This paper was originally presented as a colloquy paper to the Undergraduate Philosophy Association at the University of Texas at Austin, 1990. Since putting this paper online in 1995, I have heard from several faculty members who use this paper as a standard introduction to Levinas in courses at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. I have been invited on a few occasions to change the title so as to make the article sound more appealing to graduate students or those without a background in philosophy. I here leave the paper with its original title hoping that this proviso will do the important work of inviting a more general readership.

A.B.

Introducing Levinas to Undergraduate Philosophers

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The question of the source of the moral "ought" is no small question, nor is it unimportant. Our own philosophical tradition has dealt with the question in several ways producing a variety of answers. Some of these include locating the "ought" in the structure of reason (Kant), in the human being's desire for pleasure (Utilitarianism), or in the will of God (Aquinas). The reason why the question is so important is because different conceptions of the source of the moral ought ultimately give rise to different conceptions of what is right and wrong; they also affect the way we answer the biggest of all ethical questions, why be good.

Levinas begins his answer to this question precisely with the origin of the moral ought, which unfolds on the level of the individual. For him, ethics is, first and foremost, born on the concrete level of person to person contact. He does not find the moral "ought" inscribed within the laws of the cosmos, in reason, or in any universal desire for pleasure. Instead, each individual case of moral conflict produces the moral "ought" itself.

Today I wish to do nothing more than present an exposition of the source of the "ought" in Levinas.[1] It will be difficult to present an argument here, because the moral "ought" for Levinas has already occurred before reason comes on the scene. To present a rational argument for what occurs before reason is impossible; to do so would be to take reason into a domain where reason cannot go, in this case, to the point of contact between one person and another. Thus, Levinas can only have for us an evocative appeal. The goal of presenting ethics in this fashion is *not* to discover the *truth* of ethics, but to make an appeal for ethical transformation. Levinas invites us to listen, not only to what he has to say, but, more importantly, to the voice of the Other, who sanctions all of our moral obligation.

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[1] The process presented in this lecture follows the lines established in *Totality and Infinity*. Between the writing of this text and the later text, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, Levinas changed his mind on the ordering of the process. See Lingis' introduction to *Otherwise than Being* for more information on this point.

To get this lecture off the ground, I will derive Levinas' moral "ought" by starting with an assumption: ethics occurs always in relation to other persons. When asked how to define ethics, I am assuming that our answer will include an important reference to other people. This is not necessarily to say that there can be no ethics without at least two people—though this is the case for Levinas. It is to say that ethics is an important issue for us because it governs the way in which we relate with one another. This assumption is not unfounded: indeed, St. Thomas tells us that "harm should not be given to an other". Kant's Categorical Imperative indicates that the moral agent should "treat humanity, whether in his/her own person or the person of another, not only as a means but also as an end in itself." And Mill's "principle of utility" implies others when he notes that ethics is rooted in the notion of the greatest happiness for the greatest number. If ethics is concerned with the other, then it would appear that in order to fill out a complete account of ethics, the means by which two people come in contact with each other will be vitally important. Here, then is the root of Levinas' concern: to establish the source of contact between persons or the source of interpersonal meaning, and in finding this meaning, Levinas finds the ethical.

To a non-philosopher, the source of contact between persons seems to be a superficial question. The answer is, at first, easy. The other person is met in experience everyday, on the street, in the classroom, in the workplace, etc. To a philosopher, however, the question is not so easy: we in the tradition recognize the difficulties inherent in interpersonal contact. Does the other person have a mind? Is the other a creation of my imagination, as Descartes asks looking out of his study at the automata that pass by dressed in coats and hats? In light of these questions, though, we can never truly deny the existence of the other in the context of the street, the classroom, or the workplace, even if we can deny such contact in a theoretical context. It is on the level of life, then, as opposed to that of theory, that Levinas has his appeal.

Levinas comes directly out of the tradition established by Descartes, Kant and Husserl. "Every idea is a work of the mind," writes Descartes in his *Meditations*.[2] Ideas are created, invented by a mind, not discovered. This leaves Descartes with a problem: "How can [ideas] that have their origin in the mind nevertheless give us knowledge of independently real substances."[3] He answers this question through proofs for God's existence and divine veracity. But as the tradition progresses, Kant notes that God cannot be used within philosophy to the extent that Descartes would like. Thus, Descartes is left alone in his world with only his ideas: there is no contact with an other who is not an other in one of his ideas. Husserl takes this to its logical consequences in the fifth of his *Cartesian Meditations* and notes that the other is "there," present to me, but only in the sense that the other has for me. He writes, "Consciousness makes present a 'there too', which nevertheless is not itself there and can never become an 'itself-there'."[4] The other of Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations* is not an extra-mental other, that is, one who exists

[2] *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, eds. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross, vol. II, *Meditations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 162.

[3] Robert Paul Wolff, *Kant's Theory of Mental Activity: A Commentary on the Transcendental Analytic of the "Critique of Pure Reason"* (Gloucester, Mass: Peter Smith, 1973), 32.

[4] Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, translated by Dorion Cairns (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1960), 50, 139.

independently of me; rather, the other is only the meaning that I constitute for the other. In other words, the meaning of being an other comes down to my interpretation of the other, an interpretation which is the working of my own mind quite apart from what or whether the other may be.

If we can accept this notion that ideas are inventions of the mind, that ideas are, when it comes down to it, only interpretations of something, and if ethics, in fact, is taken to refer to real other persons who exist apart from my interpretations, then we are up against a problem: there is no way in which ideas, on the current model, refer to independently existing other persons, and as such, ideas cannot be used to found an ethics. There can be no pure practical reason until after contact with the other is established.

Given this view towards ideas, then, anytime I take the person in my idea to be the real person, I have closed off contact with the real person; I have cut off the connection with the other that is necessary if ethics is to refer to real other people. This is a central violence to the other that denies the other his/her own autonomy. Levinas calls this violence "*totalization*" and it occurs whenever I limit the other to a set of rational categories, be they racial, sexual, or otherwise. Indeed, it occurs whenever I already know what the other is about before the other has spoken. Totalization is a denial of the other's difference, the denial of the otherness of the other. That is, it is the inscription of the other in the same. If ethics presupposes the real other person, then such totalization will, in itself, be unethical.

If reducing the other to my sphere of ideas cuts off contact with the other, then we are presupposing that contact with the other has already been established. And if contact with the other cannot be established through ideas, then we must look elsewhere. Thus, Levinas looks not to reason, but to sensibility, to find the real other person.

Sensibility, for Levinas, goes back to a point before thought originates, before the ordering of a world into a system or totality.[5] Sensibility is passive, not active as thought is, and it is characterized primarily by enjoyment. Life as it is lived, (rather than understood), is lived as the satisfaction of being "filled" with sensations, the satisfaction of feeding on the environment.

Departing from Heidegger who maintains that we live from things through their function as tools and implements, Levinas maintains that we live from these things as nourishments. I eat my bread; in the activity of eating it becomes a part of my body. I bathe in the music of Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata"; in the activity of bathing. I "digest" the music. It becomes me. This "living from" is a matter of consumption, a matter of taking what is other and making it become a part of me. Levinas writes:

> Nourishment, as a means of invigoration, is the transmutation of the other into the same, which is the essence of enjoyment; an energy that is other, recognized as other, recognized ... as sustaining the very act that is directed upon it becomes, in enjoyment, my own energy, my strength, me.[6]

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[5] The "world" for Levinas is always the world constituted in subjectivity. It should not, therefore, be taken as extra-mental.

[6] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 111.

This taking on of what nourishes me conveys a separation between me and what has yet to nourish me. "Enjoyment is made," writes Levinas, "of the memory of its thirst; it is a quenching."[7] Enjoyment then includes the memory of once not having been satisfied with what now satisfies me. Thus, enjoyment also involves stepping back from my environment; "living from ... delineates independence itself, the independence of enjoyment and happiness ..."[8] Before enjoyment, there is me and the other thing that has yet to nourish me, even if the otherness of what will nourish me becomes apparent only in enjoyment, in the "memory" of its thirst. I can represent the bread, but this will not feed me. I must eat it. But then in eating my bread, the memory of hunger, evinces a separation between the bread and me. Thus, in enjoyment, the self emerges already as the subject of its need.

If Levinas is correct, then, the human being starts first as happy, satisfied with the plenum of sensations. He/she enjoys them. This enjoyment as independence is the initial formation of the I. But, this self, the self of enjoyment, constitutes an egoism. It is happy, but selfish. The self of enjoyment journeys into the world to make everything other part of itself, and it succeeds very well at this task. Cohen summarizes all of this nicely:

> [Sensation] is called "happiness" because at this level of sensibility the subject is entirely self-satisfied, self-complacement [sic], content, sufficient. Instead of [rational] synthesis, there are vibrations; instead of unifications, there are excitations; rather than an ecstatic self, there are margins of intensities, scattered stupidities, involutions without centers—egoism and solitude without substantial unity; a sensational happiness ... This event does not happen *to* subjectivity, this eventfulness, this flux, *is* subjectivity.[9]

Thus, Levinas finds on the level of sensibility a subjectivity that is more primordial than rational subjectivity.[10] It is not limited by the sphere of one's own ideas, but by the egoist self that goes out to enjoy the world. What is important here is that, unlike the sphere of ideas, sensibility reaches further out into the domain of the extra-mental.[11]

Having established subjectivity on the level of sensibility provides Levinas with a place "where" the other can be met, not in the cabinet of consciousness, but on the street, in the classroom, or in the workplace, where the egoism of enjoyment has the possibility of becoming "filled" with sensations. Furthermore, establishing subjectivity on the level of sensibility leads Levinas to a point where he can establish that the human subject is, first and foremost, passive. Sensations come to me from the outside only to be swallowed

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[7] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 113.

[8] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 110.

[9] Richard Cohen, "Emmanuel Levinas: Happiness is a Sensational Time," *Philosophy Today* 25 (1981): 201. This excellent article shows Levinas' debt to Husserl's phenomenology and his departure from it.

[10] There are at least three different types of subjectivity in Levinas: 1) rational subjectivity—the self of representation that occurs in the "I think"; 2) subjectivity of being—the self of enjoyment and need; and 3) ethical subjectivity—the social self that arises from transcendent interpersonal contact.

[11] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 109. "If cognition in the form of the objectifying act does not seem to us to be at the level of the metaphysical relation, this is not because the exteriority contemplated as an object, the theme, would withdraw from the subject as fast as the abstractions proceed; on the contrary, it does not withdraw far enough."

up on the inside. But, unlike the contents of ideas, sensations are discovered, given. They are not invented.

The ethical moment, the moment in which the moral "ought" shows itself, is found, for Levinas, on the level of sensibility when the egoist self comes across something that it wants to enjoy, something that it wants to make a part of itself, but cannot. That which the self wants to enjoy but cannot is the other person. The reason that it cannot enjoy the other person is not rooted in some deficiency of sensibility, but in the other person who pushes back, as it were, who does not allow him/herself to be consumed in the egoism of my enjoyment. The other resists consumption. The presence of the other, on this level, is not, properly speaking, known. The other person is encountered as a felt weight against me.

Thus, for Levinas, the other has some power over me. Indeed, the other is a transcendence that comes from beyond the categories of my thought, from beyond the world, from the other side of Being. Because of the other-worldliness of the epiphany of the other in the face-to-face, the face speaks thus: "I am not yours to be enjoyed: I am absolutely other," or to put the claim in Levinas' terms, "thou shalt not kill."

John Burke describes the initial approach of the other person in terms of astonishment or surprise. In so doing, he also notes the essential element of radical passivity that arises from contact with the other person. He writes, "My astonishment seems less an activity of mine, a willful projection of a function of my interests, than the deepest mode of passivity."[12] Vulnerability arises from such a surprise, a being caught off guard by the epiphany of the other person. My solitude is invaded by the other person who comes from nowhere.[13]

This element of "catching off-guard" is important here, because it indicates more about the presence of the other than the mere perception of the other. This catching off-guard makes me aware of the presence of the other as an other who is due my concern, not because I choose to give it to the other, but because it is demanded of me. I want to consume the other, but cannot.[14] Several steps are involved in elucidating this moment. In this discussion, I will present two of them: proximity and substitution. These two notions will lead us to an understanding of ethical responsibility in Levinas, though it must be understood that responsibility is not derived from these steps; it is, rather, bound up with them.

The face of the other, that element of the other that is the ground of interpersonal contact, indicates an immediacy with the other person that Levinas calls "proximity."[15] Proximity is felt as immediate contact. Levinas writes:

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[12] John Patrick Burke, "The Ethical Significance of the Face," *ACPA Proceedings* 56 (1982): 198.

[13] See Burke, "The Ethical Significance of the Face," 198. The reason that the other "comes from nowhere" is seen in the fact that the "world" for Levinas is constituted by my reason and exists "for me." The Other comes from beyond the world, hence, from a domain that is not able to be located by me.

[14] Levinas makes a distinction between desire and need. Need differs from desire to the extent that a need can be satisfied while a desire cannot. Thus, desire has a metaphysical significance. Put concretely, I desire the other person, but since the other cannot be reduced to the domain of the same, my desire for the other can never be fulfilled.

[15] See Andrew Tallon, "Intentionality, Intersubjectivity, and the Between: Buber and Levinas on Affectivity and the Dialogical Principle," *Thought* 53 (1978): 304. "The radical passivity of Levinas's self ... emerges only with the advent of the other, with the face of the other drawing near me; This nearness (prox-

> ... the proximity of the Other is not simply close to me in space, or close like a parent, but he approaches me essentially insofar as I feel myself—insofar as I am—responsible for him. It is a structure that in nowise resembles the intentional relation which in knowledge attaches us to the object—to no matter what object, be it a human object. Proximity does not revert to this intentionality; in particular it does not revert to the fact that the other is known to me.[16]

The proximity of the other demands a response; thus, Levinas claims that proximity is responsibility, or the ability to respond.[17] Proximity must then be thought of as a weight upon me that comes from the outside. But unlike Sartre who finds an antagonism in this entry of the other from the outside, Levinas finds the possibility of ethics, or the ground upon which ethics first shows itself. Not only does the possibility of ethics show itself here, the self now takes on a different characteristic. A new subjectivity is born that indicates that my self, as a subject, is a primary projection towards the other as a move of responsibility to the other. The very meaning of being a social subject is to be for-the-other.

Levinas writes, "Subjectivity is being a hostage."[18] In other words, subjectivity arises from confrontation with the other person where the other is dominant, never reducible to the domain of the same. Subjectivity means, in this context, subjection to the other.

> The self is a *sub-jectum*: it is under the weight of the universe ... the unity of the universe is not what my gaze embraces in its unity of apperception, but what is incumbent upon me from all sides, regards me, is my affair.[19]

The self is *subjected* to the other who comes from on high to intrude upon my solitude and interrupt my egoist enjoyment. The self, feeling the exterior in the guise of the other pass through its world, is already obligated to respond to the transcendent other who holds the self hostage. In turn, this means that "the latent birth of the subject occurs in obligation where no commitment was made."[20] I do not agree to live ethically with the other at first, I am ordered to do so. The meaning of my being a self is found in opposition to the other, as an essential ability to respond to the other. I am, above all things, a social self indentured *a priori*, made to stand in the place of the other.

This standing in the place of the other provides Levinas with one of his most powerful concepts, "substitution." Substitution arises directly from the self as held hostage by the other. It is the means by which my being responds to the other before I know that it does. Indeed, substitution is a sign of how other-directed the human being actually is. In

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imité) is, of course, not an intentionality by me or him alone, not a mental "state" or activity, but meaning between us."

[16] Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Phillipe Nemo*, translated by Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 97. This elegant little book goes a long way in making Levinas' thought approachable to the uninitiated.

[17] See Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1981), 139: "Proximity, difference which is non-indifference, is responsibility."

[18] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 127.

[19] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 127.

[20] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 140.

comporting myself towards the other person in substitution, my identity becomes concrete. "In substitution my being that belongs to me and not to another is undone, and it is through substitution that I am not 'another,' but me."[21]

If Levinas is correct here, the meaning of being a social subject is primarily to be for the other person. Again, substitution is indicative of a sacrifice of self—it cannot be merely the idea of being in the place of the other person, for ideas have yet to come on the scene. As Lingis suggests:

> One is held to bear the burden of others: the substitution is a passive effect, which one does not succeed in converting into an active initiative or into one's own virtue.[22]

While it is true that Levinas is vague on the essence of substitution, the suggestion seems to be that in being persecuted by an other person, I am made to consider the person as an other. However, since such consideration cannot be made on the conceptual level, this consideration becomes manifest in a comportment of the self to the other person. Consideration for the other means being-considerate-for-the-other. Substitution then is recognizing myself in the place of the other, not with the force of a conceptual recognition, but in the sense of finding myself in the place of the other as a hostage for the other. Substitution is the conversion of my being as a subjection *by* the other into a subjection *for* the other.

To get a sense of how powerful Levinas' notion of substitution is, let me depart from the vocabulary of his language for a moment and cast the discussion into concrete terms. Suppose for a moment that you are walking down the street and the person in front of you pushes a garbage can into the street. You might pick up the garbage can, you might not—but, certainly you will not feel like an injustice has been done to the garbage can. Now suppose that in the same situation, the person in front of you pushes another person into the street. Suppose further that this person, while lying on the ground looks up at you. Do you "feel" the need to respond? Levinas says that at this moment, the ethical command has been waged. You are obligated to respond. If the desire to respond does not, at first, present itself as a command, and you respond because you want to respond, then you have just been witness to the depth that substitution has taken in your own being. The desire to respond is already a responsiveness to the command of the other.

Some ethicists find that if we respond to the person because we feel a personal need to do so, then we are really satisfying our own desire, and, as such, our action does not have true moral worth. Levinas' point is more profound on this score. He notes that there is a metaphysical explanation for why we have this desire to respond. The explanation is rooted, once again, in substitution. First of all, the person has a transcendence that the garbage can does not have, and secondly, we have, in fact, already substituted ourselves for the other.[23] Within Levinas' framework, the desire to help the other emerges because I am held hostage by the other to the core of my being, and, in substitution, I am made to stand for the other, before freedom and reason comes on the scene.

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[21] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 127.

[22] Alphonso Lingis in the translator's introduction to *Otherwise than Being*, xxxi. This introduction consists of a concise exposition of Levinas' thought in this work.

[23] I wish to thank Carl Weisner for helping me to develop this point.

This brings us, at last, to Levinas' notion of ethical "responsibility." This notion of responsibility, much in line with our concept of responsiveness, means that in being a subject I am already in the grip of the Other. It also entails that all thought enters on the scene after the epiphany of the other in the face-to-face. This is to say that the other person precedes my ethical subjectivity, and that ethics precedes any conceptual science. Inasmuch as responsibility is foundational for all interpersonal relationships, it is in responsibility that we are going to find a means to pass from an encounter with the real other person into ethics. Levinas writes:

> In [*Otherwise than Being*] I speak of responsibility as the essential, primary and fundamental mode of subjectivity. For I describe subjectivity in ethical terms. Ethics, here, does not supplement a preceding existential base [as Heidegger would have it]; the very node of the subjective is knotted in ethics understood as responsibility.[24]

Furthermore, "the tie with the Other is knotted only as responsibility"[25] as well. Thus, responsibility *is* the link between the subject and the other person, or, in more general terms, the source of the moral "ought" and the appearance of the other person *as person and not as thing* are one and the same. There is no authentic sociality apart from ethics, and there is no ethics apart from sociality. To say that responsibility is foundational for ethics and interpersonal relations is to say then not only that responsibility is what relates one subject to another, but it is to go on to say that the meaning of the otherness of the other person is given in responsibility, and not in my interpretation of the other person. The very meaning of being an other person is "the one to whom I am responsible." Thus, the contact with the real other person that I spoke of at the beginning of this lecture as something presupposed by the very meaning of ethics turns out to be, in Levinas' account, the source of the moral "ought."

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[24] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 95.
[25] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 97.