



Levinas and
the centrality
of the other

Answer the following questions based on the Levinas article:

1. What questions do you have regarding the article?

2. Levinas' philosophy leans heavily on metaphor. What metaphors are central to his thought (based on the article)? Do your best to explain the role of these metaphors in Levinas' ideas.

3. What is Levinas' primary argument?

4. How does the author of the article connect Levinas to current events? What other current events might his ideas be relevant to?

5. How do Levinas' ideas on ethics seem similar to and different from those of Kant?

Where does the moral ought come from?

- Kant/Aristotle - The commands of reason
- Utilitarians - The desire for pleasure
- Aquinas (the Western Monotheistic perspective) - The commands of God

But . . .

- According to Descartes, “Every idea is a work of the mind.” Ideas are created not discovered.
- Descartes maintains nothing can be known with certainty but ideas.
- Thus my only knowledge of the other is my idea of the other and not the other as he is.
- This is an example of Levinas’ totalization - the effort to reduce the other to my conception. But the other is irreducible.
- This means that the ethical ought must be sought pre-rationally, as encountering the other rationally leads to the violence of totalization

“Any time I take the person of my idea to be the real person, I have closed off contact with the real person . . . totalization is the denial of the others’ difference, the denial of the otherness of the other”
- A.F. Beavers

Enjoyment

- Levinas argues that the pre-social self lives for enjoyment
- Enjoyment involves being nourished by the world

“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.”

- E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 111.

- Thus the pre social self is happy and satisfied as it consumes what is not itself and finds enjoyment in doing so.
- But this pre-social self is an egoism - the world and everything in it are merely extensions of the self
- The pre-social self is also pre rational. With no language there is no thought - only sensation.
- This world of sensation is where the other is met

The face to face

- Happily consuming, the self encounters that which resists consumption - the other.
- Levinas describes this encounter as surprising - the self is “taken off guard”
- I want to consume the other, but I cannot

Substitution

- In recognizing an other which resists consumption, I for the first time see myself as other to the other, thus the social self is born.
- This recognition of otherness makes me see the self as other to the other. This realization is what Levinas calls substitution.
- I am commanded to respect the other because it is only in recognition of the other that I become a social self.
- My subjectivity as an other and not an object depends on the other.
- I am thus commanded to respect the other as an a priori condition of my own subjectivity.

“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.”

- A.F. Beavers

“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”

- A. Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*