Time (*Sein and Zeit*, 1927) is one of the great works of philosophy alongside the works by Plato and Kant.<sup>22</sup> In a 1982 interview with Philippe Nemo, Levinas remarks:

---

<sup>20</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel. "Interview with Salomon Malka" in Is it Righteous to be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas. Jill Robbins, editor. (Stanford: Stanford University Press). 2001. pp. 93-94.

<sup>21</sup> Cohen, Richard A. in Emmanuel Levinas. Time and the Other. Richard A. Cohen, translator. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press). 1987. p. 2.

<sup>22</sup> Heidegger, Martin. Being and Time. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, translators. (San Francisco: Harper and Row). 1962.

I discovered in fact *Sein und Zeit*, which people around me read. Very early I had a great admiration for this book. It is one of the finest books in the history of philosophy – I say this after years of reflection. One of the finest among four or five others...<sup>23</sup>

In this seminal book, Heidegger brings the *situated* subject into philosophical discussion and debate. This subject is named by Heidegger as *Dasein* or more literally: ‘being-there.’ It is the subject or knower as he or she is situated in the world. Heidegger’s scholarly goal is to return philosophy to its original field of inquiry; that is, to question of the meaning of Being itself. He wants to introduce a discussion on what is the meaning of human existence outside of theological and religious inquiries. Hence, Heidegger rejects the idea of a transcendent absolute Being put forth by Greek philosophy from Socrates onwards. Indeed, he names this understanding of Being (*Sein*) as a false notion of ontology or an ‘onto-theology’. This is because, in time, the ‘Being’ of Greek philosophy became identified with the God of western theology. ‘Being’, in this way, came to have divine qualities. Therefore knowledge of ‘Being’ itself can only be attained through a metaphysical mode of knowing. George Steiner explains: “Most stringently Martin Heidegger rejects what he calls ‘the onto-theological;’ this is to say the attempts to found a philosophy of being or epistemology of consciousness on some kind of rationality or intuitively postulated theological basis.”<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel. *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*. Richard A. Cohen. translator. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press). 1985. p. 37.

<sup>24</sup> Steiner, George. *Martin Heidegger*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press). 1987. p. xvii.

In this way, Heidegger calls for a new secular ontology; one that is based solely on the concrete lived human experience. Steiner explains further: “an authentic ontology such as he develops it, is a ‘thinking of’ human existential immanence whose referral to being, to the primordial, naked fact and truth of essence has no theological basis.”<sup>25</sup> For Heidegger, the only method that allows for an authentic ontology undertakes an analysis of the moods and experiences of *Dasein*, the human subject as existing in relationship to the world or as being-in the-world. Heidegger’s most notable work, Being and Time (*Sein und Zeit*), is at its fundamental core a form of phenomenological reflection on human existence. It is a progressive analysis of the moods and experiences of *Dasein* in relation to ‘Being.’ Thus, it is an existential analysis of the human being. It differs from Husserl’s phenomenology in so far as, for Heidegger, there is no bracketing off of the world or *epochè* (see above). Rather, Heidegger’s Being-in-the-world describes the existence of *Dasein* in the world such as it is in human sciences.

In this work, Heidegger is unwavering in his attempt to portray human existence as concrete and rooted in the world. He argues that we are thrown (*Gerworfen*), without choice, into the world as it is. Steiner remarks:

There is nothing mystical or metaphysical about this proposition. It is a primordial banality which metaphysical speculation has long overlooked. The world into which we are thrown, without choice, with no previous knowledge (*pace* Plato), was there before us and will be there after us.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p. xvii.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. p. 87.

This fact of existence or ‘facticity’ (*Faktizitat*) is for Heidegger the reality of everydayness. Further, what Heidegger is attempting by this maneuver is to overcome the traditional subject/object dichotomy. According to Heidegger’s argument, ‘Being’ is part of, and/or within the subject rather than the subject being regarded as separate from existence. Hence, the duality of subject and *Sein* (Being) itself is overcome in the Heideggerian concept of *Dasein*.

Heidegger argues further that thinking of the meaning of *Sein* in relation to *Dasein* is the essential task of philosophy. This becomes the notion of ‘first philosophy’ or Heidegger’s own new version of ontology, beyond ontotheology. Moreover, for Heidegger, thinking of the meaning of Being (*Sein*) takes place against the horizon of human time (*Zeit*). Being (*Sein*) is already before *Dasein*’s existence and continues after *Dasein*’s death. However, for *Dasein*, existence outside of the lifespan of the subject has no meaning and therefore, it is non-sensical to speculate what Being (*Sein*) is in itself. This conclusion then leads to the fundamental issue of meaning for Heidegger: it is that human beings are mortal. Human beings exist fundamentally as beings-towards-death. Because this mortality is a fact of “being-in-the-world,” Heidegger posits that *Dasein*’s fundamental mood is inevitably one of anxiety (*angst*). In addition, Heidegger argues that *Dasein*’s *angst* results from understanding that emptiness, or non-being (death) lies at the core of human awareness.

A human being as *Dasein* is of course most anxious to avoid non-being, i.e. the end of existence, or one’s own death. Therefore, *Dasein* respects Being (*Sein*) as such and has a concern for, or care (*Sorge*), for its own well being. More importantly for Heidegger, the knowing, understanding and acceptance of one’s own death is the only



way to begin to live an authentic existence. For Heidegger, the authentic *Dasein* is then able to realize ‘one’s own most possibilities.’ George Steiner explains:

*Dasein* can come to grasp its own wholeness and the meaningfulness that is indivisible from integrating only when it faces its “no-longer-being-there” (*sein Nicht-mehr-da-sein*). So long as *Dasein* has not come to its own end, it remains incomplete. It has not completed its *Gänze* (“entirety”). *Dasein* has access to the meaning of being - this is an immensely important point - because and only because that being is finite. Authentic being is therefore a being-toward-death or *Sein-zum-Tode*...<sup>27</sup>

The essential task of *Dasein* is to grasp the full meaning of existence, that existence is finite. In other words, to be authentically who we are, we must integrate the understanding that death completes our existence. Although this is *Dasein*’s essential task, living in the world includes many distractions that may prevent living authentically. Chief among these distractions is the fact that human beings are not alone in the world. Heidegger argues that the others, who live alongside of *Dasein*, can distract *Dasein* from this essential task.

Heidegger devotes a section of his work to the concern involved when one exists as being-in-the-world with others (*Mitsein*). *Dasein* meet others environmentally, that is, one shares the space of the world and therefore has an existential proximity with others. Heidegger writes:

One’s own *Dasein*, like *Dasein*-with of Others, is encountered proximally and for the most part in terms of the with-world with which we are environmentally concerned. When *Dasein* is absorbed in the world of its concern – that is, at the same time, in

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p. 102.

its Being-with towards Others – it is not itself. Who is it, then, who has taken over Being as everyday Being-with-one another?<sup>28</sup>

Heidegger names and conceptualizes ‘others in the world’ as the ‘They’ (*Das Mann*), which can absorb the authenticity of *Dasein*. There are no distinctions in the ‘They.’ rather it is a general publicness (*die Offentlichkeit*) which prevents *Dasein* from his or her possibilities by a levelling down, to averageness. Hence, the ‘they’ indicates the common traditions and ideas. It is the so-called ‘herd-mentality’. Heidegger cautions us that the existence of the others in the world can lead to fallenness (*verfallen*) from a state of authenticity into a state of inauthenticity (*uneigentlich*) if one is not careful. Indeed as Heidegger argues:

In this inconspicuousness and uncertainability, the real dictatorship of the ‘they’ is unfolded. We take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as they (man) take pleasure; we read, see and judge about literature and art as they see and judge; likewise we shrink back from the ‘great mass’ as they shrink back; we find shocking what they find shocking. The ‘they’ which is nothing definite and which all are, though not as the sum, prescribes the kind of Being of everydayness.<sup>29</sup>

Nonetheless, although Heidegger cautions one to be on guard against the influence of the ‘they,’ he also recognizes that individuals experience concern for others in the world as they have concern for their own existence and progress towards authenticity.

Heidegger, however, does not use care or concern for others in the sense of a certain responsibility towards another’s *Dasein*. Heidegger distinguishes the care towards

---

<sup>28</sup> Heidegger, Martin. Ibid. p. 163.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. p. 164.

others (*Fürsorge*) as ‘solicitude’ towards other existents who are also in the world.<sup>30</sup> This type of care or concern for others Heidegger considers as “ontological care” in the sense of his new ontology (see above), which is a care based on how others affect *Dasein*’s progress to authenticity. It is not a care based on a moral principle such as that found in Kantian deontological ethics or a moral principle directed by religious doctrine. Rather, Heidegger’s concern or care for others is for *Dasein*’s benefit in order to establish that *Dasein* exists in a civil society. Hence, the axiom, ‘I will care for you if you will care for me when I am in need,’ is based on the self-interested aspect of *Dasein*.

Heidegger recognizes that human beings are all negligent in their care and concern for others in their environment. Most often, the sufferings of others, such as the poor living on the streets, the sick and the bereft, are ignored. In order to remedy this deficit of care, social welfare agencies are created to meet this societal need. Heidegger writes: ‘Welfare work’, as a factual social arrangement, is grounded in *Dasein*’s state of *Being* as “*Being-with* [*Mitsein*]”.<sup>31</sup> This type of concern or social care is, importantly for Heidegger, less of a priority than the care one has for one’s own existence, and *Being* itself or *Sein*.

In addition, Heidegger puts forward the argument that care for others as such can be patronizing and thus cause harm to the other’s autonomy and, as a consequence, remove the other’s dignity. Over-caring is negative, destructive, and inauthentic. He explains:

---

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p. 158.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

This kind of solicitude takes over for the other that with which he is to concern himself. The other is thus thrown out of his position, he steps back so that afterwards, when the matter is attended to, he can either take it over to something finished and at his disposal, or disburden himself of it completely. In such solicitude the other can become one who is dominated and dependant, even if this domination is a tacit one and remains hidden from him.<sup>32</sup>

Heidegger cautions people against a paternalistic care for others in the world. This type of paternalism may prevent an individual from undertaking his or her existential struggle for authenticity.

It is clear that for Heidegger, the purpose of his phenomenological analysis of *Dasein* is to present his understanding of what it means to live an authentic existence and thus is not a phenomenological examination of an inter-subjective ethic. His goal is principally to create a new ontology that is able to provide a philosophical approach that examines the meaning of existence for *Dasein*. Nonetheless, it also could be argued that his discussion of care is a minor foray into ethics as such. One may also argue that Heidegger promotes an ethic of care in order to have a harmonious world that will allow *Dasein* to flourish. Heidegger understands human flourishing as realizing one's own possibilities or authenticity. Paul Ricoeur finds Heidegger's idea of care lacking in ethics. As a consequence he will modify and expand on Heidegger's idea of care to include caring for another in an ethical relationship. This will be discussed in Chapter Five.

Emmanuel Levinas frequently remarks on the impact that Heidegger has had on his work and scholarly life. John Manning suggests in his book, Interpreting Otherwise than Heidegger: Emmanuel Levinas's Ethics as First Philosophy, that although Heidegger

---

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

has influenced Levinas work, Levinas is not a disciple of Heidegger. Manning writes: “Indebted as he (Levinas) is to Heidegger, he is no Heideggerian.”<sup>33</sup> One major reason for this argument put forward by Manning is Martin Heidegger’s active involvement with the Nazi party during World War II, which alienated Levinas from Heidegger.

Rüdiger Safranski provides a detailed examination of Heidegger’s support of National Socialism and Hitler in his book: Martin Heidegger: Between Good and Evil.<sup>34</sup> By examining Heidegger’s speeches and other written letters to fellow philosophers of the day, Safranski argues that Heidegger was not just enthralled with Hitler and the new Germany, he believed it was this moment in history that could restore Being (*Sein*), and his new ontology to its rightful place. It would finally mean an end to the Greek inheritance and the subsequent history of western philosophy. Safranski writes, and quotes from Heidegger:

In point of fact, Heidegger interprets the revolution as a collective breakout from the caves of false consolations and comfortable meanings – certainties. A nation becomes authentic, it arises and asks the disturbing question of being: Why is there something and not, rather, nothing? It defiantly surrenders itself to the power of “Dasein-nature, history, language; the Volk (people), custom, poetry, thought, belief; sickness, madness, death; law, economy, technology” – in the knowledge that they do not provide ultimate support but lead out of the darkness, uncertainty and adventure.<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> Manning, Robert. Interpreting Otherwise than Heidegger: Emmanuel Levinas’s Ethics as First Philosophy. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press). 1993. p. 6.

<sup>34</sup> Safranski, Rüdiger. Martin Heidegger: Between Good and Evil. Ewald Osers, translator. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press). 2002.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. p. 245.

Safranski interprets Heidegger's words as indicating that only the German version of *Dasein* has the resoluteness and decisiveness to bring about the new ontology, and subsequently a new mode of understanding Being (*Sein*).

Heidegger's involvement with the Nazi movement became publically evident when he accepted the position as Rector of Freiburg University in 1933. It was in his acceptance speech that he publicly announced his support for Hitler and the Nazi state. Heidegger also supported the dismissal of all Jews at the universities in Germany.<sup>36</sup> In 1933, Edmund Husserl, Heidegger's teacher and mentor, was also dismissed. Although Heidegger sent Husserl flowers to appease him and offer a modest apology, he did nothing to stop the firing of Husserl and other Jews or opponents of the Third Reich.<sup>37</sup> Heidegger resigned as Rector the following year as he was disappointed in the political support he received both from academic circles and the German Nazi state.<sup>38</sup> However, he never recanted his support for the Nazi state nor did he ever comment on the atrocities of the Holocaust. In George Steiner's view, the fact that after the war, when the extent of the Holocaust and death camps became widely known, Heidegger never commented on his involvement nor apologized, is more disturbing than his time as a member of the Nazi party.<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. See chapters 13-14.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. p. 254.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. p. 279.

<sup>39</sup> Steiner, Martin. Ibid. pp. xxvii-xxviii.

Nonetheless, Continental philosophy owes a great debt to Heidegger and his argument for a new way and place to discover philosophical understandings of *Dasein* as being-in-the-world. Levinas appreciated that Heidegger established that a place of new understandings is to be located in *Dasein*'s concrete experience in the world. Although Levinas spent much of his scholarly energy refuting aspects of Heidegger's Being and Time, he acknowledges his great debt to Heidegger. In an interview with Phillip Nemo, which took place in 1981, Levinas is enthusiastic about the discovery of Heidegger's new ontology in the history of philosophy. He remarks:

With Heidegger, "verbality" was awakened in the word being, what is event in it, the "happening" [sic] of being. It is as if things and all that is "set a style of being," "made a profession of being" [sic]. Heidegger accustomed us to this verbal sonority. This reeducation of our ear is unforgettable, even if banal today.<sup>40</sup>

Levinas's admiration for Heidegger was for his radical work in Being and Time. However, Levinas became very much alienated from Heidegger because of Heidegger's later sympathies with the Nazi state. Levinas, as a Jew, could not forgive Heidegger for his Nazi involvement. This is because Levinas lost most of his family to the Nazi death camps. He himself was held as a prisoner of war from 1940-1945 in a camp in Germany's heartland. (The German captors did not send him to a death camp as he was enlisted as a French Officer.)<sup>41</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel. In Nemo. Ibid. p. 38.

<sup>41</sup> Malka, Saloman. Ibid. p. 65.

In 1935, Levinas published an essay in *Recherché Philosophiques* entitled “De L’évasion” (“On Escape”).<sup>42</sup> In this small existential essay, written in his youth, Levinas argues that the subject has a foundational need, or more succinctly, an existential urge to escape rather than engage with Being or *Sein*. He renames Being as the *il y a*, (“the there is”). This is Levinas’s first move away from Heidegger. Levinas writes:

The elementary truth that there is being – a being that has value and weight – is revealed at a depth that measures its brutality and its seriousness. It is not that the sufferings with which life threatens to render it displeasing; rather it is because the ground of suffering consists of impossibility of interrupting it, and of an acute feeling of being held fast (*rivé*).<sup>43</sup>

In later interview with Philippe Nemo, Levinas again describes the *il y a*:

It is something resembling what one hears when one puts an empty shell close to the ear, as if the emptiness were full, as if the silence were a noise. It is something one can also feel when one thinks that even if there were nothing, the fact that “there is” is undeniable, not that there is this or that; but the very scene of being is open: there is. In the absolute emptiness that one can imagine before creation – there is.<sup>44</sup>

Levinas also likens this concrete experience of *il y a* as an overwhelming sense of being to a feeling or sensation of malaise, nausea and fatigue. For Levinas it is an unbearable burden from which we yearn to escape. However, in no way does Levinas liken this need to escape as a wish for death or non-existence. He explains:

---

<sup>42</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel. *On Escape: De l’évasion*. Bettina Bergo, translator. (Stanford: Stanford University Press). 2003.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. p. 52.

<sup>44</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel. In Nemo. Ibid. p. 48.



A quest for a way out, this is in no sense nostalgia for death because death is not an exit, just as it is not a solution. The ground of this then is constituted – if one will pardon the neologism – by the need for *excedence*”.<sup>45</sup>

The term *excedence* is meant to portray a way out of the self and its relation to Being. ‘*Excedence*’ is a play on the word ‘transcendence’ which embodies the notion of beyond one-self, often referenced as the relationship between the one-self and the divine. Hence, for Levinas, *excedence* is to get out of the self, or ego and its relationship to Being. He argues further:

Existence is an absolute that is asserted without reference to anything else. It is identity...In the identity of the I (*moi*), the identity of being reveals its nature as enchainment, for it appears in the form of suffering and invites us to escape. Thus, escape is the need to get out of oneself, that is to break that most radical and unalterably binding of chains, the fact that the I (*moi*) is oneself.<sup>46</sup>

The escape from being is a small phenomenological attempt by Levinas to break away, perhaps even to escape, if you will allow, from Heidegger’s notion of Being (*Sein*). Rather than a fundamental mood of anxiety (*angst*), because an individual faces his own mortality in existence, as posited by Heidegger, Levinas describes a fundamental mood of nausea and fatigue because it seems that we exist and cannot escape from Being. In pre-war Germany, when Heidegger was embracing the resolute German *Dasein* and his new ontology, Levinas, on the other hand, was writing, albeit, metaphorically, that there was

---

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. p. 54.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. p. 55.

no escape. Nonetheless, the goal of Levinas in On Escape is to find a way out of Heidegger's *Sein*, which as Levinas argues, is overwhelming and is to be refuted.

In 1947, Levinas published his work: Existence and Existents, which he had started before the outbreak of the war and completed while he was a prisoner of war.<sup>47</sup> This essay is both psychologically and philosophically a further break away from Heidegger's argument that Being and ontology per se should be considered as the 'First Philosophy.' Levinas writes at the beginning of Existence and Existents:

If at the beginning of our reflections are in large measure inspired by the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, where we find the concept of ontology and of the relationship which man sustains with Being, they are also governed by a profound need to leave the climate of that philosophy, and by the conviction that we cannot leave it for a philosophy that would be pre-Heideggerian.<sup>48</sup>

On the one hand, Levinas accepts Heidegger's radical idea that only through *Dasein* can one possibly understand the meaning of *Sein* yet, on the other hand, he rejects Heidegger's understanding and prioritization of *Sein* as such. He does this by a more in-depth analysis of a person's relationship to the *il y a* in a discussion of the event of conscious awareness of the 'there is'. He names this event as the *Hypostasis*.

*Hypostasis* may best be evaluated through Levinas's phenomenological examination of the state of insomnia. In the experience of insomnia, one becomes acutely aware of the *Dasein* of *Sein*. An individual is not focused on any object in the past or the

---

<sup>47</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel. Existence and Existents. Alphonso Lingis, translator. (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Pub.). 1995.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. p. 19.

future, the event is just of oneself and the awareness of existence. The individual would like to escape into sleep or unconsciousness, but he/she cannot, as the individual is riveted to the event. Levinas explains:

The impossibility of rending the invading, inevitable and anonymous rustling of existence manifests itself particularly in certain times when sleep evades our appeal. One watches on when there is nothing to watch and despite the absence of any reason for remaining watchful. The bare fact of presence is oppressive; one is held by being, held to be. One is detached from any object, any content, yet there is a presence.<sup>49</sup>

In this passage, Levinas describes an unsettling awareness of the *il y a*. This passage describes that an individual is vigilant during insomnia or, as he states, “one is wakeful and consciousness participates in the wakefulness.”<sup>50</sup> Further, Levinas argues that not only is one watchful, but that also one has the experience of being watched, “...it is the night itself that watches. It watches.”<sup>51</sup> The ‘it’ is the *il y a*.’ Moreover, importantly for Levinas, being or existence precedes or pre-exists the Hypostasis or consciousness of being. This is in a sharp contrast to Heidegger’s closed system of ontology, which begins with *Dasein* and presupposes an existing world. For Levinas existence, being, the *il y a* or *Sein*, is not dependent on the posited subject and being itself. The ‘there is’ is experienced as pre-existing the subject. One exists before one is aware of existence; existence as *Sein* precedes the subject. But Levinas views this as a burden that one must move beyond. His later works demonstrate his attempts to do this.

---

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. p. 65

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. p. 66

<sup>51</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel. In Malka. Ibid. p. 66.

In 1947, Levinas published Time and the Other (1947), which is his first in-depth examination of ethics as ‘First Philosophy,’ and his ultimate departure from Heideggerian ontology. This and his subsequent publications on ethics will be the subject of the next chapter in this dissertation. But at this stage of life there was a break in Levinas’s philosophical writings, as he did not publish from 1947-1951. It was during this period that he concentrated on the study of the Talmud under the tutelage of Rabbi Chouchani. He also worked as the Director of the École Normal National Israélite Orientale (ENIO) in Paris. Levinas immersed himself in Jewish thought and culture during these years. His biographer, Salomon Malka, quotes Levinas: “After Auschwitz, I had the impression that in taking on the directorship of the École Normal National Israélite Orientale, I was responding to a historical calling. It was my little secret....”<sup>52</sup> Throughout these and subsequent years, Levinas always attempted to separate his religious writings and his philosophical musings and publications. Nonetheless, as we shall see, this proved impossible for Levinas.

Emmanuel Levinas worked and studied amidst great changes in the world of philosophy. In his many now published interviews, Levinas discusses the influence of other scholars who were often in conversation with him in Paris after the war. He states his admiration for such thinkers as Jean Wahl, Martin Buber, Gabriel Marcel, Merleau-Ponty, and Franz Rosenzweig.<sup>53</sup> Nonetheless, it is Edmund Husserl and Martin

---

<sup>52</sup> Malka, Salomon. Ibid. p. 84.

<sup>53</sup> See Levinas, Emmanuel. Outside the Subject. Michael Smith, translator. (Stanford: Stanford University Press). 1987. and Proper Names. Michael Smith, translator.

Heidegger who had the most profound impact on Levinas's scholarly thought. Most significantly however, Levinas was never able to leave the horror of the 'great catastrophe.' He was in many ways driven to correct what he saw as Heidegger's great failing in Being and Time which was his reification of Being over ethics as 'first philosophy.' One must recognize the fundamental and profound sense of betrayal Levinas must have experienced upon learning that his admired teacher was a member of the Nazi party. The atrocities and horrors of the Nazi genocide occurred in the heart of Western Europe. In Levinas's view, western philosophy and political thought failed to halt the Holocaust. As a consequence, Levinas attempted to introduce a philosophy, which he hoped would not allow this to happen again. Thus, one cannot separate these events from the pleading by Levinas to consider ethics as 'first philosophy' rather than Heideggerian new ontology or the Cartesian Cognito. For Levinas, it is now one's own relationship to the other human being that must be considered a priority in western philosophy, not one's relation to Being. It is Levinas's attempts to propose ethics as 'first philosophy' that will be discussed in the next two chapters.

---

(Stanford: Stanford University Press). 1996. In these two books of essays, Levinas comments on the influence of certain thinkers on his body of work.

## CHAPTER TWO - THE OTHER

“The essential problem is: can we speak of an absolute command after Auschwitz? Can we speak of morality after the failure of morality?”<sup>1</sup>

“Everyone will readily agree that it is of highest importance to know whether or not we are duped by morality.”<sup>2</sup>

The previous chapter indicates that the two major influences on Levinas’s body of work are: 1) phenomenology, most notably Martin Heidegger’s phenomenological project in his seminal text, Being and Time,<sup>3</sup> and 2) the *Shoah* or the Holocaust of World War II. Levinas’s philosophical disagreement with Martin Heidegger is that essentially, ontology must not take precedence in Western philosophy as such. Rather, it is ‘ethics,’ the subject’s relation to the other, which must take the first priority in all philosophical

---

<sup>1</sup> Wright, Tamara, Peter Hughes, and Alison Ainler. “The Paradox of Morality: An Interview with Emmanuel Levinas.” In The Provocation of Emmanuel Levinas: Rethinking the Other. R. Bernasconi and D. Woods, editors. (London: Routledge). 1988. p. 176.

<sup>2</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel. Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority. Alphonso Lingis, translator. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press). 2000. p. 21.

<sup>3</sup> Heidegger, Martin. Being and Time. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, translators. (San Francisco: Harper and Row). 1962.

discourse and examinations. His poignant and provocative argument is difficult to disagree with, as the utter and tragic failure of Western moral philosophy in preventing the atrocities of the Holocaust that occurred in the heart of Europe cannot be denied. Although his arguments are of philosophical importance, the essential appeal of his argument is to the human moral impulse and sensibilities in the human experience. According to Levinas, our concern for others is our most human responsibility. Richard Cohen writes: “Levinas will show that nothing is more serious than morality. For at stake in morality is our highest individual and collective vocation, the very humanity of the human.”<sup>4</sup> This chapter will introduce Levinas’s treatise on ethics. It will also introduce Levinas’s discussion on the other in the inter-subjective relationship. The chapter will end with an examination of Levinas’s discussion of the feminine as the other *par excellence*.

Levinas’s treatise on ethics as ‘first philosophy’ is contained within his two major post-war texts: Totality and Infinity (1961),<sup>5</sup> and Otherwise Than Being: Or Beyond Essence (1974).<sup>6</sup> These two works are quite complex, repetitive in argument and frequently obtuse. Dermot Moran writes:

---

<sup>4</sup> Cohen, Richard. Ethics, Exegesis and Philosophy: Interpretation After Levinas. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). 2007. pp.1-2.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel. Otherwise Than Being: Or Beyond Essence. Alphonso Lingis, translator. (Duquesne University Press: Pittsburgh). 2000.

...its opaque, metaphorical, inexact style of writing inevitably means that there can never be an authoritative interpretation of his philosophy. It is impossible to 'master it.' Perhaps this is Levinas's intention. The exact status of his discourse is never clear.<sup>7</sup>

Further, if one approaches these texts with the goal of discerning a traditional ethical theory or framework, one will quickly become frustrated by Levinas's various complex definitions, paradoxes and hyperbole. It is difficult to ascertain what exactly is his ethical orientation. Bettina Bergo in her entry in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy writes:

If ethics means rationalist self-legislation and freedom (deontology), the calculation of happiness (utilitarianism), or the cultivation of virtues (virtue ethics), then Levinas's philosophy is not an ethics.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, Levinas himself states: "My task does not consist in constructing ethics; I only try to find its meaning."<sup>9</sup> He does not wish for his work to become a philosophical theory or a normative work. This would be the very issue or position that he argues against.

In the traditional ethical theories of the west, the cognitive understandings of ethical encounters are based on the subject's interpretations and assumptions of the other's disposition. In determining how one should act towards another, traditional ethical theories are based on universal principles and duties determined either by

---

<sup>7</sup> Moran, Dermot. Introduction to Phenomenology. (London: Routledge). 2000. p. 351.

<sup>8</sup> Bergo, Bettina. "Emmanuel Levinas" in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. 2007.  
<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/levinas/>

<sup>9</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel. Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo. Richard A. Cohen, translator. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press:). 1985. p. 90.



religious laws or philosophical reason. This is evident in, for example, the Kantian duties proposed in the categorical imperative. In defiance of these theories, Levinas attempts to formulate an argument that the priority of ethics and moral responsibilities can be shown to be experientially true. The initial ethics project proposed by Levinas, which is described below, is in fact an attempt to bring into philosophical discourse experience of a subject's encounter with another person. As well, and perhaps most significantly, Levinas wants to help to bring to awareness a subject's moral responsibilities for the other, which result from this encounter. Initially, however, Levinas continues his argument against Heideggerian ontology by naming such a philosophy as a 'closed totality.'

The title of Totality and Infinity: An Essay in Exteriority<sup>10</sup> juxtaposes totality, a closed and final system of thought, with an open-ended idea of infinity, an open-ended construct with limitless, inherent possibilities. Totality, for Levinas, is an "egoist spontaneity of the same," which may result in totalitarian regimes and war, as, according to Levinas, totality is a system of power.<sup>11</sup> It is a system power over the one(s) who are absorbed into the identity of the same, since totality, which is complete and all encompassing, has no tolerance for difference. Indeed, Levinas wishes to base his entire project on this argument. He writes in the preface of the text:

It will proceed to distinguish between the idea of totality and the idea of infinity and affirm the philosophical primacy of the idea of infinity. It will recount how infinity is produced in the

---

<sup>10</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel. Ibid. 1961.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p.43.

relationship of the same with the other and how the particular and the personal, which are unsurpassable as it were, to magnetize the very field in which the production of infinity is enacted.<sup>12</sup>

Hence, Levinas wants to leave immediately the ‘climate’ of Heideggerian ontology with *Dasein*’s enclosed interiority of authenticity (sameness) and to instead focus on a subject’s existence as openness to his or her relationship with the other (*l’autre*).<sup>13</sup>

This is a significant move by Levinas. He regards the philosophical category of ethics, as received in the western tradition, as based on the concept of sameness not of otherness or alterity. The problematic with sameness is that it may lead to a reduction of the other to one’s own terms of reference. Thus, the other is subsidiary to one’s own interest. Diane Perpich explains a further Levinasian argument based on the ego’s need to transcend being:

For the Western moral tradition, it has been most often sameness rather than otherness or difference that matters for ethical inquiry: it is a shared capacity for reason or rational willing that matters to thinkers like Aristotle and Kant; it is shared capacities and its common sentiments, habits and dispositions that take centre stage in moral sense theory, in virtue ethics and in phenomenological ethics. For Levinas, the other, the Otherness of the other, alterity, is connected to the phenomenological concern of transcendence

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p. 26.

<sup>13</sup> As it is important that the other not be understood as any type of a totality, Levinas inconsistently uses the terms other (*l’autre*), Other (*l’Autre*) or the absolutely other (*l’absolument Autre*). This can become confusing. Therefore, for the sake of clarity, the term other will be used throughout this dissertation except when a direct quote from the text requires a different form.

that is, how is it that the subject can know its object, leave the totality of the ego, escape from being itself.<sup>14</sup>

To clarify further, one cannot transcend, or escape from totality if one absorbs the other through a reduction into sameness. The ego would merely ‘feed’ itself and become more powerful over the other who is different than me.

To support his argument further, Levinas argues that the otherness (alterity) of the other, or, more clearly, the other person whom I meet in a face-to-face relation, can never be known, and hence absorbed into my subjectivity (sameness). This is more than is intended in the usual discussions of difference. More precisely, it surpasses the usual understanding of ‘different than me.’ For Levinas, the other, who can never be known, interrupts the subject’s being and the ego’s self-absorption. This intrusion by the other into the subject’s being, as a concrete event, is what Levinas names as his understanding of the subject’s experience of ethics. Levinas states: “The other interrupts my being, my attention to my own being and I am able to transcend my self, my ego....We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the other ethics.”<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Perpich, Diane. The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas. (Stanford: Stanford University Press:). 2008. p. 2. Perpich’s argument is that ultimately Levinas’s underlying theme in his body of work is to escape or transcend ontology and ‘being’ as such, and it is only through the relationship with the other that this is at all possible. This argument is consistent with Levinas early works as discussed in the previous chapter.

<sup>15</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel. Ibid. p. 43.

In Levinas's philosophical writings, particularly in Totality and Infinity, this other is portrayed or evoked as a face. He states: "The way in which the other presents himself, *exceeding the idea of other in me, we here name face.*"<sup>16</sup> Face for Levinas cannot be reduced to a mere physical description. It is a subject's experience of the face that contains its meaning. The face, then, represents the surplus of meaning contained by the other. It is immediately ethical. Levinas remarks:

- the face is meaning by itself. You are you. In this sense one can say the face is not "seen." It is what cannot become a content, which your thought would embrace; it is uncontainable, it leads you beyond — the face is straightaway ethical. The face is what one cannot kill, or it is that whose meaning consists in saying: "thou shalt not kill".<sup>17</sup>

Further, the face for Levinas, is naked, exposed, without defence. The human face, as the other, represents the surplus of suffering and vulnerability of human existence. It is a singularity beyond the context of being and ontology. Morality may be considered here to be the human response to the suffering and vulnerable human existence. Morality is not, therefore, a response based on sameness but on vulnerability and the suffering of the other. Further, the concrete encounter by the subject with the face or other is what commands the subject to responsibility. Levinas states:

The first word of the face is the "Thou shall not kill." It is an order. There is a commandment in the appearance of the face, as if a master spoke to me. However, at the same time, the face of the Other is destitute; it is the poor for whom I do all and to

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p. 50.

<sup>17</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel. Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo. Ibid. pp. 86-87.

whom I owe all. And me, whoever I may be, but as a “first person,” I am he who finds the resources to respond to the call.<sup>18</sup>

For Levinas, the encounter with the face is a summons or even a command. It initiates a moral impulse in the subject. This is a moral impulse to relieve the suffering of the other before you, and it involves a subject’s conscious recognition of his or her moral self. Levinas names this ethical event as religion: “we propose to call “religion” the bond that is established between the same and the other without constituting a totality.”<sup>19</sup>

The imperative, ethical demand, issuing from the other to the subject to be morally and existentially responsible, is both rationally and philosophically problematic. Where does this command come from? Is it an essential aspect of the human being? If it is, then Levinasian ethics would still be ontological, a part of being. This goes steadfastly against Levinas’s primary argument that ontology is a totality and closed, and that ethics must precede ontology in philosophy. A suitable explanation of this experience may be described in theological concepts.

Even though Levinas repeatedly denies that he mixes his philosophy with theology, particularly Jewish theology, he ultimately brings a particular understanding of the divine into the discussion.<sup>20</sup> In describing the ethical event he remarks: “The shock of the divine, the rupture of the immanent order, of the order I can embrace, of the order

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p. 89.

<sup>19</sup> Levinas. Totality and Infinity. Ibid. p. 40.

<sup>20</sup> Robbins, Jill. Is it Righteous To Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas. (Stanford: Stanford University Press). 2001. p. 16.

which I can hold in my thought, of the order which can become mine, that is the face of the other.”<sup>21</sup> In this passage, he suggests that the encounter with the other as face is likened to an encounter with the divine. However, Levinas certainly does not mean that God is present (immanent) in the face/other. For Levinas, God is absolutely absent and yet has been present. Morny Joy explains: “The meaning conferred in the encounter with a face depends on Levinas’s somewhat obscure designation of constituting the face as a *trace*.”<sup>22</sup> This trace is not a revelation of God but the passage of God who is absent and which Levinas names as *illeity*. *Illeity*, he argues, is the origin of alterity (otherness). Joy elaborates and quotes Levinas:

Another term Levinas uses to refer to this non-present god is *illeity* which refers ‘to the origin of alterity’ (1996: 64). In this guise, it indicates ‘the trace of the utterly bygone, utterly passed absent’ (1996: 60). The face is in the trace, which witnesses to the evidence, but never a complete revelation of God. ‘He shows himself only by his trace, as is said in Exodus 33.’<sup>23</sup>

The face therefore stands in the trace of the infinite or God. The face who stands in the trace of the divine calls me (the subject) and commands me to be there solely for the other. The subject is burdened or rendered ‘passive’ by this command and expresses ‘Here I am’, or, I am here for you. Levinas remarks:

Under the weight that exceeds my capacity, a passivity more than all passivity of correlative acts, my passivity breaks out in saying:

---

<sup>21</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel. In Is it Righteous to Be? Ibid. p. 48.

<sup>22</sup> Joy, Morny. Divine Love: Luce Irigaray, women, gender and religion. (Manchester: Manchester University Press). 2006. p. 62.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

“Here I am!” The exteriority of the Infinite somehow becomes “interiority” in the sincerity of the testimony.<sup>24</sup>

The interior moral voice, however, is not a pre-existent voice created by one’s own self, it is not “a secret place somewhere in me,” but it remains an exterior command that somehow becomes my own. Levinas explains, albeit in a difficult manner:

The commandment is stated in the mouth of him it commands, the infinitely exterior becomes an interior voice, but a voice testifying to the fission of the interior secrecy, signalling to the Other.<sup>25</sup>

It is interesting that Levinas uses the word ‘fission’ in his attempt to describe the interior moral impulse, which is created with the exteriority of the face’s command. Fission, of course, is a scientific term used when an atom’s nucleus is split and new energy is released, perhaps a fitting term when Levinas’s subject experiences ‘the shock of the divine.’

The ethics of the Levinasian ‘ethical event’ is perhaps at once the most nuanced and provocative argument proposed by Levinas. It is provocative because, from this argument, Levinas develops his thesis that the subject has a most extreme responsibility to the other; indeed, the responsibility is both beyond possibilities and infinite. This fundamental responsibility of the subject to the other is frequently mentioned throughout his major works. However, it is most evocatively expressed in his later

---

<sup>24</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel. Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo. Ibid. p. 109.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p. 110.

interviews, and especially in his text: Otherwise Than Being: Or Beyond Essence.<sup>26</sup> His inability to clearly express this firm and unwavering theme of extreme responsibility may be a weakness in his work. It can leave many who are seeking a new, radical way forward in philosophical ethics to dismiss his philosophy as mere hyperbole.

The extreme responsibility a subject has to an other, according to Levinas, is profound and never ending. It is a responsibility that goes to the extreme of substituting oneself for the other. He would even go so far as to say one should even sacrifice one's own well being for the other. He explains the responsibility involved:

For me the notion of substitution is tied to the notion of responsibility. To substitute oneself does not amount to putting oneself in the place of the other man in order to feel what he feels; it does not involve becoming the other not, if he be destitute and desperate, the associating ourselves with the essential weakness and finitude of the other; it is to bear his weight while sacrificing one's interestedness and complacency-in-being, which then turn into responsibility for the other.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, this responsibility is beyond empathic feelings. It is a clear responsibility to act in order to relieve the other from the burden of suffering. He argues further that this mode of responsibility overturns Heidegger's existential plot of the meaning of being. He states:

Here, the existential adventure of the neighbor would matter more to the I than does its own and thus would posit, the I straightaway as responsible for this alterity in its trials, as if the upsurge of the human in the economy of being overturned ontology's meaning and plot. All of the culture of the human seems to me to be orientated by this new "plot", in which the in-itself of a being persisting in its being is surpassed in the gratuity

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel. Is it Righteous to Be? Ibid. p. 228.



of being outside-of-oneself, for the other, in the act of sacrifice,  
or the possibility of sacrifice, in holiness.<sup>28</sup>

In this passage, Levinas's remarks not only underline his new meaning of being, the responsibility for the other, but also the gratitude for the ability to escape from the interiority of Heidegger's ontology of being. Further, this new meaning leads to the idea of, or understanding of a certain 'goodness' in the world, which is better than being. He states:

- the human (love of the other, responsibility for the neighbor, an eventual dying-for-the other, a sacrifice in which dying for the other can concern me more than my own death) signifies a beginning of a new rationality beyond being. A rationality of the good beyond all essence. An intelligibility of goodness.<sup>29</sup>

In this passage, Levinas argues that the new and certain rationality of goodness is a result of a subject's responsibility for the other, rather than a practice of a virtue of goodness resulting in a duty or virtue of responsibility for the other. It is a reversal of common understandings that "good" people believe they are responsible to relieve the suffering of others.

In keeping with the extraordinary theme of responsibility, Levinas also demands of his readers that they reflect on the issue of the many others who are suffering and are destitute in the world in which they live. He promotes the idea that a subject not only has the responsibility towards the singular other but also puts forth the idea that the 'I' has the same responsibility to all others in the world. Levinas remarks:

---

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. pp. 228-229.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. p. 204.

It is I who support all. You know that sentence in Dostoyevsky: *"We are all guilty of all and for all men before all, and I more than the others."* This is not owing to such or such a guilt which is really mine, or to offences that I would have committed: but because I am responsible for a total responsibility, which answers for all the others and for all in the others, even for their responsibility. The I always has one responsibility *more* than all the others.<sup>30</sup>

Not surprisingly, of course, a singular subject cannot easily accomplish this extraordinary level of demand and responsibility and this is acknowledged by Levinas. The demand for responsibility for all the others is fulfilled for Levinas both by justice and the state with its subsequent charitable and social care institutions. He remarks:

We are not a pair, alone in the world, but at least three... If I heed the second person to the end, if I accede absolutely to his request, I risk by this very fact, doing a disservice to the third one, who is also my other. But if I listen to the third, I run the risk of wrongdoing the second one. This is where the State steps in. The State begins as soon as three are present.<sup>31</sup>

The concept of three, or what Levinas also calls 'the third,' where there are more than two individuals, will be further examined in the following chapter when Levinas's concept of justice will be examined. At this point, it is important to note that Levinas's main argument is the responsibility that a subject has for the singular other. Thus, this is a clear distinction between a subject's responsibility towards the other who faces me and the category of justice. The responsibility towards the distinct and individual other is absolute and one is compelled to act individually to relieve any suffering and to not act in a harmful way.

---

<sup>30</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel. Ethics and Infinity. Ibid. pp. 98-99.

<sup>31</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel. Is it Righteous to Be? Ibid. p. 193.

In an unexpected manner, towards the end of the books, Time and the Other (1947) and Totality and Infinity (1961), Levinas introduces the female as an example or metaphor of the unknowable other. In his work Otherwise than Being: Beyond Essence (1974), he weaves in his arguments that the mother or the maternal is the ideal responsible and ethical subject. The following pages will discuss Levinas's use of female motifs in his philosophy. (The discussion of maternity or the maternal will be discussed in detail in the following chapter.)

### **The Feminine**

References to the feminine take a significant amount of space in Levinas's writings. Various chapters are devoted to the relationship between a subject (man) and the other (female.) It is striking that so little attention has been paid to this obvious piece of Levinasian philosophy in the secondary literature besides the work of a few feminist philosophers.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, it is further remarkable that Levinas himself made little or no attempt to engage in a dialogue with feminist thinkers who were actively writing philosophy when his works were becoming well known and discussed in the European academy. Levinas discusses the female other in various ways. For the sake of clarity these are: 1) the absolutely other (the mysterious), 2) the beloved (equivocation) and 3)

---

<sup>32</sup> See for example: Chanter, Tina. Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas. (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press). 2001. Katz, Claire. Levinas, Judaism and the Feminine. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press:). 2003. Sandford, Stella. The Metaphysics of Love. (London: Althone Press). 2000.

the maternal (the ideal ethical subject). One may conclude that these three motifs of the female follow the historical view of women found in religious and philosophical writings and are thus not particularly enlightening or new. There has been no discussion in the secondary literature of the idea that perhaps Levinas bases these modes of the female motif on his developing relationship with his wife. His private papers are as yet unpublished and one would need to study them alongside his philosophy to confirm such a conclusion. Firstly then, I will discuss the feminine as absolutely other found in his philosophical writings.

In Levinas's book, Time and the Other <sup>33</sup> he argues that the unknowable and totally other which appears in its purity is the feminine. He writes:

Does a situation exist where the alterity of the other appears in purity? Does a situation exist where the other would not have alterity, as the reverse side of its identity, would not comply with the Platonic law of participation where every term contains sameness and through this sameness contains the Other? Is there not a situation where alterity would be borne by a being in a positive sense, as essence? What is the alterity that does not purely and simply enter into the opposition of two species of the same genus? I think absolutely contrary (le contraire absolument contraire), whose contrariety permits its terms to be remain absolutely other, is the feminine.<sup>34</sup>

Hence, for Levinas, the absolutely other, the totally other, is the feminine. Indeed, she is considered by Levinas to be totally other than a man. She is not understood as another subject or even an other but the absolutely other or alterity itself. Levinas explains that

---

<sup>33</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel. Time and the Other. Richard A. Cohen, translator. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press). 1987.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. p. 85.

the feminine as absolutely other is also a mystery. This is not a romanticized sense of the mysterious but a mystery in that it ‘It slips away from the light’ and that its mystery defines its alterity. He states:

The other as other is not here an object that becomes ours or becomes us; to the contrary, it withdraws into its mystery. Neither does this mystery of the feminine — essentially other — refer to any romantic notions of the mysterious unknown or misunderstood woman.<sup>35</sup>

He pushes the motif of mysteriousness further in that the feminine is not a subject (the subject for Levinas is male) but that she is the opposite of consciousness. He states:

The existent is accomplished in the “subjective and in “consciousness;” alterity is accomplished in the feminine. This term is on the same level as, but in meaning opposed to, consciousness. The feminine is not accomplished as a *being* (*étant*) but in transcendence toward the light, but in modesty.<sup>36</sup>

This passage illustrates the feminine as equal in importance to the subject, or ‘on the same level,’ but also a transcendent other, where she is ethereal, beyond consciousness. She is modest in that she not sexual. She is the motif of virginity and purity often named as a Madonna in the history of western thought. Simon De Beauvoir’s footnote in her infamous text The Second Sex published in 1953 is perhaps the most quoted commentary on this passage. She writes:

I suppose that Levinas does not forget that woman, too, is aware of her own consciousness, or ego. But it is striking that he deliberately takes a man’s point of view, disregarding the reciprocity of the subject and object. When he writes that woman is mystery, he implies that she is mystery for man. Thus his

---

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. p. 86.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. p. 88.

description, which is intended to be objective, is in fact an assertion of masculine privilege.<sup>37</sup>

De Beauvoir wrote the commentary when she was examining how women were viewed in European society. The roles of women as mother and wife were unequal to men's public roles. She interpreted Levinas's view of the feminine in Time and the Other as illustrating the traditional male view. Diane Perpich argues that De Beauvoir's comment in her footnote is one which indicates an incomplete understanding of Levinas's view of the feminine and that the motif of the feminine must be understood in the context of Levinas's writings. She reminds us that Levinas's primary understanding of consciousness should be understood in the Husserlian mode. She writes:

For Husserl, intentionality expresses the fact every consciousness is consciousness of something. Every desiring is directed toward the object of desire: presuming, willing, judging, loving, and hating are all of *something*. The feminine inverts the structure of Husserlian consciousness. Hers is not a movement towards, but a withdrawal.<sup>38</sup>

Hence, Levinas's argument would appear to indicate if we seek Husserl's knowledge of the essence of the other, it is impossible to attain. The other as a feminine motif escapes our understanding and knowledge of its essence. Nonetheless, De Beauvoir is correct in pointing out that the woman/feminine in the context of Time and The Other lacks a

---

<sup>37</sup> De Beauvoir, Simone. The Second Sex. H.M. Parshley, translator. (New York: Random House). 1989. p. xxii.

<sup>38</sup> Perpich, Diane. "From the Caress to the Word" in Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas. Tina Chanter, editor. (University Park PA: Pennsylvania State University Press). 2001. p. 31.

autonomous self like a male subject, yet she is still understood to carry all the received and traditional attributes such as ‘mysterious’ and ‘modesty’.

An interesting question to ask is why Levinas chooses the motif of the feminine to demonstrate the overflowing infinity of the other or alterity. His own explanation in the preface to the 1979 edition of Time and the Other provides some clarification:

The notion of transcendent alterity - one that opens time - is first sought starting with alterity content - that is, starting with femininity. Femininity - and one would have to see what sense this has to be said of masculinity or of virility; that is, of the differences between the sexes in general - appeared to me as a difference contrasting strongly with other differences, not merely as a quality difference from all others, but as a very quality of difference.<sup>39</sup>

In this passage, Levinas argues that women and men are ‘essentially’ different. There does not appear to be any crossover of attributes between the sexes for Levinas. This is, of course, where Levinas is an extremely idealistic male, though not totally in the same way De Beauvoir thinks that women are totally other from men. His argument predates any idea or notion of a feminist male who would argue that there is indeed a crossover of attributes in both male and female persons. Nonetheless, he does admit that a further study of male attributes and virility has yet to be accomplished when examining the differences or, more appropriately, the similarities, of the two sexes.

Moreover, Levinas also includes the idea and importance of eros to ethical understandings in this 1979 preface to a 1949 work when discussing the necessity of the feminine as the motif of other *par excellence*. This is a later work of course, over thirty

---

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. p. 36.

years had passed since Time and the Other was first published in 1947. Yet it would seem his opinion has not changed. He writes:

The notion of the sociality of two, which is probably necessary for the exceptional epiphany of the face – abstract and chaste nudity – emerges from sexual differences, and is essential to eroticism and to all instances of instances of alterity – again as quality and not as a simply logical distinction – born by the “thou shalt not kill” that the very silence of the face says. Here is a significant ethical radiance within eroticism and the libido. Through it humanity enters into the society of two and sustains it, authorizes it, perhaps at least putting into question the simplicity of contemporary paneroticism.<sup>40</sup>

Levinas wrote this passage a number of years after the 1961 publication of Totality and Infinity (1961). Hence, this is an indication of the importance Levinas places on the erotic sexual relationship in the understanding of his work. [This is also another indication that Levinas does not recant any of the seriously disparaging discussions (see below) of the woman who sexually engages with the male subject.]

By this discussion and examination of eros, Levinas includes the feminine as the reified beloved who brings love and the fulfillment of sexual desire and pleasure to the male subject. Ultimately, the male subject is able to achieve transcendence of his own self through the fecundity and the impregnation of the female, culminating in the birth of a son. At first glance, this basic biological structure is unremarkable. However upon further detailed examination, the female other, the feminine, can be viewed simply as a means to an end and not an end in herself. Sadly, this interpretation has the potential of

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. p. 36.



diminishing Levinas's entire project on ethics. In many ways, it could be construed by women as a betrayal of an ethics where they are respected as equal to men.

There appears to be a profound ambiguity regarding the feminine in Levinas's work. Initially, at the end of Time and Other (1947), Levinas introduced his discussion of the sensual aspect of the male and female relationship. He describes what he names as the phenomenology of voluptuousness. He writes: "voluptuousness, is not a pleasure like others because it is not solitary like eating and drinking - seems to confirm my views on the exceptional role and place of the feminine, and on the absence of any fusion in the erotic."<sup>41</sup> He elaborates on this with his example of the caress: "The caress goes beyond touch and is a movement that seeks the infinite. The caress is the anticipation of the pure future. It is the intentionality of voluptuousness."<sup>42</sup> The caress of the beloved is more than a physical contact, it occurs as the male seek the infinite as represented by the female alterity. It is a gesture of love for the beloved, which is grounded in a desire for the infinite. However, the gentleness and romantic mention of eros and the caress as an expression of love undergoes a remarkable change for Levinas in Totality and Infinity (1961).

In the section, "Phenomenology of Eros" in Totality and Infinity (1961), the erotic male-female relationship is given a more meticulous examination. For Levinas, the mysterious and modest feminine motif is eclipsed by female erotic nudity and lustfulness

---

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. p. 89.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

and she is disfigured and inverted during the erotic relationship.<sup>43</sup> Rather than the dignity and eminence of the face of the other, the feminine evokes pity, not respect. He writes: “The frailty of femininity invites pity for what, in a sense, is not yet disrespect for what exhibits itself in immodesty and is not discovered despite the exhibition, that is, is profaned.”<sup>44</sup> The female beloved eventually loses her revered status as the other or indeed as a human being. Levinas concludes:

The beloved, returned to the stage of infancy without responsibility – this coquettish head, this youth, this pure life “a bit silly” – has quit her status as a person. The face fades, and in its impersonal and inexpressive neutrality is prolonged in ambiguity, into animality.<sup>45</sup>

The male subject nonetheless returns to himself, as there is no fusion of the same and the inverted other. It could not happen – a loss of the male self into this profanity and animality. For Levinas, as much as the same cannot absorb the other in Levinasian ethics, so too the other cannot absorb the same.<sup>46</sup> Yet, there appears to be a far greater fear for Levinas that the male subject could lose his own self. This discussion of eros is quite clearly from the male standpoint, supported by Levinas’s own understandings and conclusions. Perhaps, in keeping with his phenomenological project, it may indicate his concrete experience of the erotic. But this understanding not only lacks an ethics, it is also dangerous. If a female has no status as a person, then in erotic relations she has no

---

<sup>43</sup> Levinas. Totality and Infinity. pp. 262-263.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. p. 262.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. p. 263.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. p. 266.

rights or claims. In considering the feminine/woman as absolutely the other, no matter how hortatory in tone, such a gesture may lead to a dehumanizing motif.<sup>47</sup> Nonetheless, Levinas, despite his fear, even disparagement of the female, will also appear to give woman great respect in her role as the welcoming feminine and finally as the mother. Thus, in order to rescue both the male subject and the feminine, Levinas proposes fecundity and the subsequent birth of a son as a way out of this ambiguity. Nonetheless, Levinas's depiction of the concupiscence of the male and female relationship seems devoid of any clear ethics.

Levinas argues in his chapter entitled 'Fecundity' in Totality and Infinity (1961) that it is through paternity (the birth of the father's son) that a subject is able to transcend yet remaining a 'him-self.' Levinas writes: "By a total transcendence, the transcendence of trans-substantiation, the I is, in the other".<sup>48</sup> The child, who is also other, is also therefore a stranger to the subject (father). Levinas refers to a biblical understanding of

---

<sup>47</sup> This may have further implication for women of other cultures. Please see: Sikka, Sonia. "The Delightful Other: Portraits of the Feminine in Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Levinas." in Tina Chanter, ed. Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas. (University Park Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press). 2001. pp. 96-188. In this essay, Sikka, an Asian woman, disparages Levinas not only for his tropes on women but also how he puts other traditions and religions through what he considers the superior lens of the Bible and Greeks. She is alarmed at his western male bias yet he claims a honoring of difference.

<sup>48</sup> Levinas. Ibid. p. 267.

paternity: “My child is a stranger (Isaiah 49), but a stranger who is not only mine, for he *is* me. He is me a stranger to myself.”<sup>49</sup> Thus, the transcendence out of the self/subject is complete. It is completed in ‘trans-substantiation’, accomplished with the birth of the son. He repeats the need for the feminine for this to occur: “But the encounter with the Other as feminine is required in order that the future of the child come to pass from beyond the possible, beyond projects.”<sup>50</sup> Accordingly, to Levinas the future progeny of the child or the ‘fecundity of fecundity’ is infinite and goodness itself: “Fecundity engendering fecundity accomplishes goodness: above and beyond the sacrifice that imposes a gift, the gift of the power of giving, the conception of a child.”<sup>51</sup> Humanity continues infinitely. For Levinas then, the true gift of women is the procreation of humanity.<sup>52</sup>

Luce Irigaray in her essay “The Fecundity of the Caress”<sup>53</sup> offers a compelling critique of Levinas, as well as proposing a revision of Levinas’s phenomenology of eros as it concerns women. She writes: “When the beloved woman presents herself or appears to the male lover as a paradise to be referred back to infancy and animality, then the act

---

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. p. 269.

<sup>52</sup> This will be elaborated upon in the next chapter.

<sup>53</sup> Irigaray, Luce. “The Fecundity of the Caress: A Reading of Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, “Phenomenology of Eros.” in Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas. (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press). 2001.

of love leads not only to profaning, but also a destruction, a fall.”<sup>54</sup> Love, therefore, itself, is lost in Levinas’s accounting of eros. In Irigaray’s view, if both lovers, male and female, are only equivocally transformed by the experience of eros, there is no possibility for transcendence for either one. She supplies her own vision, if both lovers are equal participants filled with respect for each other’s mystery, then they are filled with divine love and are reborn. She comments:

Prior to any procreation, the lovers bestow on each other – life. Love fecundates both of them in turn, through the genesis of their immortality. They are reborn, each for the other, in the assumption and absolution of a definitive conception.<sup>55</sup>

For Irigaray, as well as numerous other feminist scholars, the obvious lack of respect for the autonomy of the woman and women’s voice, in Levinas’s writings on the feminine in Time and the Other and Totality and Infinity, is disappointing as well as familiar. One may argue that Levinas’s views on women express the context of his time and his received traditional tropes in religious and philosophy on the female. Women’s voice in philosophy and religion was just beginning during Levinas’s productive period in the academy and it is doubtful Levinas was even aware of the urgency of the voices.

In summary, Levinas, at this point in his work, argues for a philosophical move away from the priority of the subject (the same) in ethical and philosophical discussions. In his view, he establishes the other as ‘infinite’ and open-ended in its alterity. In contrast to Husserl, the other’s (object) essence can never be known. The ethical relationship is

---

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. p.129.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. p.123.

established as an imperative issued from the other as face. Levinas then proceeds to use the feminine as an ideal motif of this unknowable other. Unfortunately, Levinas's view of the male-female relationship is filled with ambiguity and thus his writings appear to be unsuccessful in establishing an acceptable ethical relationship for women.

It does need to be noted, however, that Levinas changes the tone of his discussion of the feminine as the 'beloved' and 'equivocation' in his later text, Otherwise than Being. For Levinas, the female other as the maternal finds redemption as the ethical subject par excellence. He is now less concerned with the reification of the other as he is with the responsibility of the subject towards the vulnerable and suffering other. Maternal ethics and care ethics from a women's perspective are also greatly concerned with the human responsibility towards vulnerable others. It is this topic, in light of Levinas's call to responsibility, that the next two chapters will examine.

### CHAPTER THREE - RESPONSIBILITY

Rakamin (mercy) is the relation of the uterus [rèkhem] to the other, whose gestation is within it, Rakamin is maternity itself. God as merciful is defined by maternity. A feminine element is stirred in the depth of this mercy.<sup>1</sup>

In searching female experience for the roots of morality, we should be astonished if thousands of years of confinement to the home, family and small community did not produce evolutionary effects.<sup>2</sup>

What is the face-to-face relation as witnessed by the mother?<sup>3</sup>

The previous chapter introduced Emmanuel Levinas's discussion of the subject's relation with the other, particularly the motif of face as a metaphor for the other whom a subject can never know. As well, the chapter introduced a discussion of Levinas's understanding of the feminine as the other *par excellence*, as the erotic lover, and finally as the other who, through her body and fertility, provides the male subject with an escape from being. More precisely, the feminine provides the means for the subject's

---

<sup>1</sup> Levinas, In Katz, Claire. Levinas, Judaism and The Feminine: The Silent Footsteps of Rebecca. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press). 2003. p. 124.

<sup>2</sup> Noddings, Nel. The Maternal Factor: Two Paths to Morality. (Berkley: University of California Press). 2010. p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Willet, Cynthia. Maternal Ethics and Other Slave Moralities. (New York: Routledge). 1995. p. 83.

transcendence of the ego's concern with his own existence through the birth of a son, i.e., paternity. In his last major work, Otherwise than Being: Or Beyond Essence,<sup>4</sup> Levinas leaves his discussion of the other and focuses his arguments on the subject's ethical responsibility to the other. In this work, the maternal body frequently described as the ethical subject *par excellence*. The maternal body as such a motif however, does not give the singular woman any status as a subject: a status that the male subject enjoys in his work. This is because it is a woman's relationship to her pregnant womb and of a nursing newborn that concerns Levinas. Nonetheless, the utilization of the maternal body motif gives Levinas's discussion of extreme responsibility some clarity for the reader. Clarification is helpful as his last major work of philosophy is both difficult, contradictory, and often relies upon rhetoric, repetition and hyperbole in its claims and demands. Lisa Guenther, in her book, The Gift of the Other: Levinas and the Politics of Reproduction, successfully adapts Levinas's ethical arguments into a woman-centered phenomenology of reproduction and birth.<sup>5</sup> (Levinas would probably not be in agreement with her conclusions.) With the aid of Guenther's work, however, the following chapter will discuss Levinas's use of the motif of maternity in constructing his argument for the subject's extreme responsibility to the other. As well, the chapter will

---

<sup>4</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel. Otherwise Than Being: Or Beyond Essence. Alphonso Lingis, translator. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press). 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Guenther, Lisa. The Gift of the Other: Levinas and the Politics of Reproduction. (Albany: State University of New York Press). 2006.



discuss Levinas's notion of justice. Firstly however, a presentation of Levinas's idea of the maternal body is in order.

In continuing his discussion of the subject's face-to-face ethical encounter, Levinas utilizes the maternal body as example of a subject's non-reciprocal responsibility to the other with its subsequent, never-ending moral burdens. In connecting this responsibility with a face he writes:

A face is a trace of itself, given over to my responsibility but to which I am wanting and faulty. It is as if I were responsible for his mortality, and guilty for surviving. A face is an anachronous immediacy more tense than that of an image offered in the straightforwardness of an intuitive intention. In proximity, the absolutely other, the stranger whom I have "neither conceived nor given birth to," I already have on my arms, already bear according to the Biblical formula, "in my breast as the nurse bears the nursling." He has no place, is not autochthonous, is uprooted without a country, not an inhabitant, exposed to the cold and the heat of the seasons. To be reduced to having recourse to me is the homelessness or strangeness of the neighbor. It is incumbent on me.<sup>6</sup>

In this statement, Levinas expresses the overwhelming moral burdens of responsibility a subject has for an other. The responsibility is like a mother's responsibility for her newborn child. It is absolute, according to Levinas, because if the mother does not nourish the child, the child will perish. Levinas also notes the biblical passage, Numbers 11:12, in which Moses appeals to the Lord asking how he can bear the responsibility to care for the Israelites who are hungry and thirsty in the desert. Moses asks:

"How have I displeased the Lord that I am burdened with the care of this whole people? Am I their mother? Have I brought them into the world and am I called upon to carry them in my bosom

---

<sup>6</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel. Ibid. p. 91.

like a nurse with her babies...? (The Lord then responds to the moral appeal and tells Moses to ask the other leaders of the people to help.)<sup>7</sup>

Here Levinas, continues the notion that the maternal body signifies the immediacy and proximity of a subject's responsibility to the other; it is a total disruption of the isolated ego's sense of autonomy. He states:

It is being torn up from oneself, being less than nothing, a rejection into the negative, behind nothingness; it is maternity, gestation of the other in the same. Is not the restlessness of someone persecuted but a modification of maternity, the groaning of wounded entrails by those it will bear or has born? In maternity what signifies is a responsibility for others and suffering both from the effect of persecution and from the persecuting itself in which the persecutor sinks. Maternity, which is bearing *par excellence*, bears even responsibility for the persecuting by the persecutor.<sup>8</sup>

The ethical event *par excellence*, as experienced concretely, appears to result in a demand of the subject to sacrifice his or her selfhood or autonomy. The other gestates in me. The mother/subject is no longer the unity of the same. This may be problematic both for women and men as the demanding responsibilities towards the other turns into a call for

---

<sup>7</sup> Numbers 11: 12. The New English Bible (Cambridge University Press: New York). 1972. p. 160. It is interesting to note that although Moses clearly feels that it is his total responsibility to feed the hungry people, he cannot do it by himself thus employing the assistance of others. This resort to political leadership, and justice, will be discussed later in the chapter. For now it is the maternal motif as an example of extreme responsibility that is under discussion.

<sup>8</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel. Ibid. p. 75.

sacrifice by the subject for this other. What then of the self or identity is left for the subject? Lisa Guenther attempts to unpack this problematic motif in a Levinasian mode.

Guenther begins her analysis by noting that for Levinas, the face-to-face event, or the ‘time’ of ethics, is anarchic and that the subject is existentially passive before the other. She writes:

Anarchy refers to the ethical temporality of response to an Other, a time that antecedes and disrupts the temporality of consciousness and its logic of representation. Before I can confirm my own identity through self-awareness or any other kind of self-relation, I find myself exposed to the Other, passive and vulnerable before him or her. Levinas describes this as a “[p]assivity anterior to all receptivity. Transcendent. *“Anteriority anterior to all representable anteriority immemorial.”* In this way the encounter with face challenges “my claim to possess time by representing it as my own.”<sup>9</sup>

Guenther then draws similar parallels to gestation and the pregnant woman. The gestating child, (Guenther uses the term “child” rather than the term “fetus”) and the mother are absolutely and fundamentally biologically connected. The developing child is dependant, vulnerable and makes demands of the woman’s body; indeed the child commands the biological body to nourish it. In passivity and vulnerability, the woman’s body stretches its skin, develops a new organ to feed the gestating child, and her organs move to accommodate the growing body of the other/child. This occurs before the child exists or has consciousness. Thus, the other is dependent on a subject before the development of its consciousness and awareness of being. As Guenther interprets Levinas: we are in relationship before existence. The pregnant mother gives the gift of time to the gestating

---

<sup>9</sup> Guenther, Lisa. Ibid. p. 98.

child, and through this gift a future time of existence is given. According to Levinas, there is a split or gap in time between an immemorial past and an unforeseeable future.<sup>10</sup> Levinas refers to this time as the time of ethics, or perhaps more appropriately the origins of ethics. It takes place 'otherwise than being.' Hence, according to Levinas, this as diachronic time is beyond being. Guenther quotes Levinas:

[Diachrony refers] to a recurrence in the dead time or the meanwhile [*le temps mort au l'entre-temps*] which separates inspiration and expiration, the diastole and systole of the heart beating dully against the walls of one's skin.<sup>11</sup>

The gap between the subject and the other is therefore not a gap as in a gap in space. In fact it is a proximity beyond proximity, as the vulnerable and needy child is in the maternal body. Although there is no biological gap between the mother and the child, in the pregnant body there is both a subject and a distinct other. Guenther writes:

The Other's power to accuse and command consists not in her superior strength but rather in her vulnerability and exposure before me. The Other commands me not as a punishing father, but as a newborn child whose cries single me out as the only one who can respond."<sup>12</sup>

Thus, the power of the other to demand that I act in ways that protect and reduce suffering of the other, lies in the other's vulnerability and need, and not in the other's strength. As well, Guenther reminds her readers to that Levinas calls us to understand that ethics or the ethical relation is 'like' this maternal body in relation to the demands of the

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 102

<sup>11</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel. In Guenther, Lisa. Ibid. p. 102.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p. 104.

other. In this manner, Guenther is able to draw out the concrete aspects of the (maternal) pregnant body. In this way Guenther clarifies Levinas's account of the ethical event as discussed in the previous chapter.

In the 1981 translation of Otherwise than Being, 'maternity/maternal body' is not even listed in the index. Yet it is central to Levinas's argument. Perhaps it is mere oversight, or more likely, it indicates the dismissal of women, especially the maternal, as not important for understanding Levinas's work. Nonetheless, if one agrees with the argument of "like a maternal body," one is confronted with the very problem that confronts Levinas's work as a whole. This is the problem of a lack of singularity or personhood that results from employing a universal motif. Further, in response to both Guenther and Levinas, it seems necessary to pose a question: who cares for the mother?

The somewhat ideal and pious account of maternity presented by both Levinas and Guenther is gravely lacking any discussion of an ethics where this physical and political sacrifice of woman, and her selfhood is taken as a given. This issue seems to be unproblematic for Levinas. Women, of course, can and often do die while pregnant or while giving birth. They die of infections, blood loss and all manner of terrible pregnancy-induced illnesses. In Levinas's ethical discussions, dying for the other may indeed be the result of this extreme responsibility for the other. When asked, in a 1991 interview, what he thought of a woman dying to allow the birth of a child he remarks: "I think that the heart of the heart, the deepest point of the feminine, is dying in giving life, in bringing life into the world."<sup>13</sup> Hence, although Levinas makes a grand gesture in

---

<sup>13</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel. In Guenther, Lisa. Ibid. p.142.

calling for all, both male and female, to be like a maternal body, it remains for Levinas that the feminine, though beloved woman and mother, is still the one who sacrifices herself concretely for a future; both for the future child and for the male ethical subject.<sup>14</sup>

In many ways, Emmanuel Levinas presents a secular rather than religious rationale or call for women to the ethical life. Yet, in this he is no less extreme or demanding than the traditional accounts found both in Judaism and in Christianity. Nonetheless, further to this issue of the sacrificing mother, there is the fact that the myth of the 'good mother' is fraught with misrepresentation of motherhood. Not all mothers are 'good.'<sup>15</sup> Mothers have abused, neglected or even killed their children. As well, contemporary reproductive technology allows for the genetic testing of gestating fetuses and many of those found with the possibility of disease are often aborted. In addition, the new practice of surrogacy with the 'rent' of a poor or marginalized woman's womb to produce a 'first world child' for a wealthy couple, sex selection, the status of donor eggs and IVF embryos, are all ethical issues which now are connected with the maternal body. Of course, Levinas was most likely unaware of these contemporary issues.

It is thus seems appropriate that Guenther expands her phenomenological examinations of the pregnant female to include a politics of reproduction. She underlines the concern that until recently, women have had no choice as to whether or not they

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> The next chapter will include a discussion of maternal ethics in relation to care. This is because one of the academic roots of the ethics of care is maternal ethics.

become pregnant. Indeed, this is still the case for most women in the world. The reality of these women's lives of servitude, disease and poverty, in comparison to the feminine and maternal ideal found in Levinas writings is extremely jarring. If one adopts unquestionably Levinas's notion of extreme responsibility and sacrifice, this so-called 'good mother' should actually be not considered an ethical ideal, but rather a model of an "empty ideal of a non-self."<sup>16</sup> Still, one cannot ignore that women are, and will continue to be, the child bearers of human societies. They also make up the majority of the caregivers of the sick and the vulnerable. Yet it would seem the birth of an ethical self in the mode of extreme responsibility in relationship to the other as discussed in Otherwise than Being has meaning and value only if one leaves aside Levinas's idealized views of women.

Diane Perpich argues that Levinas makes an error when he unknowingly slips into identity politics in discussing the feminine/maternal. She discusses the point that his work on alterity and responsibility promotes a singularity that is beyond essence and social identity. She writes:

Levinas's problematic depictions of femininity do not stem from his failure to represent the other (as either same or different), but precisely to ceding to the temptation to representation. Here, contrary to the strictures of his own writing on the face, Levinas does not refuse to represent the other, and it is precisely the stereotypical images of women and other others that he dishes up that cause his readers such consternation and pain.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Guenther, Lisa. Ibid. p. 112.

<sup>17</sup> Perpich, Diane. The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas. (Stanford: Stanford University Press). 2008. p . 192.

Another woman philosopher, Sonia Sikka, in her essay: “The Delightful Other: Portraits of the Feminine in Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Levinas” is not so forgiving as Perpich of Levinas’s slippage into identity politics. She puts forth the view that his entire philosophy may be in error. This is because she evaluates the identity of both the subject and the other in Levinas is based on unreflective thinking and dialogue. Sikka writes: “The problem is that he has not reached a conclusion at the end of some process of dialogue and reflection. He has carelessly assumed his culturally engendered givens, without paying attention to any other that might question these givens.”<sup>18</sup> Sikka quotes Levinas in a later interview where he reveals his unreflective position towards other cultures: “I always say - but privately - that in humanity the only serious things are the Greeks and the Bible: everything else is dancing.”<sup>19</sup> She takes exception to this view as it lacks the respect for any of the other great civilizations’ contributions to the world of thought. She also charges that this is not due to an oversight or point of ‘style.’ She writes:

But the problem is not simply a matter of style, nor does it indicate a blind spot in Levinas’s thinking. It is a direct result of a tendency that one should not be surprised to find in Levinas. There is a link between Levinas’s suspicion on any emphasis on enracinement (rootedness) on the one hand, and his lack of suspicion of his own enracinement within a historical tradition on the other. His disregard of cultural specificity, that is, leads to a naïve position where, in his relation to the cultural other -neither

---

<sup>18</sup> Sikka, Sonia. “The Delightful Other: Portraits of the Feminine in Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Levinas” in Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas. Tina Chanter editor. (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press). 2001. p. 114.

<sup>19</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel. In Sikka, Sonia. Ibid. p. 113.



Greek nor Christian nor Jew - Levinas exemplifies unthinking rootedness rather than opposing it.<sup>20</sup>

The cultural and gender bias in Levinas's thought is clear. Nonetheless, one must remember the context of his life, notably, his immersion in Jewish and European culture as whole. For Levinas, the philosophical and ethical traditions of Greek and Jew and Christian had utterly failed in preventing the Holocaust. It is rather doubtful he was concerned with examining other cultural philosophies and religious systems of thought, let alone feminist thinking. His philosophical concerns must be considered in the context of being a Jew who survived the Holocaust. It is from this perspective that he argues for a philosophy that is "indifferent to difference."<sup>21</sup> Sikka has a point when she observes:

This is a philosophy of the Other that, although it claims to be based on difference, is in another sense indifferent to difference. It is a philosophy that says beyond all identity and difference and prior to them, there is this Other who challenges my self-absorption, and to whom, whoever he may be, I, whoever I may be, owe bread and water and warmth and shelter. It is *this* Other that forbids violence, a face naked of any differentiating and specifying characteristics that would identify it as a member of one group rather than another. This is perhaps the only kind of ethics that could come out of the Holocaust, and it is deeply right on its central point, and also right to privilege this point above any other.<sup>22</sup>

This is a great paradox in Levinas's writing. He proclaims a difference beyond difference, except, that is, for women. Morny Joy sums up this anomaly by quoting

---

<sup>20</sup> Sikka, Sonia. Ibid. pp.114-115.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p. 115.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

Levinas: “The feminine will never take on the aspect of the Divine.”<sup>23</sup> For Levinas, women are ‘totally other,’ even ‘alterity’ itself” but even with their self-sacrifice, in his eyes, they are not able to have any aspects of divine in their human nature. Morny Joy argues that this is likely due to Levinas’s view of women’s bodily corruption: i.e. her sexuality.<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, there may be still be a space in this paradox for women Guenther intervenes in Levinas’s argument from a position of equality or justice for women.

In Levinas’s project, the ethical subject is not born with the virtue of responsibility for the other. This, despite the fact that he posits ethics as anterior to being or, at this stage of his work, more appropriately, ‘otherwise than being.’ He writes:

The for-the-other characteristic of the subject can be interpreted as neither a guilt complex (which presupposes an *initial* freedom), nor as a natural benevolence or divine “instinct,” nor as some love or some tendency to sacrifice.<sup>25</sup>

For Levinas, the responsibility to the other frees one from the traditional views of one’s ‘essence’, that is associated with traditional metaphysical notions of being, through the destabilization of one’s ego. This is because only the “I,” as the singular subject, becomes responsible and riveted by the face of the other. As such, the subject is now an irreplaceable hostage to the demand of the other. In this way the subject is freed or

---

<sup>23</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel. In Morny Joy. Divine Love: Luce Irigaray, women, gender and religion. (Manchester: Manchester University Press). 2006. p. 69.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel. Ibid. p. 124.

dispossessed from any 'essence.' Levinas argues that this singular responsibility "... frees the subject from ennui, that is from the enchainment to itself, where the ego suffocates in itself due to the tautological way of identity."<sup>26</sup> A subject's sense of his or her own selfhood therefore is, for Levinas, found only when the other takes precedence. This concrete, felt experience or sensibility is produced by way of facing the suffering and traumatized other. "The other is in me and in the midst of my very identification."<sup>27</sup> Therefore one can argue, for women as well as men, freedom from essentialism can only be found in relation to the other or, more precisely, in the Levinasian uniqueness of the individual responsibility for the other. He writes:

My responsibility is untransferable [sic], no one could replace me. In fact, it is a matter of saying the very identity of the human I starting from responsibility, that is, starting from this position or deposition of the sovereign I in self consciousness, a deposition which is precisely its responsibility for the Other. Responsibility is what is incumbent on me exclusively, and what *humanly*, I cannot refuse. This charge is a supreme dignity of the unique. I am I in the sole measure that I am responsible, a non-interchangeable I. I can substitute myself for everyone, but no one can substitute himself for me. Such is my inalienable identity of the subject. It is in this precise sense that Dostoyevsky said "We are all responsible for all men before all, and I more than all the others."<sup>28</sup>

To flourish, or for one to find meaning in his or her own existence, and indeed in his or her death, is to have one's obsession with one's own essence, or ego, disrupted by

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. p. 124.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p. 125.

<sup>28</sup> Levinas Emmanuel. Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo. Richard Cohen, translator. (Duquesne University Press: Pittsburgh). 1985. pp.100-101.

the face of the other. The other for Levinas, if one will recall, is open-ended, infinite, and beyond any enclosed identity. Both the subject and other therefore are open-ended and in process of discovery through the ethical relationship. Hence, in contrast to Heidegger, the emergence of the authentic self is one who is in relation and responsible for the other. It is not a self who understands that one's self is existentially alone and merely a being-towards-death.<sup>29</sup>

Levinas understands and accepts that there are limits to responsibility in that a singular subject is unable to be responsible for meeting the needs of all the others in the world, let alone for all those who suffer near him or her. Although it is impossible, one is not relieved of the demands upon me from all the others. This extreme responsibility remains in one's consciousness as one's own moral burden. Levinas argues that when the individual subject is faced with the many others in the world, and not the singular other, he or she is troubled. He writes:

It is troubled and becomes a problem when a third party enters. The third party is other than the neighbor, but also another neighbor, and also a neighbor of the other, and not simply his fellow [human being]...The third party introduces a contradiction in the saying whose signification before the other went in one direction. It is of itself the limit of responsibility and the birth of the question: What do I have to do with justice?<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Heidegger, Martin. Being and Time. John Macquarie and Edward Robinson, translators. (San Francisco: Harper and Row). 1962. p. 305.

<sup>30</sup> Levinas. Otherwise Than Being. Ibid. p. 157.

As a result, for Levinas, a call for justice is necessary as there is always a 'third' who problematizes the singular ethical relationship. He argues further:

The other is from the first the brother of all other men. The neighbor that obsesses me is already a face, both comparable and incomparable, a unique face and in relationship with faces, which are visible in the concern for justice.<sup>31</sup>

Therefore for Levinas, the foundation of justice is the face-to-face relationship as representative of all the others who face me becomes included in my consciousness. He writes: "The one for the other in proximity is not a deforming abstraction. In it justice is shown from the first, it is thus born from the signifyingness of signification, the one-for-the-other, signification."<sup>32</sup> The argument that justice arises in proximity or the face-to-face means for Levinas that justice is not simply an abstract principle determining one's behaviour towards the other. Instead, Levinas's idea of extreme responsibility towards the other, situated in relationship, can be expanded to include justice. Indeed, Levinas even extends his argument that ethics, meaning here the face-to-face, is the basis of all human endeavours. He writes: "Responsibility for the others or communication is the adventure that bears all the discourse of science and philosophy. Thus, this responsibility would be the very rationality of reason or of its universality, a rationality of peace."<sup>33</sup> For Levinas, therefore, the subject should also have a concern for justice in all above-named

---

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p. 158.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. p. 159.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. p. 160.

areas of endeavour. As a responsible subject therefore, it is necessary that one be concerned that justice is embedded in these areas of discourse and human activity.

Guenther, in assessing Levinas's claims in relation to justice, indicates one must also include concern for the responsible subject, and especially the responsible subject *par excellence* i.e., the maternal. In expressing her argument as both a woman and mother Guenther writes:

This demand for justice raises the possibility that I, too, am justified in seeking equality, that despite my ethical asymmetry with the Other (and indeed in the midst of this asymmetry), I myself might emerge as socially and politically symmetrical with the Others. Insofar as I am included in the community of thirds, I may also make a claim for justice and fair treatment.<sup>34</sup>

In this way, for Guenther, justice, in the relationships within a community of thirds, balances out the asymmetry of the subject and the other. This is because the mother, as also a subject herself, is someone's other. Guenther, however, in extending justice to the mother, expands Levinas's own understanding. Levinas writes:

The relationship with the third party is an incessant correction of the asymmetry of proximity in which the face is looked at. There is a weighing, thought, objectification, and thus a decree in which my anarchic relationship with illeity is betrayed, but in which it is conveyed before us. There is a betrayal of my anarchic relationship with illeity, but there is also a new relationship with it: it is only thanks to God, that, as a subject incomparable with the other, I am approached as an other by the others, that is, "for myself." "Thanks to God" I am another for the others.<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> Guenther, Lisa. Ibid. p. 155.

<sup>35</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel. Ibid. p. 158.

In this passage, Levinas outlines that, as a subject, he also is an *other* whom other subjects have a responsibility towards as an original subject in a relationship. But Levinas does not mention women, specifically mothers as included in his analysis. Guenther, however, describes this community of others which includes a ‘for-my-self’ that specifically includes women:

We could describe this complex relation in the language of pronouns: the I emerges as a responsible self – as a “me” absolved of the egoist *Moi* – in response to a You who commands me, and in this midst of this command points me to Him or Her, thereby opening the possibility of a We, a political community in which the distinctions between You, I, She and He would not be dissolved but preserved as anterior to the We that they constitute.<sup>36</sup>

In this way, in Guenther’s eyes, the maternal who is now both a subject and other, can and should expect the others in the community of the ‘We’ to be also concerned for her well-being and safety, etc. If there is injustice towards her or to whom she represents, there should be a requisite demand for justice. This is absolutely necessary for Guenther, despite the fact that for Levinas, there is the “paradox of representation” in regard to all women. It is in conjunction with justice that Levinas writes:

Out of representation is produced the order of justice moderating or measuring the substitution of me for the other, and giving the self over to calculus. Justice requires contemporaneous of representation. It is thus that the neighbor becomes visible, and looked at, presents himself, and there is also justice for me.<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> Guenther, Lisa. Ibid. p. 149.

<sup>37</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel. Ibid. p.159.

Guenther's careful reading of Levinas establishes that despite Levinas's omission of women, he can be interpreted as allowing there is justice for me, both as a singular subject and as an other. Such a reading redeems the misplaced sexism of Levinas for Guenther. She quotes Levinas in a later interview to support her claim further:

...but I think I should say that all those who attack us with such venom have no right to do so, and that consequently, along with this feeling of unbounded responsibility, there is certainly a place for defence, for it is not always a question of 'me' but of those close to me, who are also my neighbors. I call such a defence a politics, but a politics that is ethically necessary.<sup>38</sup>

In Levinas's philosophy, room can be made for women both individually and as a community. In this way they can seek both flourishing and justice, as well as to be protected from suffering and violence. Furthermore, as Guenther will in time interpret, it is also necessary that I attend to myself, to care for myself in this community of the We. I must attend to myself in order to meet my responsibilities for the other. If I did not attend to myself, that is care and nurture my self, I would not be able to give care and concern to the other who faces me. Moreover, it is necessary that I care for myself so that I can demand justice for all the others.<sup>39</sup>

Finally, and maybe somewhat contentiously, Guenther believes Levinas's thought has room for a woman's reproductive choices, that is, she has a right to choose abortion. This 'right to choose', as a singular woman, is under threat in many parts of the globe, including the west. It remains an urgent issue for women in the realm of politics and

---

<sup>38</sup> Guenther, Lisa. Ibid. p. 148.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. p.154.



justice. Guenther argues that Levinas's arguments can be extended to a political argument for women's singularity as an irreplaceable subject. She writes:

In this sense, an ethics of maternal bearing, such as Levinas describes in Otherwise than Being, requires a political recognition of mothers as a singular and irreplaceable selves: not as a walking womb or a source of egg cells, but as an I who remains itself in the midst of its being-for-Others".<sup>40</sup>

She also clarifies that Levinas's call to be "like a maternal body" does not mean that all women are commanded to give birth. Rather, it is meant to be a metaphor for the extreme responsibility of a subject, passive before the other and in the anarchy of ethical time.<sup>41</sup> For Guenther, the maternal body as motif also can be used to describe the gift of time in future existence for the other. The maternal body works as a successful metaphor as it is used in these contexts. I doubt, however, that Levinas would agree that the gestating fetus be stopped in its development, even with his invocations of justice and politics. Guenther's reading condoning abortion is thus an extrapolation from Levinas that reflects a more contemporary feminist perspective. It is also one that possibly extends Levinas's program beyond its limits.

Levinas was a man of deep faith and in no way supported or discussed women's political arguments in his work. He did not disrespect women; he was simply not engaged in gender politics or feminist thought. The use of female metaphors and the demarcated feminine/maternal however, should not be ignored when a Levinasian philosophy of

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Guenther argues that the maternal metaphor must apply to men as well as women. See Guenther, Lisa. Ibid. p. 96.

ethics is discussed. His numerous and continuing use of these motifs are obviously of significant importance to him in his task of arguing that ethics is the basis of human existence as ‘first philosophy.’ They require careful reading and evaluation.

Diane Perpich asks of what value, beyond that of moral piety, is Levinas’s work on ethics. She asks this not only on behalf of women but also of those engaged in such normative ethical work as care-giving and education. She writes:

When Levinas’s work is employed to identify and redress social, political, and economic injustices, when it is involved as calling us to a new respect for alterity, difference, diversity or simply “the other,” when it is cited as a way to rethink the ethical dimension of the relationship between teachers and students, caregivers and patients, judges and defendants, when it is appealed to by a host of disciplines from psychology and sociology to literary theory and communications studies as they make the “turn to ethics,” it is well-nigh impossible to read these invocations as having nothing to do with normative ethical concerns.<sup>42</sup>

Yet, the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas is neither a work of moral piety nor a work of normative ethics. It is a work motivated by a need to understand how the horrors of genocide could occur in the centre of Europe. His search for the reasons in philosophical literature and discourses led him to discover that the failure of philosophy in preventing the Holocaust was because, historically, it did not consider ethics as ‘first philosophy’. He proposed that western philosophy was overly concerned with ontology and with the knowledge of the world as it exists. His attraction to phenomenology was because it particularly deals with the concrete lived, experience of the subject and his or her own interpretation of the world. Jeffrey Murray writes:

---

<sup>42</sup> Perpich, Diane. Ibid. p. 125.

Levinas seeks to describe the Other as a phenomenon, a lived experience. He seeks to reveal the nature of one's relation to an other person through a portrait of the way in which that Other presents itself. And he finds that the experience of the Other is not one of knowing, but is instead one of ethical obligation. Prior to "ethics," traditionally conceived as a person's set of values and value hierarchies, lies a more primordial ethics, reconceived as a summons to responsibility.<sup>43</sup>

According to the argument posited by Levinas, the demand of responsibility comes not from a virtuous subject or an imposed deontological duty, or indeed from normative principles, but solely from the face of the other. This is an important distinction that would be necessary to apply in the varied ethical discourses found in the many disciplines mentioned by Perpich (see above quote). It would also mean there are many who face me at various times, but not all are in need. Determining whom to respond to and in what manner, is the work justice and of applied ethics. Levinas's brief discussion of the abstract notion of justice with the introduction of the 'third' as an answer is both unsatisfactory and incomplete. Jeffrey Murray writes in referring to the ethical command from the other in relation to justice:

Yet, it does not preclude the possibility of the commandment of the face might contain a particular sense of immediacy or urgency. Does not the epiphany of the face as a moral summons carry a relative magnitude? Does not the Other's cry for justice sound more urgently under the weight of great suffering?<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> Murray, Jeffrey. "The Dialogical Prioritization of Calls: Toward a Communicative Model of Justice" in The New Jersey Journal of Communication, Volume 11, No.1, Spring 2003. p. 5.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

Murray is correct in underlining the point that even with Levinas's deferral to an abstract notion of justice, one is left with a deficient model of justice. This is because there is no way forward to determine what the priorities should be and how particular needs should be met when there are many cries for justice. Thus, justice must listen for all the cries for justice and commence a dialogue with the others who are in need or suffering to determine what action is required.

Nonetheless, in reality, it is those who listen for, and receive the cries of justice who will be the ones who interpret the cries, and determine the outcome of such justice.

Murray writes:

The call of the Other is heard against a cultural and historical backdrop, through the interpretative filter of ideological preconceptions, prejudgments, and prejudices. In other words, even if the call of the Other is *announced* transparently, it may not, in practical terms, be *received* as such. This is simply because interpretative distortion often interposes itself to mask or overwrite the primordial first word.<sup>45</sup>

Levinas does not adequately address this problem outside of his pleadings that the other is beyond interpretation or knowledge, and that the singular subject is absolutely responsible for meeting the other's demand for justice. Yet, as argued by Sikka earlier in this chapter, this is why Levinas is unable to understand that his views of women are not acceptable or redeemable. Finally, he is unable to escape from his cultural and gender preconceptions. Perhaps, it is more his provocations and hyperbole in the area of responsibility that have had such an impact in various disciplines in which normative ethics are utilized. Levinas has, in many ways, advanced the 'turn to ethics' in a variety

---

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. p.10.

of disciplines. His urgent demands that we persevere in seeking a just world are difficult to ignore, but his work needs to be put in context.

An ethic of contemporary care, as developed by feminist thinkers, is also a relational ethic. It is an ethics theory that developed out of women's concern that a female voice be heard in philosophical discussions involving ethics and justice. There are similarities between care ethics and Levinas's ethics, not the least of which is the use of the feminine activity of mothering and caring. The following chapter will discuss the ethics of care as a contrast to Levinas, who has not allowed women a voice.

## CHAPTER FOUR - CARE

The previous two chapters have focused on Emmanuel Levinas's description of the feminine - the other *par excellence*, but also as the responsible and caring subject, or the good and sacrificing mother. Levinas utilizes his personal phenomenological understanding of the activity of the female in the world. Unfortunately, he focuses on the culturally received views of women, with which he appears in full agreement. A feminist critique of this utilization leads one to ask, what then is the women's view of moral responsibility to the other? This chapter will examine the ethics of care, which developed out of a feminist attempt to draw a distinct moral framework initially based on women's activities and the notion of the maternal. This approach will demonstrate the same weakness as that of Levinas's philosophy in the understanding of female moral activity. This is to say, it is based on a received cultural understanding that confines women in an outmoded romantic attitude of a caring without reservation. It will also demonstrate that care ethics lack a reasonable ethics framework. This is to say, it is a simply an adoration of a virtuous activity rather than a distinct and new ethical theory. Firstly, however, a brief history of the development of care ethics is in order.

The history of care ethics is commonly agreed to have started in the 1980's. At this time in the academy, women scholars began to examine women's moral experience. Previously it had been excluded from discourses in moral philosophy. In 1980, Sara Ruddick published her essay: "Maternal Thinking" which was followed by her 1989

book: Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace.<sup>1</sup> Ruddick's argument was based on an examination of moral thinking in mothers when they are caring for their children. From this examination, she proposed that mothering activities and caring skills could be utilized to achieve peace in global affairs. Ruddick promoted mothers as having a distinct and different non-violent, loving and caring ethic. In the Preface of the 2002 edition of Maternal Thinking, she admits her 1980 and 1989 arguments were simplistic and based on an idealized view of women and motherhood. Ruddick writes:

From the outset "difference" was controversial among feminists. But the crescendo of complaint has swelled in the last few years: the very idea of "women" is said to be hopelessly romantic and conceptually confused, and politically dangerous. Affirmations of difference allegedly mask feelings of moral superiority and fear of power, ignore painful divisions and injustices among women, and serve the purposes of political "backlash" against the women whose difference they supposedly celebrate.<sup>2</sup>

Although much has changed since Ruddick first published her work, the work is still considered groundbreaking by introducing the role of women and mothers as "thinking" to academic discourses.

A second notable text in the North American context was Carol Gilligan's work: In A Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development (1982).<sup>3</sup> Gilligan's main argument in this work is to argue that Lawrence Kohlberg's research on

---

<sup>1</sup> Ruddick, Sara. Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace. (Boston: Beacon Press). 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. pp. ix-x.

<sup>3</sup> Gilligan, Carol. In A Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press). 1982.

the moral development of children was flawed because he excluded girls. Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development maintained that the moral development of children progressed on a scale of six distinct phases. When Kohlberg's scale was applied to females, they appeared to only reach stage three. As a result, they were considered as deficient in their moral development. Gilligan writes:

Prominent among those who thus appear to be lacking in moral development when measured by Kohlberg's scale are women whose judgments seem to exemplify the third stage of his six-stage sequence. At this stage, morality is conceived in interpersonal terms and goodness is equated with helping and pleasing others.<sup>4</sup>

Further, Gilligan argues that by implication, women are only able to recognize the inadequacy of their moral development when they enter the traditional male areas of activity. In these areas, such as politics, law and so forth, the higher stages of moral reasoning are utilized.<sup>5</sup> According to Gilligan the highest stages of moral reasoning in Kohlberg's theory are "where relationships are subordinated to rules (stage four) and rules to universal principles of justice (stages five and six)."<sup>6</sup> Kohlberg's frame of reference would thus designate women as deficient in these stages.

In her rebuttal of Kohlberg's work, Gilligan proposes that women construct moral problems in a different way than in traditional western philosophy (that has been predominately constructed by men). As such, Gilligan argues, western moral philosophy

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p.18.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.



and Kohlberg's own work is based on moral reason and principles. The 'different way,' according to Gilligan, lies in the way that women conceive of moral problems in the first place. She writes:

In this conception, the moral problem arises from conflicting responsibilities rather than from competing rights and requires for its resolution a mode of thinking that is contextual and narrative rather than formal and abstract.<sup>7</sup>

Gilligan evaluates that this alternative type of moral reasoning, based on responsibilities and relationships, "centers on the activity of care," which she proceeds to discuss by using one of Kohlberg's test cases, the Heinz dilemma.<sup>8</sup>

In the Heinz dilemma, Heinz's wife is dying of a disease. The only thing that will save her is a drug that Heinz cannot afford. Jake, an eleven-year-old boy, is asked if Heinz should steal the drug. Jake answers in the affirmative because life is more important than money. Further, Jake answers that a judge would probably agree with him. Amy, an eleven year old girl, responds by saying that Heinz should not steal the drug and suggests that Heinz and the druggist could reach some type of agreement. This would involve Heinz working in the store to pay off his debt. Amy thinks that if the druggist could meet the wife, he would understand that he should either give the drug to the wife or make a deal with Heinz. Further, Amy is concerned that if Heinz steals the drug, he may go to jail and then there would be no one to care for his sick wife. Gilligan argues that Jake answers according to logic and principles, whereas Amy believes the dilemma

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 19.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

can be resolved through understanding the relationships, making connections, and caring for others.<sup>9</sup> Gilligan argues that Amy's way of moral reasoning is equally valid to Jake's way of reasoning. From this example, Gilligan concludes that an ethics of care, which arises from women's experience in relationship and responsibility, is a different but equally valid way of moral reasoning.<sup>10</sup>

There are some glaring errors in Gilligan's arguments. Her separation of justice from relationships is perhaps the most obvious. The druggist may not necessarily be a compassionate man. As well, even if the druggist had a relationship with Heinz or his wife, it is possible the druggist would tell Heinz he is more concerned with the success of his business than he is with the well being of his customers. Heinz would then have to steal the drug and rely on justice to determine the consequences.

Although Gilligan argues that women are most often responsible for providing the care required in relationships, such as the care provided to the children, it does not automatically follow that all women are caring, nor are they necessarily just. Hence, the fault of universalizing women as always acting in a certain way is evident in her argument. It is true however, that historically the majority of women have been engaged in domestic and institutional care-giving. Yet it is a great leap to assume that all women are caring and that they therefore, conceive moral problems in the same way. By constructing such a gender-based theory, Gilligan falls into the same trap as Kohlberg. Nonetheless, it still could be conceded that Gilligan has made a significant step in the

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. pp. 25-31.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p.173.

area of ethical understanding. Her introduction of women's voices to the discussion of moral theory is perhaps her most important contribution. As well, the introduction of a relational based ethics, however flawed, marks a vital beginning for women's participation in debates on contemporary care ethics.

Nel Noddings is another original care theorist who promoted an ethical position based on women's activity of care-giving. In her book, Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education (1984), Noddings argues that the concept of 'care' should be the foundational and informing activity in all discussions of moral developmental theory.<sup>11</sup> Noddings discusses various types of caring attitudes and activities in human relationships. She suggests that most humans, not just women, have a natural caring attitude, based on memories of being cared for as a child.<sup>12</sup> In Noddings's view, all human beings need to have been cared for as children in order to survive and flourish in the world. This natural caring attitude motivates the individual to become more involved or 'engrossed' with the activity of understanding the person being cared-about or cared-for. Noddings explains:

Caring is largely reactive and responsive. Perhaps it is even better characterized as receptive. The one-caring is sufficiently engrossed in the other to listen to him and to take pleasure or pain in what he recounts. Whatever she does for the cared-for is

---

<sup>11</sup> Noddings, Nel. Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education. (Berkeley: University of California Press). 1986.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p. 49.

embedded in a relationship that reveals itself as engrossment and in an attitude that warms and comforts the cared-for.<sup>13</sup>

A caring relationship thus includes an emotional attachment in the relationship. The caring person desires to provide the needed care. According to Noddings, there are times when the sentiment of wanting to care includes a feeling of moral obligation. This type of care she names as ethical care. In ethical care, a person may initially choose not to care but then decides instead to care in order to maintain his or her natural attitude of caring and a sense of an ideal self as being a good person.<sup>14</sup>

Noddings's proposals concerning the different types of care may be seen as an attempt to describe the emotional experience of caring and to advocate that understanding caring in relationships is a valuable element in moral theories. Her motivation is similar to Gilligan's in that Noddings wants to underline that in any discussion of morality, or indeed ethics, we must recognize that we live in the context of relationships that include emotional attachments.

Throughout her book, Noddings places her discussion on ethics and care in opposition to the traditional philosophies based on principles and rational propositions. She examines the experience of women in caring roles, such as mothering and teaching, and proceeds to privilege them throughout her book. As an example, on page one of her book she states:

One might say that ethics has been discussed largely in the language of the father: in principles and propositions, in terms

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p. 19.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p. 80.

such as justification, fairness, and justice. The mother's voice has been silent. Human caring and the memory of caring and being cared for, which I shall argue form the foundation of ethical response, have not received attention except as outcomes of ethical behaviour. One is tempted to say that ethics so far has been guided by Logos, the masculine spirit, whereas the more natural and, perhaps stronger approach would be through Eros, the feminine spirit.<sup>15</sup>

In this passage, Noddings sets up her argument by utilizing the trope of the 'feminine spirit' as compassionate and caring. This is seen as a natural way of engaging in moral activity.

Later in her book, however, Noddings allows that men as well as women are capable of care. She will nevertheless qualify this, stating that she privileges women because women are better at caring relationships. Noddings writes:

It should be clear that my description of an ethic of caring as a feminine ethic does not imply to speak for all women nor to exclude men... there is reason to believe that women are better equipped for caring than men are. This is partly a result of the construction of psychological deep structures in the mother-child relationship. A girl can identify with the one caring for her and thus maintain a relationship while establishing identity. A boy must, however find his identity with the absent one — the father — and thus disengage himself from the intimate relation of caring.<sup>16</sup>

That Noddings takes this position is disappointing. Although she mentions that men can or should be caring, she promotes the idea that men are inept in relationships and in giving care. This is not the case, of course, because there are many caring men in families, in fatherhood, in health care and teaching and so forth. As well, not all women

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p.1.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p. 97.

are good caregivers. Many, if not most, women have historically found themselves in care-giving roles but not necessarily by choice. The bifurcation of gender roles promoted by this ethic reinforces the stereotyping of both men and women. Noddings employs an idealized view of the 'feminine,' much like Levinas. This idealization of the feminine has led to women being excluded from moral theorizing. Even though Noddings wants the reader to listen to the voices of women, their voices appear to be no different than the received historical trope about women as carers that has led to their exclusion from philosophy and that Noddings argues against.

In a bizarre move, Noddings argues further that because boys are disengaged from care-giving they seek comfort and security in religion. She writes:

It seems to me quite natural that men, many of whom are separated from the intimacy of caring, should create gods and security and love in worship. But what ethical need have women for God?...What I mean to suggest is that women have no need of a conceptualized God, one wrought in the image of man. All the love and goodness commanded by such a God can be generated from the love and goodness found in the warmest and best caring relations.<sup>17</sup>

Clearly from the above passages, Noddings believes that women's ways of caring activities should be privileged over traditional moral philosophy and religion. Her arguments regarding religion are simplistic. To say that warm and loving relationships could/should replace the need for religion is not respectful of many women's experience of religion and is incredibly naive. Further, to say men create their gods because they are inadequate in forming loving and secure relations diminishes their humanity.

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

Unfortunately, she debases her argument by universalizing all women as being warm and caring even though she argues she does not intend to do this. Similarly to Gilligan, Noddings may be faulted for her universalizing of gender social roles. Yet the fact remains that they both were instrumental in bringing a women's voice to the academic world of ethics and contemporary care ethics theorizing has nonetheless changed because of these early care theorists.

Virginia Held is another contemporary woman philosopher who in her book, The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political and Global (2006), discusses five distinct features of care ethics that remain influential in contemporary ethics of care discussions.<sup>18</sup> She writes: "First, the central focus of the ethics of care is on the compelling moral salience of attending to and meeting the needs of particular others for whom we take responsibility."<sup>19</sup> In this statement she repeats Gilligan's and Nodding's view, that human beings have all been in need of care as children and most will need to be cared for in illness and frailty. Accordingly, care theory recognizes this reality of human existence. The particular others that Held alludes to are those individuals who are being cared-for and therefore are in a relationship with the caregiver. The caregiver is not engaged in care-giving because of self-interest nor because of some sense of an altruistic ideal. According to Held, the caregiver and the cared-for are intertwined in a "cooperative relationship" and are concerned for the well being of each other and the relationship

---

<sup>18</sup> Held, Virginia. The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political and Global. (Oxford: Oxford University Press) 2006.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p. 10.

itself.<sup>20</sup> Hence, Held argues, “Moralities built on the image of the independent, autonomous, rational individual largely overlook the reality of human dependence, and the morality for which it calls.”<sup>21</sup> In this way Held also criticizes contemporary philosophy for its omissions.

The second feature of care theory, according to Held, is that emotion is valued in determining the outcome of a moral deliberation. However, only certain emotions are to be cultivated, such as empathy, sympathy, and sensitivity. Held argues that although raw emotion cannot be a guide for moral deliberation, the removal of emotion in moral deliberation is a deficiency. According to Held, emotions are part of human existence and they need to be reflected upon in ethical concerns.<sup>22</sup> This area, however, is fraught with difficulties. Problems arise because although moral emotions exist in ethical discussions, the way in which one would determine exactly what is and is not acceptable is not clear. Held will argue that because of this lack of clarity in determining acceptable emotions, care theory requires the establishing of a deliberative ethics of care. She writes:

Since even the helpful emotions can often become misguided or worse—as when an excessive empathy with others leads to a wrongful degree of self-denial or when benevolent crosses over in to controlling domination—we need an *ethics* of care, not just care itself. The various aspects and expressions of care and caring relations need to be subjected to moral scrutiny and evaluated, not just observed and described.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p. 12.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. p. 10.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p. 11.



In this passage, Held proposes that an ethical examination of caring activity and/or emotions is required in order to assure that the care provided is ethical. However, she has not as yet proposed exactly who does the ethical scrutiny nor how it is to be evaluated.

Held's third feature of an ethics of care is that it rejects dominant moral theories that utilize abstract reasoning in order to avoid "bias and arbitrariness."<sup>24</sup> Instead, an ethics of care recognizes the moral value and guidance found in particular relationships, i.e. friendships, and parent-child relationships. She states:

To most advocates of the ethics of care, the compelling moral claim of the particular other may be valid even when it conflicts with the requirement usually made by moral theories that moral judgments be universalizeable, and this is of fundamental moral importance.<sup>25</sup>

Consequently, this would place an ethics of care in conflict with the traditional idea of justice as founded on moral principles that can be applied universally to individuals. Held agrees that this could well be the case. She argues however that it is the context of relationship that should influence the outcome of justice. In this way, "the norms of care" in a relationship should be regarded as a part of justice.<sup>26</sup> Hence, the private and the particular must be an element in justice.

It follows then that the fourth feature of an ethics of care for Held is that the ethic addresses moral activity in the private realm. She argues that moral theorizing has been

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

traditionally interested in the public arena. It has for the most part ignored private relationships such as those found in the home. Moreover, according to Held, because of this lack of consideration, a full and complex understanding of life is lacking in moral theories.<sup>27</sup> She writes:

The ethics of care addresses rather than neglects moral issues arising in relations among the unequal and dependant, relations that are often laden with emotion and involuntary, and then notices how often these attributes apply not only in the household but in the wider society as well.<sup>28</sup>

This is an argument that feminist scholarship in the academy has long recognized, and it does not only arise in the ethics of care. The split between private and public has often led to acts of injustice towards those in the private realm who have little or no power. For example, violence perpetrated against women and children usually occurs in the privacy of family units, away from public scrutiny. This concern has been raised in the public realm of justice and law. The violence stops however, not because the private relationship becomes more caring or because of contextual norms of caring. It stops, hopefully, because of the application of justice. Women in the west are today equal persons under the law with the attendant, full human rights. It is in the privacy of relationships and certain cultural communities that the lack of justice occurs.

The fifth feature of the ethics of care, according to Held, is its critique of liberal individualism. In the dominant liberal moral theories, the individual is viewed as

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p. 13.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

autonomous and distinct. Held writes, referring to both Michael Sandel and Martha Nussbaum:

What such views [liberal moral theories] hold in Michael Sandel's critique of them is that "what separates us is in some sense prior to what connects us—epistemologically prior as well as morally prior. We are distinct individuals and *then* we form relationships." In Martha Nussbaum's liberal feminist morality, "the flourishing of human beings taken one by one is both analytically and normatively prior to the 'flourishing' of any group."<sup>29</sup>

In contrast to this understanding, Held argues that the ethics of care maintains that the fully autonomous and detached individual is a misconception of human life. Held repeats the views of the early care theorists discussed above, by stating that people live inter-dependently and are in relationships throughout life.<sup>30</sup> The moral life, therefore, consists in cultivating relationships that are based in care. In this way, the ethics of care considers that human beings are "embedded and encumbered" in relationships. Therefore an ethic calls us to a responsibility to care.<sup>31</sup> It is an existential reality that we live intimately amongst others. For all care theorists, we must care for one another in order for all to flourish.

Michael Slote in his book, The Ethics of Care and Empathy (2007), states that care theory is in fact a virtue expressed in ethical relationships and that it may even be

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p.15.

considered a sentimental moral theory.<sup>32</sup> Care theorists, for Slote, have not been rigorous enough in developing philosophical arguments as to why care should be considered anything else but a variation of empathy towards particular others. Further, he argues that care ethics, at this time, cannot successfully global justice. The fact that care theory is concerned with relationships of close proximity has meant that the theory of ethics has had some difficulty in examining more distant relationships. These more distant relationships are those in which the issue of justice and its subsequent responsibilities are also of great importance. Yet, as determined by Held and others, care ethics and justice are not necessarily in conflict, but can work together. According to Slote, this theory has not yet been fully developed. As a consequence, care ethics, at least for Slote, is not yet matured.<sup>33</sup> The difficulty with an ethics based on close proximity in contrast to justice in more distant relationships is also found in Emmanuel Levinas's limited discussion of justice as considered in the previous chapter. The key to this transition is rather than contrasting the two, justice must be included in the inter-subjective relationship. That is, a relationship must be reciprocal in order to be just. Tove Pettersen, a contemporary care theorist, adopts such an approach.

Tove Pettersen, in her essay, "Conception of Care: Altruism, Feminism and Mature Care" explores the adoption of a type of reciprocal care which she names as

---

<sup>32</sup> Slote, Michael. The Ethics of Care and Empathy. (London: Routledge). 2007.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. pp.1-8.

Mature Care.<sup>34</sup> She begins her examination of care by arguing that the common definitions of ‘care’ indicate a human altruism towards others. According to Pettersen, altruism contains five characteristics: “(1) a selfless act, (2) provided unconditionally and (3) spontaneously (4) to particular human beings in need of care (5) for the sake of the person’s best interest.”<sup>35</sup> These characteristics are similar to Levinas’s demand that the subject has an absolute responsibility towards the other; it is selfless. More particularly, it is a moral responsibility towards the vulnerable suffering ‘other.’ This type of altruism might have its roots in religion. In a religious sensibility, the ‘call to serve the poor and the sick’ in the name of a particular God is a common part of a devotional life and faith. Nonetheless, Pettersen claims that this type of care is unethical. It is based upon an incorrect ontology. In her view, it is based on a moral ontology that views personhood as a stand-alone entity in the world, whereas for care theorists the individual self is in fact a relational self. She writes:

But if a human being’s being-in the-world is understood as individualistic, self-assertion at the expense of others, it partly explains why actions are deemed good only if the other-regarding

---

<sup>34</sup> Pettersen, Tove. Conceptions of Care: “Altruism, Feminism, and Mature Care” in Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy. (Hoboken New Jersey: Wiley). Volume 27, Number 2, Spring 2012. pp. 366-389. Pettersen acknowledges that the term ‘mature care’ was introduced by Gilligan as an interactive process or dialogue between the caregiver and the recipient of the care. This type of care was also expanded upon by Nel Noddings and Eva Kittay. See Pettersen. Ibid. p. 376.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. p. 368.

perspective clearly dominates. With an alternative ontology, where the starting point is human connectedness and interdependency as it is in an ethics of care, the welfare of one individual is seen as intertwined with the flourishing of others.<sup>36</sup>

It must be said that the advancement of this alternate ontology is not quite so simple as Pettersen claims it to be. Although we are not solitary creatures as such, we do suffer and die as solitary beings. The dialectic between the self and the other is complex and requires much more analysis than Pettersen and proponents of care ethics propose. As will be seen in the next chapter on the ethical framework developed by Paul Ricoeur, knowledge of the self as both solitary and relational is a great puzzle in the history of moral philosophy. Further, although Levinas does admit to a demand from the other, as separate from the subject, the meaning of his work is to indicate that ethics, or the relation with the other, is primary and exceeds the understandings of ontology. World religions, and indeed the sciences, such as biology and physics, also continue to grapple with the concept of inter-connectedness. Simply attesting to an inter-connected self does not solve the ontological problem. Inter-connection between a self and another is a category, or an element of ontology, rather than ontology as such.

Pettersen examines compassion as a spontaneous impulse to care for others, which for her, is another element of altruistic care. She rightly explains that although a feeling of compassion towards others is considered noble, it does not mean that care based on compassion is always necessarily good. She writes:

Comprehending care as only originating in a heartfelt, spontaneous compassion also creates, in addition to the insecurity

---

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. p. 370.

attending to its delivery, undue pressure on both parties in the caring relationship. The carer might feel compelled to provide care whenever she experiences compassion and would feel guilty if she didn't. She might see the care as second rate if it is not accompanied by deeply felt sentiment.<sup>37</sup>

In this way, the problem of spontaneous compassion is similar to Levinas's demand of immediate responsibility. Yet it differs in that the command comes from the other for Levinas, rather than being initiated internally within the subject. The moral burden imposed on the subject or caregiver in both cases is extreme. Pettersen may be correct in stating that ethical action or decisions based *only* on emotional feelings of compassion are insufficient. As a remedy, Pettersen proposes that compassion towards others in need of care must include a process of cognitive reasoning. She writes: "Compassion is an aspect of mature care, but unlike the altruistic concept, the other-regarding feeling is not granted special status, and this has some important implications."<sup>38</sup> The implications are that emotional, contextual and intellectual understandings of the relationship are all required. Ethical action is, therefore, determined by a reflective process that employs both analytical and emotional elements. Pettersen explains:

To insist on a central role for both emotion and reason in caring is to imply that the agent can practice care for those she does not feel much toward, and that a carer does not necessarily perform an action that immediately appears to be rational if it is counter intuitive or contradicts her emotions.<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. p. 372.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. p. 379.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. p. 380.

In this way, Pettersen is attempting to explain that the caring activity is not based solely on an emotional or moral impulse but based on intellectual activity as well. This allows for care to be given even if the caregiver does not feel compassion. Conversely, it may also allow the caregiver permission to not provide a certain type of care if she intuits that it is misguided. Nonetheless, Pettersen does not refer to any frame of moral reasoning in order to explain what exactly reasonable reflection entails. Further, the notion of compassion towards suffering others is simply not given enough examination by Pettersen. The history of compassion as a moral virtue both in religion and philosophy is long and complex. Accordingly, simply adding intellectual reasoning to the notion of compassion dismisses and diminishes this great historical inheritance.

Lastly, Pettersen discusses her idea of reciprocity in care relations. If relationships are reciprocal, the idea of justice in intimate relationships may be attained. Nonetheless, Pettersen recognizes that most relationships in a ‘care’ context’ are asymmetrical. They are asymmetrical because, most often, the one who is receiving the care has the least power in the relationship. Moreover, in altruistic care, there is a danger of the caregiver being exploited. The caregiver who responds selflessly, according to Pettersen, receives nothing in return. He or she would be required to empty his or her self in the act of caring. As a solution to the caregiver’s potential loss of self, Pettersen argues that in mature care, both the caregiver and the receiver of care are to be considered equal. She writes:

No one should be perceived or treated as inferior; hence the carers’ interests are equal in worth to the cared-for’s. A carer is not an instrument for others to exploit, just as the caree is not of lesser worth for her dependency and vulnerability. The one-sidedness of the altruistic comprehension of care fails to



conceptualize mutual recognition as a significant feature, whereas this is one of the prominent features of mature care.<sup>40</sup>

Pettersen thus establishes that in caring activity mutual respect is required in order to prevent exploitation of either the carer or the caree. She then extends this mutuality to responsibility. Therefore, both parties must contribute to a common aim. She uses examples in teaching and nursing where the student or patient must make efforts towards the aim of flourishing in learning or healing. In other words, the caree is not a passive recipient of care.<sup>41</sup> Although there is a brief foray into ethics in Pettersen's claims, there is not enough depth in this descriptive philosophy. It ignores a deeper understanding of a self in relation. The reciprocity posed by Pettersen does not entail any process or change experienced by the caregiver while providing care. The reciprocity is aimed towards the flourishing of the receiver of the care, or the common goal. The giving self is respected but not necessarily enhanced in her or his flourishing as a human being. Hence, the proposed mature care ethic is unsatisfactory in developing any significant new understandings in relational ethics. The inclusion of mutual respect in asymmetrical relationships, however, may move care ethics towards the aim of justice but not in any satisfying way.

Care theorists, as discussed above, are attempting in many ways to bring forth a phenomenological understanding to the activity of giving care. In order to do this more successfully, they must examine the deep processes that occur in the self when in a

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. p. 381.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

relationship with an other who is vulnerable or suffering. Ruth Groenhout, another contemporary care theorist, attempts to do this by introducing the idea of the sacred into such discussions. However, she is not particularly successful.

Ruth Groenhout writes of the similarities between the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas and care ethics. In her book, Connected Lives: Human Nature and an Ethics of Care (2004), Groenhout discusses human nature as espoused both by Augustine and Levinas and compares their ethics to an ethics of care.<sup>42</sup> Groenhout begins her comparison between Levinas's philosophy and care ethics by noting that some would disagree with Levinas's view of women in his body of work.<sup>43</sup> Groenhout then proceeds to compare Levinas's arguments to care theory, completely ignoring that both philosophies utilize the female motif as ideals in quite different ways. Her purpose in making this comparison is to show that the basic features of care theory can be found in male philosophy. This, she explains, gives care theory more philosophical credibility because it can be gender neutral. She writes:

...it is worth noting that Levinas's account of ethics, an account very close in a number of ways to that given by care theory, is not derived from women's experiences or moral reasoning. While this is in one sense a problem that must be dealt with, it is at the same time evidence that care theory is not applicable only to women, nor is derivable only from women's experience. Instead the similarities between Levinas's account of ethics and that offered by care theory suggest that careful philosophical

---

<sup>42</sup> Groenhout, Ruth. Connected Lives: Human Nature and an Ethics of Care. (Lanham Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield). 2004.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. p. 79.

investigation into lived human experience generates just this type of ethical theory.<sup>44</sup>

This argument is contrary to the fact that Levinas does in fact employ the motif of the mother as the ideal responsible subject. Groenhout makes a critical error by choosing to ignore the role of the female motif, however misguided, in his work. He does not use men as the ideal responsible subject in his philosophical musings. Further, the grounding of care theory historically is based on women's experience. Perhaps, it may be that *because* of Levinas's utilization of the female, and care theorists' grounding in the experience of mothering and care-giving, that Groenhout senses some general similarities.

In her work, Groenhout outlines four features of Levinas's philosophy that she believes are similar to features of care theory and are gender neutral. These are: 1) both forms of ethics are based on an understanding that existence is relational; 2) both ethics argue that in moral discussions we must recognize that we are embodied and that the others in our relationships have physical needs 3) both ethics focus on the particularity of others, and finally, 4) although both ethics have an element of self-sacrifice for the sake of others, both ethics call for justice for the many others beyond an individual's ability to serve.<sup>45</sup> Groenhout then adds a religious element to this list. Unfortunately, she incorrectly interprets the call of the other in Levinas's philosophy as a direct call from God. She writes:

Further, Levinas articulates this notion of the otherness of the other in terms of the sacred. This adds a dimension to the call to

---

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. pp. 79-80.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. pp. 80-90.

care that is, I think missing in contemporary care theory....The language of the sacred has been misused in the past, but it can be properly used, as in identifying the recognition of an other who calls me into an ethical relationship.<sup>46</sup>

Diane Perpich, in her review of Groenhout's book, states that this is a misuse of Levinas's idea of the other as infinite. Perpich writes and quotes Groenhout:

Groenhout finds Augustine and Levinas companionable fellow travellers that "encourage us to recognize that human life is lived in the presence of sacredness" (130). Though Levinas explicitly rejected the notion of the sacred, this does not undermine Groenhout's claim that both philosophers teach us "God is recognized in the other person" (130). This is an appealing idea for the author since it combines recognition of a transcendent (nonsubjective) and thus potentially objective ideal with an emphasis on the moral significance of particularity—a combination that Groenhout sees as the specific contribution of care theory in general.<sup>47</sup>

It is obvious that Groenhout wants to ground the ethics of care in some type of religious metaphysics, but she is unable to do so in her brief comparison. She seems to rely on a sense of intuition rather than a detailed analysis of Levinas and Augustine.

In summary, the ethics of care as a field of ethical theory began in the 1980's within the body of feminist scholarship in the academy. It was and is a genuine attempt to bring the concrete experience of the activity of caring into moral, theoretical discussions. Although initially founded on the experience of women and mothering, the contemporary theorists are attempting to move the theory into more gender-neutral discussions. The

---

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. pp. 99-100.

<sup>47</sup> Perpich, Diane. "Book Review" in Hypatia. Vol.21 Number 4. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press). 2006. p. 22

theory continues to have difficulty with care and justice. That is, there are distinct problems in the transfer from the particular to the general, or more succinctly, from the one to the many. The lack of deep analysis of the process that the self undergoes within the context of care is greatly needed in future discussions of care theory. Paul Ricoeur in his philosophy of ethics explores this category of moral philosophy. The next chapter, therefore, will discuss Ricoeur's theory of the hermeneutical self and ethics of the other.

## CHAPTER FIVE – RICOEUR'S "LITTLE ETHICS"

The previous chapter examined the topic of the ethics of care as espoused by a number of women moral theorists. The purpose of the discussion was to demonstrate how some women scholars have responded to liberal moral theory in the academy, which has historically ignored women's ideas and experiences of human morality. As well, the ethics of care was discussed in order to compare Emmanuel Levinas's motifs of the female as other *par excellence* and the maternal as the ideal responsible subject. Although there are similarities between the two ethics, such as the priority of relationships in ethical discussions, these relationships are idealized and dependent upon a universal ideal of a female activity in the world. Further, both the ethics of care and Emmanuel Levinas have rejected the received tradition of western moral philosophy as a failure. Care theorists argue that western moral philosophy has failed to prevent the unjust treatment of women and, as well, to hear women's voices. The western moral tradition, according to these theorists, has simply ignored the fact that women are also moral beings. Further, the continuation of sexual violence perpetuated towards women and girls appears to be a concern outside of ethical discussions and moral theory in the traditional canon. And, although women and girls are expected to be the caregivers towards those in need, there is no reciprocity, nor examination of the concrete experience of care-giving itself. Simply put, it is an expected female activity. Most often, it is the women in families and communities that are tasked with caring for the sick, fragile or dying members of their family or social group. In Canada, for example, the caregivers who provide paid care to the sick and elderly in their homes, are frequently new immigrants and are paid minimal

wages and benefits. This reality, however, is not meant to exclude the piece-meal gains made for women and girls in justice theory and judicial practice. More and more, 'global ethics' is a field where women are able to find a place for their voice. Generally, this is the result of work in disciplines outside of the western moral tradition, however. For Levinas, western moral philosophy failed to prevent the horrors of the Holocaust. He has reminded us of our responsibilities that this horrific event, and the still continued violence perpetrated against different others in various global contexts, must be considered a priority in our moral theorizing. Yet Levinas's philosophy did not deal in a completely satisfying way with the actual situation of women in the relation of care and justice.

The following chapter will discuss the exploration of ethics in Paul Ricoeur's philosophy as an additional voice to western moral theorizing. The expanse of Paul Ricoeur's work in philosophy is truly remarkable. His many books and essays cover the great questions of human existence with all its conundrums and vicissitudes. One of the major underlying themes in his work is the question: How is it that humanity lives capably in the world and yet seems incapable in preventing suffering? He further asks: Who are we? How do we understand and interpret the world in which we find ourselves? What compels us to act or not act in the world? Most importantly, for this chapter, Ricoeur argues that it is finally the deep human realization and understanding that we live with others, that we need others in order know ourselves, and that others, like ourselves, may suffer.

Paul Ricoeur was born in Valence, France on February 27<sup>th</sup>, 1913 and was of a Huguenot Protestant background. Like Levinas, he studied philosophy in France amongst the most prominent and innovative thinkers of the day, such as Gabriel Marcel (1899-

1973) and Jean- Paul Sartre (1905-1980).<sup>1</sup> Like Levinas, he was prisoner of war during World War II. While in prison, he immersed himself in the philosophical writings of Karl Jaspers, Edmund Husserl and notably, Martin Heidegger. Indeed, it was while he was in prison that he “undertook a translation of Edmund Husserl’s “Ideen I”.<sup>2</sup> It is reasonable to assume that Ricoeur both understood and was deeply affected by the moral omissions and failures which occurred in the heart of Europe in World War II. The great human sufferings that unfolded during the war no doubt profoundly influenced Ricoeur’s path in philosophy.

Ricoeur’s initial philosophical inquiries led him to explore areas of human fallibility and human consciousness. Similarly to Levinas, he was motivated to understand why human beings are capable of participating in acts which are considered evil and that cause such terrible harm to their fellow human beings. As such, his first publications were an exploration of the human will. His first published work: Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary (1966) [1950]<sup>3</sup> explored the possibility, in

---

<sup>1</sup> Joy, Morny. “Paul Ricoeur: Hermeneutics, Philosophy and Religion.” in Continental Philosophy and Philosophy of Religion. Morny Joy, editor. (Dordrecht: Springer). 2011. p. 17.

<sup>2</sup> This work was first published in English as “Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy.” F. Kertsten, translator. (The Hague: M. Nijhoff). 1982 [1913].

<sup>3</sup> Ricoeur, Paul. Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary. E. V. Kohàk, translator. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press). 1966.



a Husserlian mode, of determining the essence (*eidos*) and structure of the human will.<sup>4</sup>

In this exploration, Ricoeur came to an awareness that acts of consciousness involve an interaction with emotions and impulses, which are involuntary. According to Morny Joy, he concluded that there are various contingencies which impact the conscious acts of the will within the reality of human life. Joy explains:

His studies from this time demonstrate the radical finitude of the human condition — the free yet bound nature of the will, struggling to act in resolute ways, in conformity with rational decisions, but always susceptible to the vagaries of the body with its physical and emotional disruptions, as well as to unconscious impulses.<sup>5</sup>

For Ricoeur, the nature of the human will is finite, or is located in a limit-situation. Moreover, he further discovered that although we have a certain freedom to act (the voluntary), we also suffer physically and emotionally (the involuntary).<sup>6</sup> A human subject, then, is involved in a dialectic within oneself, mediating between his or her actions and experiences of suffering or being acted upon. As a result, even though one may aspire to act with goodness, one may find he or she is blocked from acting upon this aspiration due to involuntary limitations. We are limited human beings. Yet, according to Ricoeur: “The phenomena of the voluntary and the involuntary appeared to be capable of accounting only for the weaknesses of being exposed to evil and capable of doing wrong,

---

<sup>4</sup> Joy, Morny. “Paul Ricoeur: Hermeneutics, Philosophy and Religion.” Ibid. p. 18.

<sup>5</sup> Joy. Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ricoeur, Paul. “Intellectual Autobiography,” in The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur. Lewis Hahn, editor. (Peru Illinois: Open Trade and Academic Book). 1996. p. 12.

but not of actually doing evil.”<sup>7</sup> Although human beings can and do choose to participate in bad or evil things, for Ricoeur it is not because they have a bad will and they are therefore compelled to do evil acts.

In his next body of work, Ricoeur moves from a phenomenological examination of the finite will to a more nuanced examination of human existence. Ricoeur’s works, Finitude and Guilt: Fallible Man (1965 [1960]) and the Symbolism of Evil (1969 [1960]) marked a significant philosophical move towards a hermeneutical philosophy and away from a phenomenological philosophy in the Husserlian mode.<sup>8</sup> In these works, Ricoeur became aware that consciousness was not only often unaware of itself, but that self-understanding was an interpretative process mediated by such contingencies as cultural and religious symbols and texts.<sup>9</sup> This turn to the hermeneutical understanding of texts and symbols allowed Ricoeur to expand his understanding of the way an individual interprets his or her experience of the world. He wanted to understand how an individual makes sense of a seemingly chaotic and unpredictable existence. Indeed, this became the foundational idea that Ricoeur would later focus on and refine in his philosophical project. He would become more deeply interested in the concept of a ‘self,’ i.e., the interpreter of these texts and symbols and who acts in the world. Nonetheless, at this

---

<sup>7</sup> Ricoeur, Paul. Ibid, p. 15.

<sup>8</sup> Ricoeur, Paul. Finitude and Guilt: Fallible Man. Ch. A. Kelbey translator, (Chicago: Henry Regnery). 1965. The Symbolism of Evil. Emerson Buchanan, translator, (Boston : Beacon Press). 1969.

<sup>9</sup> Joy. “Paul Ricoeur: Hermeneutics, Philosophy and Religion.” Ibid. p. 18.

juncture in his work, Ricoeur remained concerned with the phenomenological project but he maintained that the life-world of the conscious subject could not be bracketed off; the *epoché* of the early Husserlian phenomenological method had become impossible. He writes:

There is no self-understanding that is not mediated by signs, symbols and texts; in the last resort understanding coincides with the interpretation given to these mediating terms. In passing from one to the other, hermeneutics gradually frees itself from the idealism with which Husserl had tied to identify phenomenology.<sup>10</sup>

Husserl's phenomenology would thus become a hermeneutical phenomenology for Ricoeur. This new understanding would place an importance on the circular process occurring within the self during the activity of understanding texts. The self is a hermeneutical self where the texts and symbols become part of the self in the process of interpretation or more succinctly, the text is in me. This then further influences the self's on-going interpretation of other texts. In addition, as his next project was to indicate, sub-conscious drives and desires and their symbolic expressions, as well as their interpretations, would also influence Ricoeur's understanding of the hermeneutical self. First, it is important to appreciate what Ricoeur meant by a hermeneutic self. He explains: "By *Self* I mean a non-egoistic, non-narcissistic, non-imperialist mode of subjectivity

---

<sup>10</sup> Ricoeur, Paul. "On Interpretation" in After Philosophy: End or Transformation. K. Baynes, J. Bohman and T. McCarthy editors. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press). 1986. p. 357.

which responds and corresponds to the power of a work to display a world.”<sup>11</sup> The hermeneutical self which is described here by Ricoeur, does not approach a text with pre-conceived ideas that the self will impose on the text. The self is open to the meaning of the text with all its contextual undercurrents. The self is enhanced or flourishes with these new understandings which were previously inaccessible. In time, Ricoeur will bring this understanding of the self to the other who is in a relationship with another being who is regarded as a person rather than a text.

Paul Ricoeur also began an intense study of Freudian psychoanalysis, which culminated in his book: Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation (1970 [1965]).<sup>12</sup> This intense period of study assisted Ricoeur in his own self-understanding of guilt and personal mental suffering. He states: “For me, the passage through Freud was of critical importance; besides the decreased concentration I owe to him on the problem of guilt, and a greater attention to undeserved suffering.”<sup>13</sup> Further, this study led Ricoeur to conclude that in hermeneutical examinations and understandings there can be a conflict of interpretations. He writes in his autobiographical essay:

I owe to the preparation of my book on Freud the acknowledgement of speculative constraints tied to what I have termed the conflict of interpretations. The acknowledgment of the

---

<sup>11</sup> Ricoeur, Paul. “Philosophical and Theological Hermeneutics.” Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses. Vol.5. No.1. (1975). p. 30.

<sup>12</sup> Ricoeur, Paul. Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation. D. Savage, translator. (New Haven: Yale University Press).

<sup>13</sup> Ricoeur, Paul. In Hahn. Ibid. p. 21.

equal rights of rival interpretations seemed to me to belong to a genuine ontology of reflection and philosophical speculation. I saw Freud take his place within an easily identifiable tradition, that of a hermeneutic of suspicion continuing the line of Feuerbach, Marx, and Nietzsche.<sup>14</sup>

In this passage, Ricoeur is introducing something vital for his later work. Nothing that we say or interpret can be regarded as inherently correct. Before being finally accepted, any interpretation has to be judged by peers, in accordance with a hermeneutics of suspicion. There are always rival or competing claims. Such claims have the right, nonetheless, to be interpreted and assessed as better or worse interpretations, according to the hermeneutics of suspicion. It has to be subjected to careful evaluation of its claims. This is done by public discussion and argument, not by a process that would simply accept or dismiss its claims according to an abstract process of verification. It is extremely important, therefore, not to assume that a received particular point of view, no matter how embedded in one's own received tradition, should be considered the correct one.

This period of close investigations into the process of understanding texts and symbols was followed by Ricoeur's expansion of the hermeneutical self to include the idea of the narrative self. This is another important stage in Ricoeur's philosophy of the self. The narrative self encompasses Ricoeur's understanding as to how an individual creates coherence and structure from the manifold of influences and events in one's own life. Similar to a narrative story, the characters can and do change; unexpected events

---

<sup>14</sup> Ricoeur, Paul. In Hahn. Ibid. pp. 21-22.

occur in one's life, yet there is the ability on the part of the protagonist to direct the plot in new directions.<sup>15</sup>

In the second half of his career, Ricoeur returned to the great questions of human sufferings and the cruel reality that some human beings do indeed inflict sufferings on others. He recognized that throughout his intense study and writing on philosophical hermeneutics, and on the self, that he had not paid sufficient attention to the actual suffering of other human beings and the realm of justice. Ricoeur remarks to Charles Reagan:

It is this speculative problem of action and passion, but also the problem of victimization — the whole story of this cruel century. The twentieth century — and all the suffering imposed on the Third World by the rich, affluent countries by colonialism. There is a history of victims that keeps accompanying or reduplicating

---

<sup>15</sup> The narrative self will not be expanded upon further in this chapter. The chapter is meant to indicate the evolution of Ricoeur's thinking as he moves in the direction of his work on ethical relations. The indications of the evolution in Ricoeur's thesis that need to be acknowledged at this stage are that the human self is limited, hermeneutical, open to the other in a non-dominant orientation, and capable of constructing a narrative identity. It is sufficient to acknowledge that in constructing a narrative self, from Ricoeur's perspective, a human being can create a narrative that gives coherence to the seemingly disparate experiences of one's existence. See Ricoeur, Paul. Time and Narrative. Volumes I-II. K. McLaughlin and D. Pellauer, translators. Vol III. K. Blamey and D. Pellauer, translators. 1984, 1985, 1988.

the history of the victors. But the history I try to revive has a strong ethical debt to the victims.<sup>16</sup>

For Ricoeur, the unjust suffering, both historically and in contemporary settings, presents a critically unresolved philosophical problem. As he indicates in the above passage, there is a profound moral debt owed to the victims of both past and possible future wrong doings. Like Levinas and women care theorists, Ricoeur admits the failings of western moral philosophy to develop a mode of thinking that is less abstract and less removed from the reality of human suffering and injustice. In one way, western philosophy, and perhaps Ricoeur himself, is morally haunted by the victims of violence. Nonetheless, Ricoeur's intention, which he aligns with the intention of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) that he borrows from Aristotle, is to address in a persistent way this issue of human beings acting in evil ways.<sup>17</sup> At the same time he also counsels not to lose hope in

---

<sup>16</sup> Ricoeur, Paul. In Reagan, Charles. Paul Ricoeur: His Life and Work. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press). 1996. p. 114.

<sup>17</sup> *Phronesis*, used by Aristotle, is usually translated as practical wisdom. In contemporary terms practical wisdom is further modified as the field of applied ethics. Originally for Aristotle, it meant prudence or prudent action. This is a type of wisdom applied to areas of practice and skill. For Aristotle it is not enough to be excellent in one's practice. It must also include rational reflections on principles and virtues that aims to a good life or happiness. The wise person applies these principles to a problem or area of expertise. For example, a wise teacher has excellent pedagogical skills but also has the intellectual understandings of ethical principles and virtues. When there is a difficulty, a

achieving a just world.<sup>18</sup> Ricoeur openly turns to a focus on practical ethics in addressing the problem of others who are deprived of their personal capacities and rights to flourish in the world.

The book, Oneself as Another, (1992 [1990]), demonstrates Ricoeur's attempt to reconcile and modify *phronesis*. Basically he aims to modify the historical inheritance of abstract moral philosophical musings by emphasizing the unrelenting and concrete human suffering in the world.<sup>19</sup> Ricoeur moves away from his previous focus on the hermeneutical understanding of texts and symbols, and both the hermeneutical/and narrative self, towards [a practical] ethics. Nonetheless, his understanding of the narrative and hermeneutical self continue to influence his idea of the self and his proposed ethical framework. The concept of the self would now be expanded to an ethical self based on the hermeneutical circularity of the self and the other as necessary process both in self understanding and in acting in the world. Again, the notion of as non-imperialistic self who is open to the other and can learn from him or her, is a necessary component of his work.

Oneself as Another is a dense and deeply layered work of moral philosophy. It is fully embedded with references and notations of Ricoeur's previous works. Moreover, he

---

wise person is asked to assist in resolving the problem. See, Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VI-5. Terence Irwin, translator. (Indianapolis; Hackett). p. 89.

<sup>18</sup> Ricoeur, Paul. "Reply to Stephen T. Tyman". In Hahn. *Ibid.* p. 475.

<sup>19</sup> Ricoeur, Paul. Oneself as Another. Kathleen Blamey, translator. (Chicago: Chicago University Press). 1994.



refers to a great variety of moral philosophers from the ancient Greeks, to British and American analytical philosophers, as well as to certain Continental philosophers of the last century. This work truly displays the breadth and depth of Ricoeur's scholarship. He utilizes a hermeneutical method in the book as he mediates between the historical and conflicting interpretations of morality and ethics. Indeed, many call him a philosophical mediator *par excellence*. Nonetheless, although impressive, there is a danger that the density of the work may impair the understanding and impact of his thesis. It may well veil Ricoeur's intention of compassion and passion towards fragile and suffering others.

Oneself as Another incorporates two overarching premises in order to allow a move towards an ethical self. The two are: 1) the notion of the capable self or 'homo capax'<sup>20</sup> and 2) the concept of recognition.<sup>21</sup> The notion of the capable self introduces an understanding that the human self has agency. That is, one understands one has various capacities and powers to act. Ricoeur explains that one has "...the power to designate oneself as the speaker of one's own words; the power to designate oneself as the agent of one's own words, the power to designate oneself as the protagonist in one's own life's story."<sup>22</sup> Because of these capacities and powers, the capable self, as an agent, can therefore be held accountable or responsible for his or her actions. Clearly, it may

---

<sup>20</sup> See Studies 2 and 3. Ricoeur, Paul. Ibid. pp. 56-112.

<sup>21</sup> Ricoeur later devotes a book to the structure and process of recognition. See: Ricoeur, Paul. The Course of Recognition. D. Pellauer, translator. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press). 2005.

<sup>22</sup> Ricoeur, Paul. In Hahn. Ibid. p. 367.

reasonably be argued that responsibility for one's own actions is an assumption in any discussion of ethics. What is interesting in Ricoeur's discussion, however, is that the capacity and power to act is not assumed automatically, but is a process that unfolds in an agent's examinations of his or her self. Thus, the accusatory mode often found in the ethics of responsibility, such as that found in Levinas, is qualified by Ricoeur.

The second over-arching premise which is not thematized in a strong manner broadly in the book is that of 'recognition'. He writes towards the end of the book:

If...I had to name a category that corresponded to the category of imputation and responsibility...I would choose the term recognition so dear to Hegel in the Jena period and throughout the subsequent course of his work. Recognition is the structure of the self-reflecting on the movement that carries self-esteem toward solicitude and solicitude towards justice. Recognition introduces the dyad and the plurality in the very constitution of the self.<sup>23</sup>

According to Ricoeur, in 'recognition' a person or self reflects dialectically on his or her own capacity and accountability. This means that I am accountable to myself. That is, a self is not only accountable for his or her actions, i.e., responsibility towards another, but the self also evaluates his or her own actions as to whether they are ethical or not. It is a mode of self-evaluation of one's moral character. In a sense this move can be understood as a further development of the self, following on from the hermeneutic and narrative self, in the direction of an ethical self. It is part of a growth in self-awareness as the self moves towards a stance of solicitude and justice for others. This move of self-evaluation

---

<sup>23</sup> Ricoeur, Paul. Oneself as Another. Ibid. p. 296.

or self-esteem – which is a process of self-estimation, actually describes a move towards accountability.<sup>24</sup> Ricoeur elaborates:

Because someone is counting on me, I am accountable for my actions before another. The term ‘responsibility’ unites both meanings: ‘counting on’ and being ‘accountable’ for. It unites them, adding to them the idea of a response to the question: ‘Where are you?’ asked by another who needs me.<sup>25</sup>

As a self who is accountable to another who is in need of my solicitude, the other becomes essential for my own process of self-esteem. I cannot be a moral or ethical self without another. Ricoeur develops a discussion of the ethical self and an ethical framework throughout Oneself as Another. It is in this development that he will expand on his ideas of both solicitude and self-esteem as part of his revision of Hegel’s concept of recognition. Ricoeur will incorporate these ideas into his ‘little ethics’. In this connection he will also delineate his understanding of the ethical self.

Ricoeur’s self-described program of “little ethics” is developed in the last three chapters or studies in Oneself as Another. His “little ethics” is a three-pronged adaptation of Aristotle’s teleological principle. Ricoeur expresses this adaptation as: “The wish to

---

<sup>24</sup> Self-esteem means a reflective self. It is hermeneutical interpretation of his or her own ethical self and actions towards the other in dialogue with ontological ideas of a good person. This reflection may lead to a feeling of positive self-regard or self-respect. Conversely, the reflective process on one’s own self may result in a state or feeling of dis-ease or discomfort with his or her own understanding of being a good person.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p.165.

live well with and for others in just institutions.”<sup>26</sup> Ricoeur begins the explanation of his ‘little ethics’ by discussing Aristotle’s teleology or the ethical aim. Ricoeur explains his understanding of Aristotle:

The first component of the ethical aim is what Aristotle called “living well,” or the “good life...” The “good life” is what should be mentioned first because it is the very object of the ethical aim. Whatever the image that each of us has of a full life, this apex is the ultimate end of our action.<sup>27</sup>

The Aristotelian aim towards the ‘good life’ necessarily involves action on the part of an individual. For, Aristotle, *praxis* (action) must always be directed towards the end of living a good life. Ricoeur further explains that, for Aristotle, deciding what particular actions one must choose to implement depends upon appropriate practical wisdom or *phronesis*. Therefore, what leads to a happy and fulfilled life is always careful reflection so as to make a right action or decision in a specific context. Ricoeur explains that if a life plan includes the wish to be a doctor, then one’s decisions are made accordingly. In order to continue to be a doctor, the doctor must practice according to the standards required in order to maintain his profession.<sup>28</sup> Such a course of action then supports Ricoeur’s aim of pursuing the ‘good life’. However, this general explanation of the ethical aim does not refer to specific human meanings and the actual vocation of being a professional who relieves suffering. Nor does it assist with a doctor’s own personal anguish and fragility when responding to others who are ill or in pain. It is a

---

<sup>26</sup> Ricoeur, Paul, in Hahn. Ibid. p. 51.

<sup>27</sup> Ricoeur, Paul. Oneself as Another. Ibid. p. 174.

<sup>28</sup> Ricoeur, Paul. Ibid. pp. 176-177.

rather narrow and abstract statement. Ricoeur nevertheless argues that a person's or self's action when aiming towards a 'good life' is a very complex process. It involves a process of hermeneutical interpretation. He writes:

In more modern terms, we would say that it is in the unending work of interpretation applied to action and to oneself that we pursue the search for adequation between what seems best to us with regard to our life as a whole and our preferential choices.<sup>29</sup>

As a result, aiming towards the good life requires not only a hermeneutical process that moves back and forth between the good life and personal preferences but also includes the interpretation of one's self or self-estimation. Ricoeur qualifies the Aristotelian ethical aim by incorporating an interpretation of one's self, or self-estimation, in order to emphasize the need for careful personal evaluation of the effects and meaning of one's actions in a specific context.

To expand on Ricoeur's example, the inclusion of practical implications or *phronesis* is exceedingly important in medicine particularly when acting towards the relief of suffering of other human beings. For some, who are devotees of a particular religion, acting in such a manner may mean that they are doing 'God's work'. Moreover, they may believe they are 'called' to such work. Still others may view their work as meaningful in a humanist ethos without any notion of God or a divine in their life's narrative. There must be some type of meaningful purpose, even if it is economic gain, in order for the good doctor to continue to persevere in his or her chosen profession.

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. p. 179.

Nonetheless, when the ethical implications of personal meaning are added to the decision-making process in determining right action, it may result in an interpretation, which “provokes controversy, dispute, rivalry...in the exercise of practical judgment.”<sup>30</sup> According to Ricoeur, however, there is no abstract verification principle for determining the right action for the resultant potential conflict of interpretations. Instead, one needs to consult the judgment of others.<sup>31</sup> An example of this is when there is a conflict of values in an ‘end of life’ decision. A believer (who may be the doctor) of a particular religion may place a value of the sanctity of life over and above what the patient may see as useless suffering. Thus, the doctor may argue that all measures must be taken to sustain a life. Perhaps, this may be in conflict with the patient’s own values, including the notion that allowing them to suffer futilely is not an action that enhances life, even if there is little of it left.

In this way Ricoeur argues there is no one single principle that can determine which meaning and action is absolutely right. The point being made here is that a general statement of aiming towards a ‘good life’ is not so clear a guideline when there are other relevant people whose understanding of the meaning of a good life differs from one’s own. As a consequence, the next phase of Ricoeur’s ‘little ethics’ will add the axiom, “with and for others.” In this way Ricoeur expands Aristotle’s original statement of what the ethical aim of a good life should be.

---

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p. 180.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

Ricoeur's next move is a further innovative expansion of Aristotle's ethical aim. He does this by appealing to Aristotle's notion of friendship which appears elsewhere in Aristotle's ethics.<sup>32</sup> According to Ricoeur, Aristotle understands that one needs social and community interactions with particular others in order to achieve happiness. There can be no happiness without others. Aristotelian friendship is based on the recognition that one receives pleasure in having friends. Therefore, friends fulfill a need towards having a good life. In friendship, each one gives to happiness to the other. In this way, friendships are reciprocal. Ricoeur summarizes that for Aristotle, friendship is one of the "greatest goods" in one's life.<sup>33</sup> The important acknowledgement that we live amongst others and that relationships are reciprocal in order to achieve a good life is the most important element that Ricoeur appropriates from Aristotle. He writes: "From Aristotle, I should like to retain only the ethics of reciprocity, of sharing and living together."<sup>34</sup> Ricoeur will also later significantly modify and deepen this understanding of reciprocity in friendship. He is concerned with the evolution of a hermeneutical self included in the structure of a friendship.<sup>35</sup> The relationship between friends therefore must include more than Aristotle's notion of friendship. For Ricoeur, each friend must be open to each other without pre-conceived values and beliefs. Each one in the relationship develops and grows in understanding of one another. Further, each friend is influenced by the other in

---

<sup>32</sup> Aristotle. Nicomachean Ethics. Book VII. Ibid. pp. 119-136.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. pp. 185-186.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. p. 187.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. p. 184. (See footnote number 18).

his or her own self-understanding. Moreover, he will include the attitude of ‘solicitude’ towards others who are suffering as an integral element of reciprocity. Such an attitude is absent from Aristotle’s ethical aim.

At this stage, it should be observed that, in contrast to Aristotle and Ricoeur, Emmanuel Levinas does not emphasize or agree with reciprocity in inter-subjective relations, particularly relationship with others who are suffering or in need. Levinas is, of course, the philosopher who heightens the importance of the utter non-reciprocal responsibility for the other into ethical understandings. As was examined earlier in this thesis, Levinas argues that the other is absolutely other than the self and can never be known. Yet, this other, as a face, calls me to moral responsibility. In response to Levinas Ricoeur argues that the other, viewed in this manner, is not in a relationship of reciprocity with me. The extreme exteriority of the other, as advocated by Levinas, is in such a state of separation that it denies any sense of relationship.<sup>36</sup> This is because the face is impersonal. Ricoeur writes:

By virtue of this irrelation, the appearing of the Other in the *face* of the Other eludes vision, seeing forms, and even eludes hearing, apprehending voices. In truth, the face does not appear; it is not a phenomenon; it is an epiphany. But whose face is it? I do not think I am unduly limiting the scope of the admirable analysis of Levinas’s Totality and Infinity, to say nothing here of his Otherwise than Being, by saying this face is that of a master of justice, of a master who *instructs* and does so only in the ethical mode: this face forbids murder and commands justice.<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. p. 189.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid



The Levinasian commanding by the other is in contrast to the aforementioned reciprocal relationship of the other in a friendship. There is no reciprocity in Levinas's notion of ethics. In reality, Levinas's notion of ethical relations, according to Ricoeur, would "break off the exchange of giving and receiving and would exclude any instruction by the face within the field of solicitude."<sup>38</sup> How, Ricoeur asks, can one be concerned for the other who faces me if there is no relationship? According to Ricoeur, in contrast to Aristotelian friendship, in relationships as posited by Levinas there is responsibility, but they are not only non-reciprocal, they are impossible. He will also charge that in Levinas's relationship with the face there is no space given for solicitude or care.

Levinas would agree with Ricoeur that his understanding of the inter-subjective relationship is non-reciprocal. But this is precisely Levinas's point. Levinas posits an ethics of responsibility from which nothing in return is to be expected. Further, one is reminded that Levinas does not purport to posit an ethics *per se*; he is most interested to discover the meaning of ethics, and to establish ethics as 'first philosophy'. For Levinas, one must respond solely on the demand from the weakness or need of the other. Levinas is not interested in contributing a subject's self-estimation or self-understanding.

From Ricoeur's perspective, however, Levinas's self is trapped in a self-gratifying ego. In contrast, from a Levinasian perspective, a hermeneutical self, such as posited by Ricoeur, has the danger of incorporating the other into the self such that the ego is gratified. This view understands that escape from one's own ego is extremely

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

difficult. In response to Levinas, it appears that Ricoeur is deliberately more interested in actual ethical behaviour and action towards the other from a non-narcissistic and non-imperial perspective. He is interested both in understanding the relational self as acting in an ethical mode, while, at the same time, being oneself as both a suffering and self-reflective self. For Ricoeur, human beings act to relieve suffering not because this is an ethical demand, such as the categorical imperative. As a way forward, Ricoeur will add his own understanding of solicitude or care, thereby modifying both Aristotelian friendship and Levinas's admonition of utter responsibility to the other.

In order to introduce a mode of solicitude, Ricoeur appropriates and modifies elements of Heideggerian thinking. In particular, Ricoeur will modify Heidegger's key concept of *Sorge* (care), by emphasizing the more embracing notion of *Fürsorge* (care for others). This is because Heidegger's care is not a care or solicitude for others located in an ethical space. Heidegger's care is fundamentally narcissistic in that *Dasein* cares for one's being in the world with others (*Mitsein*) only in order to survive and enhance its own well-being.<sup>39</sup> Whereas, for Ricoeur, solicitude or care towards others is a crucial part of an ethical self who acts with a deep concern for justice in the world. It is a mode of being that is both generous and benevolent towards others.

Ricoeur's solicitude enables a reciprocal exchange to occur in ethical relationships. When the other who faces me is suffering, I respond with solicitude. As such, this approach fosters a non-narcissistic concern. Further, in contrast to Levinas, I

---

<sup>39</sup> Please refer to Chapter One of this dissertation for an account of the various types of Heideggerian care such as *Sorge* (care for being) and *Fürsorge* (care for others).

must act in a way that maintains my self-integrity and moral self-respect. If I cannot act, or refuse to act, with solicitude for the suffering other, I find myself in distress, or in a state of suffering. Ricoeur writes:

Suffering is not only defined by physical pain, nor even mental pain, but by the reduction, even the destruction, of the capacity for acting, of being-able-to act, experienced as a violation of self-integrity. Here, the initiative, precisely in terms of being-able-to-act, seems to belong exclusively to the self who *gives* his sympathy, his compassion, the terms being taken in the strong sense of the wish to share someone else's pain.<sup>40</sup>

At first glance, it might seem that it is the other who *receives* in the caring relationship. The other receives my compassion and solicitude. However, for Ricoeur, the relationship is reciprocal *because* the other acknowledges my solicitude. Thus, the other confirms my integrity and self-respect. For Ricoeur, this exchange results in a reciprocal relationship, even though the suffering other comes from a position of weakness and the inability to act. He poignantly writes:

For from the suffering other there comes a giving that is no longer drawn from the power of acting and existing but precisely from weakness itself. This is perhaps the supreme test of solicitude, when unequal power finds compensation in an authentic reciprocity in exchange, which, in the hour of agony, finds refuge in the shared whispers of voices or the feeble embrace of clasped hands.<sup>41</sup>

In this intimate encounter with another person who is powerless and suffering, perhaps even dying, the shared poignant situation of our common humanity is revealed. This is graphically illustrated in the title of the book: Oneself as Another. Solicitude leads to

---

<sup>40</sup> Ricoeur, Paul. Ibid. p. 190.

<sup>41</sup> Ricoeur, Paul. Ibid. p. 191.

one's understanding that "with and for others" in the ethical aim includes a recognition of the utter fragility, and mortality of all humanity. Yet Ricoeur will refine this reciprocal relation of solicitude and concern for the other person, which occurs only within a close personal dynamics. This is because justice, which belongs to the realm of the public, is of a different order. Ricoeur will demonstrate that justice can flourish only when it builds on solicitude. Justice with its stress on equality for all, can flourish only if there is first solicitude at the personal level. Ricoeur writes:

Equality however it is modulated, is to life in institutions what solicitude is to personal relations. ...the sense of justice takes nothing away from solicitude; the sense of justice predisposes it, to the extent that it holds persons to be irreplaceable. Justice in turns adds to solicitude, to the extent that the field of application of equality is all of humanity.<sup>42</sup>

Equality is thus to be accorded to all others with whom we do not have personal relationships in order that institutions function in a just manner. Reciprocity and solicitude in personal relationships are prerequisites for equality. Justice and equality thus operate in the public sphere for those whom we do not know personally.

Justice is the final axiom in Ricoeur's 'little ethics'. This must be the ethical aim if all of humanity is to be regarded as equal both in due respect and as a subject of rights. If I am accorded rights to flourish in my existence, so too must I accord this to all others. It is only in this way that violence and deliberate deprivations in the treatment of others can ever be mitigated or stopped. The moral horrors of the Holocaust occurred, in part, because the victims were viewed as not deserving of the

---

<sup>42</sup> Ricoeur, Paul. Ibid. p. 202.

respect and equality presumed by the perpetrators of the extreme violence. This particular violence was institutionalized in Nazi society. One could speculate that this may be the reason that Ricoeur, in a later interview, seems compelled to return to Levinas to clarify his difference. He remarks:

The Other, who has a face, can become a friend. And this is the problem of intersubjective relations. I believe that Levinas is the thinker of this relationship to the Other with a face. But we always have to keep in mind the relation with an Other who has no face for us. For me, the Chinese over there somewhere will never become friends. But I have relations with them through institutions. We have a shift from the concept of friendship to a concept of justice. *Oneself as Another* puts both relations on the same level — friendship and justice. I define moreover, the first ethical relation in the following terms: “To aim at the good life with and for others in just institutions.” Consequently, the idea of justice concerns my relations to the Other without a face. It is here that the institution makes the relation and not intersubjectivity. This is why I would react against a narrow personalism that would reduce everything to relation: ‘I-you’. There is a you, but there is also an ‘each one’... ‘To each his or her own right.’<sup>43</sup>

In this passage, Ricoeur qualifies Levinas’s discussion of ‘the third’. Levinas does in fact acknowledge there are many others towards whom I have responsibility. And he concedes that it is within justice, or what he also terms ‘the third,’ that the needs of all the others must be addressed. Further, Levinas claims that it is the responsibility of the subject to make sure that all institutions are just.<sup>44</sup> However, Ricoeur is correct in

---

<sup>43</sup> Ricoeur, Paul. In Raynova, Yvanka. “All that Gives Us to Think: Conversations with Paul Ricoeur.” In, Between Suspicion and Sympathy: Paul Ricoeur’s Unstable Equilibrium. A. Wiercinski, editor. (Toronto: The Hermeneutic Press). 2003. p. 674.

<sup>44</sup> See Chapter Two and Three of this dissertation.

claiming that Levinas does not acknowledge *enough* the integrity of the individual others with whom I have no immediate relationship. The usual mode of broadly discussing the diverse cultures and peoples in the world does nothing for individuals who are disenfranchised and who suffer from deprivations and violence. Justice means that *each* particular human being is deserving of respect and solicitude. While it is all very well and good to speak broadly of our ethical responsibilities and of justice, Ricoeur is also extremely interested in the practicalities, i.e., the actual circumstances of the implementation of his posited ethical framework. This marks Ricoeur's difference from Levinas who was not so vitally concerned in this dimension. Because of this needed addition, Ricoeur will survey the predominant moral norms and maxims in western society in order to assess the best ways of establishing criteria for making such practical decisions.

Ricoeur believed that the introduction of moral norms and practical wisdom is required as clearly there are both right and wrong actions. The fact of violence, deprivations and sufferings inflicted on people by other human beings in the world cannot be ignored in any discussion of personal and public ethics. All abstract teleological discussions regarding the good life do not effectively deal with this reality. Ricoeur notes that our obligations to not cause these harms entail at a minimum obeying the laws of one's society and having certain responsibilities. In this connection Ricoeur will begin by examining aspects of Immanuel Kant's discussion of moral norms.

Ricoeur redacts two key statements from Kantian philosophy. The first espoused by Kant is the way on how one ought to decide to act based on a universal approach to other human beings. Ricoeur quotes Kant:

It is, however, better if in moral *judgment* we proceed always in accordance with the strict method and take as our basis the universal categorical imperative: 'Act on the maxim which can at the same time be made a universal law'.<sup>45</sup>

Ricoeur states that this statement does not consider the diversity of human persons. It does not consider what persons would want for themselves. Neither does it consider the way they would wish to be treated nor what they would want to be done to them. A clear example of the need for a more definite directive would be in end of life decisions. This is because not all persons would want heroic measures to save their lives, whereas others would want everything done even if such measures will cause further suffering. This does not imply we should therefore *not* act. We are obliged to act. How we are to act requires both solicitude and understanding of the person before us.

The second directive refers to the respect for individual autonomy. Ricoeur quotes Kant: "Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end. (*Groundwork* 4. 429, p. 96)."<sup>46</sup> This maxim assumes an unchanging autonomous self that stands alone. Again, Ricoeur regards this general statement as not particularly clear as to the actual details of the required conduct. Previously, Ricoeur has attested to a self that is both hermeneutical and ethical and that is in reciprocal relationship with others. In contrast, for Kant it is a stand-alone

---

<sup>45</sup> Ricoeur, Paul. Ibid. p. 211.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. p. 222.

rational self that is involved. The respect for a relational self or a suffering self is not included in Kant's moral directives or rules.

Rather than employing Kant's moral directives that constitute the categorical imperative, Ricoeur turns to the Golden Rule as a way of determining the way one ought to act. He argues that this more encompassing Golden Rule that intimates reciprocity goes deeper than the Kantian moral rules. He writes:

Now what does the Golden Rule say? We can read it in Hillel, the Jewish master of Saint Paul (Babylonian Talmud, *Sabbath*, 31a): "Do not do unto your neighbor what you would hate him to do to you. This is the entire law; all the rest is commentary." We read the same thing in the Gospels: "Treat others as you would like them to treat you" (Luke 6:32).<sup>47</sup>

The first formula in the above passage is negative command, that is, it is a 'do not' harm another as you would not want to be harmed. The second formula contains a positive command of doing good. According to Ricoeur both commands balance one another, with the second one containing a motive of benevolence in doing something *for* others.<sup>48</sup> The most remarkable aspect of the Golden Rule as expressed in both formulas according to Ricoeur is the "enunciation of a *norm of reciprocity*."<sup>49</sup> Clearly, this is one reason why Ricoeur prefers the Golden Rule to the Kantian moral directives or maxims. Moreover, according to Ricoeur, the Golden Rule contains an unstated recognition that an initial power dissymmetry between one and another may

---

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. p. 219.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.



exist. In dissymmetry one has power over another, for example, one may be suffering and passive. This dissymmetry must be mediated by acting with solicitude for symmetry (equality) to be re-established.<sup>50</sup>

Neither the Golden Rule nor the Kantian moral rules, however, are able to assist with actual ethical decision-making in cases of stand-alone moral theories in particular situations. To provide guidance, Ricoeur returns to Aristotle and advises the use of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) in such matters. Ricoeur writes:

Practical wisdom (or the art of moral judgment in situation) appeared to me to be required by the singular nature of cases, by conflicts among duties, by the complexities of life in society where choice is most often between grey and grey than between black and white, and finally by situations of distress, in which choice is not between good and bad, but bad and worse.<sup>51</sup>

Practical wisdom entails a thorough analysis and reflection upon the presented moral problem. This, for Ricoeur, means that it must also pass through the sieve of morality or moral norms. For Ricoeur, such reflection and analysis involves an understanding that both the hermeneutical and narrative self are engaged in assessing ethical problems. A further requirement for Ricoeur is that such an assessment must be made with solicitude in reflective conversations with others. It would thus seem that the guidelines of practical wisdom in connection with solicitude for a person or patient is most suited in ethical decision-making.

---

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. pp. 219-220.

<sup>51</sup> Ricoeur, Paul. In Hahn. Ibid. p. 52.

Interestingly, Ricoeur briefly discusses an ethical dilemma commonly discussed in the field of bioethics where the use of practical wisdom is most suited in ethical decision-making in the field of bioethics, i.e. the example of telling the truth to the dying. He outlines the dilemma as either:

...telling the truth without taking into account the capacity of the patient to receive the truth, out of sheer respect for the law, assumed to abide no exceptions; or that of knowingly lying, out of fear, one believes, of weakening the forces in the patient struggling against death and of transforming the agony of a loved one into torture.<sup>52</sup>

For Ricoeur, practical wisdom would imply that any decision to act should consider an 'exception' to the rule or maxim, 'never to lie'. Such a decision is never arbitrary, as it is also necessary to consult the wisdom of respected persons. In addition, Ricoeur states that solicitude regarding the well-being of the patient must always factor into a specific decision. For Ricoeur, well-being or happiness is not necessarily the opposite of suffering. He writes:

One learns that one's own apprenticeship of aging, as well as the respect for the aging of others, is not unrelated to this proper use of solicitude, when it moves in the narrow space where it remains true that there is no ethics without happiness, but where it is false that happiness excludes suffering.<sup>53</sup>

From this perspective, practical wisdom would not extrapolate that one therefore has a duty to lie to the dying in order to reduce suffering. A universal rule cannot be made from such a particular situation. Rather, with the intention of solicitude and of promoting

---

<sup>52</sup> Ricoeur, Paul. Oneself as Another. Ibid. p. 269.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. p. 269.

human well-being understood as the good life for the patient, a health care worker or physician needs to undertake a solicitous dialogue with the patient and/or their loved ones. Should a patient be told he or she is dying? It depends on circumstances and variations being taken into careful consideration. It is not simply a case of imposing a law or theory. Perhaps, for his or her sense of well-being, a dying patient does not wish to know. One should always consult a patient about what he or she wishes to know. Consequently, an ethical decision is made from an enabling and caring conversation between experts and a patient. This is then a mediation of values; truly a Ricoeurian solution.

In the last chapter of Oneself as Another, “What Ontology In View? Ricoeur returns once again to a discussion of Levinas and includes a discussion of Levinas’s struggle with Heidegger. As noted above, Levinas and Ricoeur were contemporaries, and both were influenced by phenomenology and Martin Heidegger. Ricoeur often visited Levinas and his wife in their home. Ricoeur remarks:

I got to know Mme. Levinas, and to witness the depth of their intimacy and attachment. Levinas did not travel to any conference without Mme. Levinas. It is why I understood the extent of his pain when she died. I truly valued all those admirable pages in *Totality and Infinity* on domestic grandeur, and that beautiful page on the caress.<sup>54</sup>

One may safely assume, Ricoeur and Levinas would discuss and debate the writings. (Interestingly, the above passage supports the view that much of Levinas’s work was

---

<sup>54</sup> Malka, Salomon. Emmanuel Levinas: His Life and Legacy. Michael Kigel and Sonia Embree, translators. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press). 2002. p. 191.

indeed influenced by his experience of his intimate relationship with Mme. Levinas).

Ricoeur repeats his criticism that Levinas's other is so extremely other that there can be no relationship. For Ricoeur, the extreme separation of a subject's ego from the other, as posited by Levinas, is based on a hyperbolic philosophical method and is not based on the reality of a subject's lived experience. Ricoeur does not accept the unequal 'height' and the priority of the other in the Levinasian ethic.

Ricoeur remarks:

Since I encounter the Other in reciprocity I always asked myself where I am in Levinas's text. Am I the one who says "I" — or the one who is spoken of as the "Other"? and Levinas, where is he? Does he say "I"? Or is he already the "third"? A certain interrogation is needed there for me, therefore. Which place does one occupy?<sup>55</sup>

The question arises as to what exactly is the location of one's self in Levinas's texts? It would seem that one's self can indeed be all of the above at different times in Levinas's philosophy. As a result, this may lead to some confusion such as Ricoeur discerns in Levinas. The self in Levinas at differing times can be the summoning other, the responsible self, as well as the "third," a participant in the wider spectrum of justice.

Perhaps the sense of confusion also lies in Levinas's goal to eliminate all traces of Heideggerian ontology from his philosophy. The teleological aim of Heidegger is an authentic *Dasein* with its mode of self preoccupation whereas for

---

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. p. 195.

Levinas the teleological aim is that of a responsible subject. Ricoeur remarks further regarding Levinas's motivation.

Heidegger's is a philosophy that could not produce an ethics. There is a kind of an empty space for the hero. Not having developed the ethical and political dimensions of his own thinking as Jaspers did, this is a deserted space, an ethical moral space. It is a kind of fundamental a-moralism. He was thus the perfect prey for Hitlerism. This is the flaw that had to be recognized and Levinas perceived it perfectly.<sup>56</sup>

In this instance, Ricoeur agrees with Levinas regarding the 'a-moral' aspects of Heidegger's philosophy. He remarks to Richard Kearney in 2004: "Here I try to explore the possibilities of an ethical ontology beyond the Heideggerean [sic] model of ontology without ethics and the Levinasian model of ethics without ontology."<sup>57</sup> For Ricoeur both of these positions have a distinct limitation, as I have described above.

In summary, Ricoeur's philosophical journey leads him to confront the pressing philosophical problem of ethics in an unjust world. He began his journey exploring the human limitations of acting according to our will. Initially he discovered that one is in a constant process of a dialogue with oneself, first with texts and symbols and then in a solicitous relationship with others. This trajectory marks Ricoeur's journey from a hermeneutical self to an ethical self. The final Ricoeurian ethical self is also a self-reflexive and self-interpreting being, mediating

---

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. p. 198.

<sup>57</sup> Kearney, Richard. On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva. (London: Ashgate). 2011. p. 167.

between one's own self-understanding and living with solicitude in a community of others. This solicitous approach to personal others required a further expansion to an ethical self who is called to act to establish justice for all others, especially those who may be diminished through suffering or deprived of their rights within a community. Perhaps, then, Levinas is right after all, when he declares that ethics must be considered 'first philosophy.' Perhaps this is where Ricoeur's philosophy also rests, although he proposes a more practically ordered ethical orientation.

## CONCLUSION

This dissertation is a contribution to the study and examination of the ethical relationships in which we find ourselves so deeply embedded. These studies and examinations may assist in the possible achievement of a more just and caring world. The historical record is certainly littered with moral-wrong doings and acts of extreme violence that we as human beings have inflicted on one another. This reality indicates that ethics, or the way we act towards one another, must be at the forefront of thinking in the academy. This dissertation is also concerned with the possible barriers that prevent humanity from attaining ethical relationships. It does this rather than to focus on the problem of evil as found in the traditional western Philosophy of Religion. As such, the explorations of the work of Emmanuel Levinas, feminist ethics of care, and the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur are discussed as radical and hopeful contributions.

Chapter One's focus is on both Emmanuel Levinas and the phenomenological tradition. Emmanuel Levinas calls moral philosophy to account. He engages the reader in such a manner that one cannot look away and ignore his pleadings to place ethics as 'first philosophy.' Levinas was a survivor of the Holocaust. As a Jew, Levinas's life's work was defined by this horror. Further, this immoral and evil event's impact on the philosophical tradition in Europe was, and should continue to be, considered a turning point towards a new ethics in the tradition's musings. The chapter's discussions of both Heidegger and phenomenology are critical to understanding both Levinas and the Continental tradition. Although Levinas admired Heidegger's Being and Time, large portions of his work are engaged in disputing Heidegger. While Heidegger claimed a

resolute *Dasein* who embraces the concrete realities of existence, Levinas wanted to escape Heidegger's emphasis on ego and the all-encompassing nature of Being. Levinas finds 'Being' heavy, relentless, and haunting. He names this the *il y a*, or the 'there is'. It is in his wish to escape that he discovers the hope of the other. It is only through the relation with an other that one can escape the 'rumbling and rustling' of *il-y-a*. The chapter ends with the discussion that Levinas, as both a scholar and a Jew, was unable to forgive Heidegger for his political involvements and sympathies with the German Nazi party. Surely this was Heidegger's greatest downfall, both personally and academically. He appears to have cast ethics aside.

Chapter Two discusses Levinas great work: Totality and Infinity. It is in this work that Levinas explains his idea that the other, whom I meet in relation, is infinite and thus unknowable. It is this movement, of the other into the same, or the subject's ego that Levinas names 'totality.' Totality becomes a system of power and control which may lead to violence and war. Instead, Levinas proposes that the power in the relationship be given to the other. The other, which he now names as face commands and demands my response. The face demands 'Thou shalt not kill,' 'do not let me die alone.' I become responsible for the other who is in need of my care. This is a crucial and innovative aspect of Levinas that the demand to be ethical comes not from the subject but rather from the other or face. It is exterior to the self. There are some who would intuit that this then is a command from the divine or God. Levinas however, adamantly denies this. Perhaps, a fitting answer is that, for Levinas, the face is the 'trace' of an absent God. By the word 'trace' Levinas proposes the paradoxical presence of the absent God. God who was present but has now left. I have tried to demonstrate how Levinas's ethics of utter



responsibility to the face of the other is his response to the Holocaust as a way of moving beyond the failure of traditional Jewish and Christian based ethics.

Another issue that arose in Chapter Two is Levinas's views and understanding of the feminine. He argues that the feminine is the other *par excellence* and he places it in a category that is unique. In so doing, Levinas unfortunately adopts the same tired trope of the female as being mysterious and serving the male's need for transcendence and progeny. The secondary literature, outside of a few feminist scholars, ignores this part of Levinas's work. Nonetheless, as a student of Levinas and as a woman, I could not ignore this aspect of his work, and in the following chapter, I introduced the work of several feminist scholars who have helped to put his work on both the feminine other and the maternal in a certain critical perspective.

In Chapter Three, I examine Levinas's ideas regarding the moral responsibilities one has for the other who faces me. This responsibility is both extreme and unattainable. Levinas is dramatic in his demands. He even calls for the subject to sacrifice him or herself for the other. He will not waver from this point. He employs the motif of the maternal or mother as the ideal responsible and ethical subject. The feminine is no longer the mysterious other but now a devoted subject tasked with fulfilling an other's needs. The ultimate responsible mother will die for the child. Here again are Levinas's extreme views of the female. Lisa Guenther uses pregnancy to explain Levinas's complexity in regards to time and to relationality. Guenther's work explores Levinas's idea that we exist in relationship before we are aware we exist. This is a radical move in relational ethics. Guenther also attempts to reconcile Levinas ethics of responsibility with the need for justice. This is difficult as Levinas spends so little time on justice. Still, her attempt is

noteworthy but one is left unsatisfied. In both these sections in Chapter Three I have tried to present the complexity and radical proposals of Levinas's ethics, but also their problematical dimensions for women.

By way of response, in Chapter Four I have included a chapter on the ethics of care as proposed by contemporary feminist scholars. This inclusion is necessary as, in the history of philosophy, women's voices in moral philosophy have rarely, if ever, been heard. This ethical theory, with its emphasis on relationship and care, requires more in-depth dialogue with other modes of philosophy to develop into a fully fledged philosophical position. Care ethics will not develop further if it remains female-centric and therefore insular.

Finally, in the last chapter I turn to the hermeneutical and ethical approach of Paul Ricoeur. I chose to end with Ricoeur because his hermeneutical theory and work on the self allows one greater understanding as to what is involved in developing a relational ethics. He successfully and methodically outlines his ethical framework, which he calls his 'little ethics.' This is the 'wish to live well with and for others in just institutions.' His teleological aim is one of justice. In order to achieve this aim, justice must be built on an ethical relation of care or, as Ricoeur names it, solicitude. This implies that while at the personal level solicitude is all-important, at an institutional level it is justice that is required. The combination of solicitude and justice in this way provides one possible way that a contemporary relational ethics can be relevant in ways that allow participants in both modes of relationship to be granted equality and mutual recognition. Ricoeur's understanding of the role and value of solicitude, which is a necessary and integral part of relationships may assist care theorists in their future examinations especially in the light

of his reclamation of *phronesis*. Paul Ricoeur's deep understanding of the ethical self gives hope to future research in relational ethics and justice.

In summary, my examination of ethical relationships in developments in contemporary ethical philosophy involves a number of approaches: 1) The demand from Emmanuel Levinas that contemporary philosophy must place ethics in a position of priority in all its reflections. 2) The voices of feminist ethics of care who add the concerns of women for the first time to debates on ethical dilemmas — especially in the area of care. 3) The hermeneutical and ethical approach of Paul Ricoeur who advocates a constructive combination of solicitude and justice. In all my engagements with these ideas I have held the following questions in mind: What does philosophy matter if the thinking does not add to the justice and goodness of the world? In all relational activity, whether this means in the human world or the natural world, ethics remains of paramount importance as a way of promoting human well-being. It is of paramount importance today that we seek to find ethical insights and express ethical concerns in ways that respond to the unprecedented problems that challenge us, especially those who suffer, and who have suffered because of human moral indifference or wrong-doings. This thesis is a constructive contribution to the continuing ethical conversation on these issues that is vital for humanity's well-being, if not survival.

## REFERENCES

Bergo, Bettina. "Emmanuel Levinas" in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. 2007. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/levinas/>

Chanter, Tina. Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas. (Pennsylvania University Press: Pennsylvania). 2001.

Cohen, Richard and Marsh, James, editors. Ricoeur As Another: The Ethics of Subjectivity. (Albany N.Y.: State University of New York Press). 2002.

Cohen, Richard. Ethics, Exegesis and Philosophy: Interpretation After Levinas. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). 2007.

De Beauvoir, Simone. The Second Sex. H.M. Parshley, translator. (Random House: New York). 1989. Originally published by Alfred A. Knopf Inc. 1953, and in France by Librairie in two volumes as Le Deuxième Sexe: I. Les Faits et Les Mythes, II. L'Expérience Vécue. 1949.

Gilligan, Carol. In A Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press). 1982.

Groenhout, Ruth. Connected Lives: Human Nature and an Ethics of Care. (Lanham Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield). 2004.

Lewis Hahn, editor. The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur. (Peru Illinois: Open Trade and Academic Book). 1996.

Heidegger, Martin. Being and Time. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, translators. (San Francisco: Harper and Row). 1962. Translated from the German, Sein und Zeit. (Seventh edition, Tübingen: Neomarius Verlag).

Irigaray, Luce. The Fecundity of the Caress: A Reading of Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, "Phenomenology of Eros." in Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas. (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press). 2001.

Joy, Morny. Divine Love: Luce Irigaray, women, gender and religion. (Manchester: Manchester University Press). 2006.

Joy, Morny. "Paul Ricoeur: Hermeneutics, Philosophy and Religion." in Continental Philosophy and Philosophy of Religion. Morny Joy, editor. (Dordrecht: Springer). 2011.

Kearney, Richard, editor. Paul Ricoeur: The Hermeneutics of Action. (London: Sage Publications). 1996.

Kearney, Richard. On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva. (London: Ashgate). 2011.

Kockelman, Joseph. Phenomenology: The Philosophy of Edmund Husserl and Its Interpretation. (New York: Doubleday). 1967.

Levinas, Emmanuel. Time and the Other. Richard A. Cohen, translator. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press). 1987. First published as “*Le Temps et l’autre*” in: J. Wahl. *Le Choix, Le Monde, L’Existence*. (Grenoble-Paris: Artaud). 1947.

Levinas, Emmanuel. Existence and Existents. Alphonso Lingis, translator. (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Press). 1995. First published in French as *De l’existence y l’existant*. (Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff). 1947.

Levinas, Emmanuel. Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority. Alphonso Lingis, translator. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press). 2000. First published in French as *Totaite et Infini*. Martinus Nijhoff: The Hague). 1961.

Levinas, Emmanuel. Otherwise Than Being: Or Beyond Essence. Alphonso Lingis, translator. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press). 2000. First published in French as: *Autrement qu’être*. (Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff). 1974.

Levinas, Emmanuel. Proper Names. Michael Smith, translator. (Stanford: Stanford University Press). 1996. First published in French as *Noms propres* and *Sur Maurice Blanchot*. (Saint Clement: Fata Morgana). 1975 and 1976.

Levinas, Emmanuel. Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo. Richard A. Cohen, translator. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press). 1985. First published in French as *Ethique et infinti*. (Librairie Arthème Fayard et Radio France). 1982.

Levinas, Emmanuel. On Escape: De l’évasion. Bettina Bergo, translator. (Stanford: Stanford University Press). 2003. First published in French as *De l’évasion*. (Saint Clement: Fata Morgana). 1982.

Levinas, Emmanuel. Outside the Subject. Michael Smith, translator. (Stanford: Stanford University Press). 1987. First published in France as *Hors Sujet*. (Saint Clement: Fata Morgana). 1987.

Held, Virginia. The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political and Global. (Oxford: Oxford University Press). 2006.

Malka, Salomon. Emmanuel Levinas: His Life and Legacy. Michael Kigel and Sonja M. Embree, translators. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press). 2002. First published in French as Emmanuel Lèvinas: La Vie et la trace. (JC Lattès). 2002.

Manning, Robert. Interpreting Otherwise than Heidegger: Emmanuel Levinas's Ethics as First Philosophy. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press). 1993.

Moran, Dermot. Introduction to Phenomenology. (London: Routledge). 2000.

Natanson, Maurice. Edmund Husserl: Philosopher of Infinite Tasks. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press). 1973.

Noddings, Nel. Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education. (Berkeley: University of California Press). 1986.

Pettersen, Tove. "Conceptions of Care: "Altruism, Feminism, and Mature Care" in Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy. (Hoboken New Jersey: Wiley). Volume 27, Number 2, Spring 2012.

Perpich, Diane. "From the Caress to the Word" in Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas. Tina Chanter, editor. (University Park PA: Pennsylvania State University Press). 2001.

Perpich, Diane. The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas. (Stanford: Stanford University Press). 2008.

Perpich, Diane. in Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Ethics. Vol. 21 Number 4. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press). 2006.

Reagan, Charles. Paul Ricoeur: His life and work. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press). 1996.

Ricoeur, Paul. Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary. E. V. Kohàk, translator. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press). 1966. First published in French as: Philosophie de la volonté: Le volontaire et l'involontaire (Philosophie de l'esprit). (Paris: Aubier). 1950.

Ricoeur, Paul. Finitude and Guilt: Fallible Man. Ch.A. Kelbey, translator. Chicago: Henry Regnery). 1965. First published in French as: Philosophie de la volonté. Finitude et Culpabilité. I. L'homme fallible (Philosophie de l'esprit). (Paris: Aubier). 1960.

The Symbolism of Evil. Emerson Buchanan, translator. (Boston : Beacon Press). 1969. First published in French as: Philosophie de la volonté. Finitude et Culpabilité: II: La symbolique du mal. (Philosophie de l'esprit). (Paris: Aubier). 1960.

Ricoeur, Paul. Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation. D. Savage, translator. (New Haven: Yale University Press). 1970. First published in French as: De l'interprétation. Essai sur Freud (L'ordre philosophique). (Paris: Seuil). 1965.

Ricoeur, Paul. "Philosophical and Theological Hermeneutics." Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses. Vol.5. No.1. (Sage Pub). 1975.

Ricoeur, Paul. "On Interpretation" in After Philosophy: End or Transformation. K. Baynes, J. Bohman and T. McCarthy editors. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press). 1986.

Ricoeur, Paul. Time and Narrative. Volumes I-II. K. McLaughlin and D. Pellauer, translators. Vol. III. K. Blamey and D. Pellauer, translators. 1984, 1985, 1988. First published in French as: Temps et récit. Tome I-II. (Paris: Seuil). 1983, 1984, 1985.

Ricoeur, Paul. Oneself as Another. Kathleen Blamey, translator. (Chicago: Chicago University Press). 1994. First published in French as Soi-même comme un autre. (Editions du Seuil). 1990.

Ricoeur, Paul. Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative and Imagination. D. Pellauer translator. Mark Wallace, editor. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press). 1995.

Ricoeur, Paul. The Just. D. Pellauer, translator. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press). 2000. First published in French as: Le Juste. (Éditions Esprit). 1995.

Ricoeur, Paul. Autrement lecture d'autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence d'Emmanuel Levinas. (Paris: Presses universitaires de France). 1997.

Ricoeur, Paul. In Raynova, Yvanka. "All that Gives Us to Think: Conversations with Paul Ricoeur." In, Between Suspicion and Sympathy: Paul Ricoeur's Unstable Equilibrium. A. Wiercinski, editor. (Toronto: The Hermeneutic Press). 2003.

Ricoeur, Paul. The Course of Recognition. D. Pellauer, translator. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press). 2005. First published in French as: Parcours de la Reconnaissance. (Vienna Lecture Series: Editions Stock). 2004.

Robbins, Jill, editor. Is It Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas. (Stanford: Stanford University Press. 2001.

Ruddick, Sara. Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace. (Boston: Beacon Press). 2002.

Safranski, Rüdiger. Martin Heidegger: Between Good and Evil. Ewald Osers, translator. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press). 2002. First published in German as Ein Meister aus Deutschland Heidegger und Seine Zeit. (München Wien: Carl Hanser Verlag). 1994.

Sandford Stella. The Metaphysics of Love. (London: Althone Press). 2000.

Sikka, Sonia. "The Delightful Other: Portraits of the Feminine in Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Levinas." in Tina Chanter, ed. Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas. (University Park Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press). 2001.

Slote, Michael. The Ethics of Care and Empathy. (London: Routledge). 2007.

Steiner, George. Martin Heidegger. (Chicago: The University of Chicago University Press). 1987.

Wright Tamara, Peter Hughes, and Alison Ainler. "The Paradox of Morality: An Interview with Emmanuel Levinas," in The Provocation of Emmanuel Levinas: Rethinking the Other. R. Bernasconi and D.Woods, editors. (London: Routledge:). 1988.



## **APPENDIX**

I have worked in the health care field for the past thirty years. My professional career as a Registered Nurse has given me the opportunity not only to assist those who are suffering from ill health but also to experience the great diversity of human values and beliefs expressed during difficult times. I attended the University of Calgary as a mature student in order to advance my education in nursing. During this period I was fortunate enough to attend classes in the Department of Religious Studies and I was hooked. Continuing education in nursing was left aside as I pursued both undergraduate and graduate studies in the department of Religious Studies while continuing to practice as a Registered Nurse.

There are a myriad of reasons for a health care professional to pursue advanced degrees in Religious Studies. These are in addition to the frequently mentioned benefits of obtaining a liberal arts degree. Healthcare, perhaps a poor term, and religion are concerned with the ‘rawness’ of life. Both are intimately engaged with human suffering, particularly at the beginning and end of life. The fields have developed, and are developing, methods and procedures (rituals) to mitigate the suffering that each of us must endure at various times in life. Moreover, the two fields are involved in addressing the moral questions which arise as a result of remarkable medical advancements. Although there have been great efforts throughout history by both fields, to separate the cogito from the emotions and the body, the reality in the field of their practices indicates no such separation.

Religious Studies provides the freedom to explore all aspects of humanity. For example, I acquired more knowledge about Freud and Jung than most psychology students. Conversely, I was able to bring my professional knowledge and understandings regarding mental illness to my examinations of religion. It was a rich experience. Religious Studies offered me the opportunity to examine the psychology of the religious experience and thereby deepening my intellectual learning in the field of the psychological sciences.

In my view, to touch and comfort a suffering or dying child or adult is a profoundly moral act. I have pursued ethics in my graduate studies in order to deepen my learning in understanding the human response to those who are suffering. I choose to do this in the department of Religious Studies because within the field there seemed to me a certain theoretical freedom to fully consider the whole human being. And, even though we live, work and study in a secular world, we do not seem very eager to give up on the consolations and comforts of religion. History indicates that human beings are a persistently religious bunch. Many are not of course, but it really does not matter to the family or the patient lying ill in a bed as to whether or not you agree with his or her religious views. The great academic battles over faith and reason, secularism and religion, hold little relevance at the bedside of a believer.

Currently, I work as a Clinical Ethicist within a very large healthcare organization. Clinical Ethics is a recent field of inquiry and practice. Clinical Ethics is derived from the larger area of bioethics. The word bioethics was originally a term used by biologists when examining the impact and responsibilities human beings have to the

biosphere. At this time, the term bioethics is commonly used to describe the field of applied ethics as employed in the practice of health care and health research. A growing area in bioethics is in animal or veterinary medicine.

In my view, the historical record highlights the Nuremburg trials which took place after World War II. The Nuremburg trials resulted in a medical research Code of Ethics that is renamed in various countries and it is changing and adapting to new realities even in present day. This code was developed as a result of the world hearing that Nazi physicians and others did medical research on vulnerable living human beings imprisoned in the concentration camps. It was a remarkable and shocking event. The assumption that a physician or health care professional embodies an essential virtue was eclipsed. There have been other examples of immoral and unethical medical research throughout the history of medicine. Even today, in Canada, past unethical research is discovered all too frequently. The most vulnerable and stigmatized in our society are often the unwitting participants. The mentally ill, the cognitively disabled, and First Nations peoples come to mind. Thus, today, in the west, all health sciences research must receive approval from a research ethics board before proceeding with the project.

A further and important impact on health care and ethics is the advancement of remarkable life extending technology. This, alongside of a move into reproductive technologies, designer pharmaceuticals, and genetic therapies and so forth, have greatly impacted the way health care is practiced. The technology advances daily and we as a society must grapple with moral questions that a generation before us could not even imagine.

Western bioethics employs a number of ethical frameworks and theories as found in the western philosophical canon to assist in resolving some of these issues. Examples of these theories are: virtue ethics, deontological (Kantian) ethics, casuistry, consequentialism, utilitarianism, and communitarianism. (These philosophical theories were included as part of my undergraduate studies in the philosophy of religion). In 1979, Tom Beauchamp and James Childress advanced a thesis that there is a common morality in medicine and health care. As such, they put forward principles that the health care provider must balance in order to make ethical decisions. Briefly these principles posited by Beauchamp and Childress are: autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence and justice. The impact of Beauchamp's and Childress's thesis on bioethics was enormous. And still today, these principles are considered a theoretical foundation in clinical ethics.

Nonetheless these principles are often deemed inadequate when dealing with complex health care decisions. This was especially the case within Nursing ethics and feminist ethics. Feminist ethics and care ethics, now commonly referred to as relational ethics, offered an additional understanding to the way ethical decisions are made in health care. They have promoted a relational autonomy which includes the concrete experience of the patient and the health care provider. Considerations such as gender, vulnerability, moral distress, and narrative are now part and parcel of ethical deliberations in a clinical context.

At this time, there is a developing interest in a dialogue between bioethics and the hermeneutical tradition as espoused by the canon of hermeneutical philosophers, in particular Hans-Georg Gadamer and Martin Heidegger. However, there does not appear

to be any conversations taking place with Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy and very little with Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutical phenomenology. Nonetheless, in my practice as a Clinical Ethicist, I incorporate both Levinas and Ricoeur in assisting others to make difficult decisions. I would venture to say I am a Ricoeurian ethicist. I employ the hermeneutical process of understanding with solicitude and conversation passing the possible decisions through the lens of reformulated moral norms. Levinas, gives me the moral context of responsibility towards the 'face' of the suffering other.

My practice consists of three main activities. The first one is mediation. I assist teams of health care providers, patients and families to have moral conversations. I open a moral space where different ethical values, religious and/or humanist, can be disclosed and discussed. The people participating in this moral space all aim for what would be a good decision that benefits the patient. Sometimes, there may be only one option, for example, the withdrawal or stoppage of medical treatment. Conversely, the process of mediation may lead to a number of options. When people who are in relationships (chosen or otherwise) understand that certain options are based on sound ethical thinking, they move more easily into a common decision. Sometimes, there is only a choice between sorrows. Occasionally, when mediation fails, the courts are required to make these decisions. An example of this type of conflict is physician assisted suicide. This decision, together with the conflicts that surround it, are currently before the Supreme Court of Canada as an acceptable form of decision-making could not be reached within the practice of medicine and medical law. The abortion debate could also not be satisfactorily resolved by either moral or legal deliberations, and thus the law regulating

abortion was struck down by Canada's Supreme Court. There are many other individual cases which are presented to the justice system to decide on a resolution. These cases often lead to distress and may often be considered a failure of ethics.

The second major activity in my role as clinical ethicist, is debriefing teams and families in moral distress. Moral distress is the state of being where one knows what the right thing to do is but there are barriers preventing one from doing good. The barriers range from lack of human and financial resources to refusal of care by the patient. Moral distress may also occur when witnessing and caring for severe trauma cases. Seeing and being with someone who is in extreme pain and suffering impacts the healthcare providers. Carrying this private burden may lead to ill health of both a physical and psychological nature.

Thirdly, I am very involved in teaching health care professionals both on the frontline and in management positions that involve demonstrating how to make decisions based on sound ethical foundations. The people involved want to be able to do this and indeed today it is regarded as an accepted standard of practice that they understand certain underlying ethical theories that can inform their practice.

Finally, for me at least, there remains a challenge to both Religious Studies and Bioethics. These fields of philosophical inquiry require a more intense dialogue with each other. There are the occasional books and articles on bioethics from various religious traditions. Mostly these involve dogmatic pronouncements on what is allowed and what is forbidden. There does not appear to be sufficient dialogue between the different

religious traditions and medical ethicists and practitioners when faced with the unrelenting moral issues and conflicts which arise concretely in the healthcare environment. In some ways secular bioethical theories and views have replaced the religions. Perhaps, as many would argue, this is a good thing. Yet those who come into our care, as well as the many health care providers themselves, come to the bedside with religious values and understandings. These values are not left on the steps of the hospital as Paul Ricoeur well knows. It is this dimension that needs to be added to contemporary ethical discussions in a non-dogmatic way.