

THE STONE - What Do We Owe Each Other? - By AARON JAMES WENDLAND - JANUARY 18, 2016 3:45 AM

The thousands of refugees who continue to arrive in Europe each day face barriers: not only physical barriers — walls, fences, barbed wire — but an even deeper resistance, in the nationalism and xenophobia bubbling up across the Continent.

A handful of recent events — Islamic State attacks in Istanbul, Paris and elsewhere, as well as the mass assault of women in Cologne, Germany, on New Year's Eve — continue to feed a deep-seated and often irrational fear of the "other." And then there is the debate about refugees coming to the United States, where a nationalist sentiment has also emerged, often in the rhetoric of certain presidential candidates.

Now, in Germany and elsewhere, doors are closing. But what are the potential consequences of this resistance to outsiders, to those in need? Is it justified? Do we owe the suffering and dispossessed something more, if we are to call ourselves ethical beings?

Few philosophers confronted questions like these more directly than Emmanuel Levinas. Born into a Jewish family in Kaunas, Lithuania, in 1906, Levinas moved to France in 1923 and studied philosophy in Germany under Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger in the late 1920s. Levinas made a name for himself in the 1930s as one of the first interpreters and defenders of Husserl's and Heidegger's phenomenology in France, but his commitment to and understanding of phenomenology's often arcane search for the meaning of being was transformed during the Second World War. Levinas was drafted into the French Army in 1939. He was taken prisoner by the Nazis in 1940. And while his status as an officer saved him from being sent to the concentration camps, all the members of his immediate family were killed by the Nazis for their Jewish faith and ancestry. After the war, Levinas's abiding concern was to describe the concrete source of ethical relations between human beings: our ability to respond to the wants and needs of others. The epigraph to Levinas's "Otherwise Than Being" reads: "To the memory of those who were closest among the six million assassinated by the National Socialists, and of the millions upon millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man, the same anti-semitism." The book that follows is a profound meditation on the essence of exclusion. It is also an uncompromising account of a basic hospitality that constitutes our humanity. And Levinas's extensive body of work has much to teach us about the nature and danger of nationalism as well as the necessity of welcoming and protecting vulnerable human beings.

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Nationalism is the result of identification and differentiation and it follows from the similarities and differences we see between ourselves and others. As an American, you share the same upbringing with many of your fellow citizens. Your background is different than that of most Britons or Italians. And it is partially by recognizing the traits you share with Americans and then distinguishing them from citizens of other states that you develop your sense of identity. But as we know from history, this identity building, taken to extremes, can often lead to horrible things.

Levinas traces the roots of virulent nationalism to the sharp distinctions we draw between "same" and "other." And while identification and differentiation enables the formation of personal identity, it can also result in hostility when the traits we use to distinguish ourselves from others are totalized and taken as absolute. "Totalization" occurs when members of one group take a feature of another group to be both definitive of that group and all members in it. Generalizations like "Americans are outgoing," "Brits are reserved" and "Italians are passionate" are often unfairly applied to individual Americans, Britons or Italians. And negative stereotypes such as "Jews are greedy," "Blacks are dangerous" and "Muslims are terrorists" have a history of leading to unjust aggression against members of those communities. In each of these examples, we reduce others to a simple or single category that distinguishes "them" from "us" in an absolute way. And this reduction often produces an allergic reaction to others; a reaction exemplified by the rush to build fences around Europe to keep Afghan, Iraqi and Syrian refugees out.

Levinas's antihistamine for our allergic reactions involves three things: an appeal to the "infinity" in human beings, a detailed description of face-to-face encounters and an account of a basic hospitality that constitutes humanity.

Infinity is Levinas's technical term for the idea that other people are always more than our categories can capture. You may be a British Anglican from the Midlands, but you're much more than that. You are a father, a son and a husband. You have black hair, blue eyes and a graying beard. You have political opinions and controversial beliefs about the beginning of the world. And so on, ad infinitum.

Similarly, a Syrian refugee may be Muslim, but she's much more than that! She is a mother, a daughter and a wife. She has black hair, brown eyes and a sharp jaw-line. She has political opinions and controversial beliefs about the beginning of the world. And so on, ad infinitum. By calling attention to this infinity in human beings, Levinas was trying to show us that our identifications and differentiations always fail as adequate descriptions of others. And he aims to interrupt our totalizing and xenophobic tendencies by indicating the irreducible humanity of other human beings.

Hospitality, welcoming and sharing are the foundation upon which all communities are formed, and is at the root of our basic humanity.

Concretely, the irreducible humanity of other human beings is found in the face. Faces confront us directly and immediately and they refuse typologies. Levinas indicates the irreducibility of others by speaking of God's presence in the face, but his account of the face also illustrates another aspect of human beings: vulnerability. The face is naked, exposed, and open to attack. It is hungry and thirsty. And it seeks protection and nourishment. Levinas invokes the stranger, the widow and the orphan as examples of deprivation. We could also add asylum seekers and embattled exiles as acute cases of suffering. However, Levinas's general account of vulnerability shows us how hospitality in the face of another's need constitutes individual human beings and bespeaks a humanity that precedes and is more fundamental than the establishment of all national boundaries.

Hospitality, according to Levinas, involves curtailing our enjoyment of the world when confronted with another's wants. It is exemplified by the act of welcoming another into our home and sharing our possessions. Welcoming and sharing with others determines who and what we are as specific human beings. Levinas expresses this idea in a discussion of subjectivity in which the self is described as a host and hostage to others. We are hosts to others because welcoming them into our world is a precondition for a relation of identification and differentiation between us. And we are hostages because our personal identity is determined by how we respond to the demands others place upon us.

For instance, your identity as an Italian high school teacher is achieved with your recognition and response to the fact that others want an education. Likewise, a Syrian man's status as a trafficker of refugees is possible via his recognition and response to an exile's need for safe passage across the sea. With these examples we discover that our place in a distinct human community is based on our ability to respond to the wants and needs of others. Yet Levinas shows us that hospitality not only determines our identities in specific communities but is also the mark of humanity — hospitality is the basis of human community as such.

The existence of distinct human communities presupposes our ability to welcome and share our property with others. "To recognize the other," Levinas wrote in "Totality and Infinity," "is to come to him across the world of possessed things, but at the same time to establish, by gift, community and universality." Once our enjoyment of the world has been questioned by another's need, hospitality establishes human community in the act of giving and with the creation of a common tongue. Language, Levinas wrote in his work, is universal because it is the very passage from the individual to the general, because it offers things that are mine to the other. To speak is to make the world common, to create commonplaces. Language does not refer to the generality of concepts, but lays the foundations for a possession in common. It abolishes the inalienable property of enjoyment. The world in discourse is no longer what it is in separation, in the being at home with oneself where everything is given to me; it is what I give: the communicable, the thought, the universal.

While the creation of a common tongue is the basis of human community, language also allows us to label others and thus explicitly identify and distinguish our selves from them. This facilitates our tendency to overlook a face in need and see a "Syrian" or "Muslim" that is not like me. The foundation of a human community also raises the question of "other others" whereby any face-to-face encounter may be interrupted by the face of another. We are asked, in other words, to share our possessions with *all* human beings. Levinas sees this request as an infinite but impossible responsibility, since we could give what we have to anyone, but we do not have enough to give to all. In the face of this impossible responsibility we require justice: the systematic organization and distribution of resources amongst human beings. And from here we are not far from the formation of nation states with rigid identities and physical boundaries and the barbed-wire resistance with which we began.

Although we seem to have come full circle, Levinas has taught us that our responsibility for others is the foundation of all human communities, and that the very possibility of living in a meaningful human world is based on our ability to give what we can to others. And since welcoming and sharing are the foundation upon which all communities are formed, no amount of inhospitable nationalism can be consistently defended when confronted with the suffering of other human beings. "In the relationship between same and other, my welcoming of the other is," as Levinas puts it, "the *ultimate* fact." It is the hospitality of humanity, or a peace prior to all hostility. And in this primary peace, in this basic welcoming of refugees, Levinas reminds us that "things figure not as what one *builds* but as what one *gives*."

Aaron James Wendland is a research fellow at the University of Tartu, in Estonia, and a co-editor of the books "*Wittgenstein and Heidegger*" and the forthcoming "*Heidegger on Technology*."

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