THE FACE-TO-FACE ENCOUNTER: EMBODIMENT AND ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY IN LEVINAS' PHENOMENOLOGY

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Abstract: This article shows how Emmanuel Levinas's ethical philosophy departs from traditional Western metaphysics by rooting moral responsibility in the embodied encounter between corporeal subjects. Embodiment is key for both the ethical subject and the *Other*, with ethical consciousness arising from shared corporeal vulnerability. For Levinas, ethical obligation emerges in concrete, physical encounters with the *Other*, rather than abstract principles. Ethical responsibility arises in the *face-to-face* encounter with the embodied *Other*, where vulnerability and need are revealed. Ethical response involves embodied acts of goodness and substitution, where the subject takes on the suffering and needs of the *Other*. By orienting itself toward the Other, the being can break free from self-centeredness and the dangers of the 'there is', establishing its identity outside itself and experiencing liberation. Ultimately, Levinas's ethics demands a shift from abstract moral reasoning to an embodied, practical response to the Other's call, unfolding in the immediacy of human encounters and grounded in the corporeal reality of our existence.

Keywords: embodiment, ethical responsibility, Emmanuel Levinas, the Other, face-to-face encounter, substitution

Abstrak: Artikel ini hendak menunjukkan bagaimana etika Emmanuel Levinas yang menjangkarkan tanggung jawab moral pada perjumpaan antar subjek yang bertubuh melepaskan diri dari metafisika tradisional Barat. Kebertubuhan menjadi kunci dalam perjumpaan antara seorang subjek moral dengan Yang Lain, di mana kesadaran moral tumbuh dari kerentanan fisik mereka. Alih-alih dari prinsip-prinsip abstrak, kewajiban moral muncul dari perjumpaan fisik yang konkret. Dalam perjumpaan antar wajah tersebut, kerapuhan dan kebutuhan ma-

sing-masing tersingkap. Tanggung jawab moral terwujud dalam respons baik yang menubuh dan dalam substitusi, melalui mana subjek merengkuh penderitaan dan kebutuhan Yang Lain sebagai miliknya. Lewat keterarahan pada Yang Lain, 'ada' membebaskan diri dari 'ada-di-sana' (*il y a*) dan dari keterpusatan diri seraya menegaskan identitasnya di luar diri sendiri. Etika Levinas menuntut pergeseran dari penalaran moral yang abstrak menuju kepekaan praktis pada panggilan Yang Lain, yang hadir dalam perjumpaan langsung dan melibatkan realitas kebertubuhan manusia.

Kata-kata Kunci: kebertubuhan, tanggung jawab moral, Emmanuel Levinas, Yang Lain, perjumpaan tatap muka, substitusi.

INTRODUCTION

The ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas presents a radical departure from traditional Western metaphysics by grounding moral responsibility in the embodied encounter between corporeal subjects. What distinguishes Levinas's ethics is its profound recognition of embodiment as essential to both the ethical subject and the *Other* who commands responsibility. The body is not merely an instrument through which ethical action occurs, but the very condition that makes ethical encounters possible. The novelty of Levinas's approach lies in his assertion that ethical consciousness emerges through our shared corporeal vulnerability we are called to responsibility precisely because we are embodied beings encountering other embodied beings in their fragility and need.

Levinas locates ethical obligation not in anything like either Kantian categorical imperatives or utilitarian calculations but in the concrete, physical encounter with the *Other* in specific moments of space and time. This article demonstrates that genuine ethical engagement cannot be reduced to abstract rules or principles but must be understood through the mutual embodiment of both subject and *Other*. It is in the face-to-face meeting of vulnerable bodies that true ethical responsibility is born and sustained. The *face of the Other*, in its corporeal presence, serves as a

profound reminder of the subject's self-centered existence and offers a path to salvation through ethical response to the *Other's* call.

The article develops this argument through three main sections. First, "The Phenomenology of Embodied Ethical Subject" examines how the subject emerges as an embodied being from the anonymous 'there is' (il y a), establishes itself through 'hypostasis' and 'economic existence,' and finds nourishment in everyday life. The second section, 'The Ethical Demand: Arising from the Face-to-Face Encounter with the Embodied Other," explores how the face-to-face encounter with the *Other's* corporeal vulnerability transforms mere "economic existence" into ethical subjectivity. The third section, "The Embodied Response: Substitution and Small Goodness," delves into how ethical responsibility, born from the face-to-face encounter, manifests in concrete actions of substitution and in the pursuit of "small goodness", demonstrating the embodied nature of ethical response and the subject's willingness to prioritize the *Other's* well-being over his or her own.

Through this progression, we demonstrate how Levinas's understanding of embodied ethical subjectivity offers a profound reimagining of moral philosophy. The central thesis of our investigation is that moral responsibility emerges precisely at the intersection of our vulnerable bodies where the embodied subject encounters the embodied *Other* in that *Other's* suffering and need, making an absolute ethical demand which can only be understood only through our shared corporeal existence, and which offers the possibility of transcendence through embodied ethical response.

THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF EMBODIED ETHICAL SUBJECT

The foundation of Levinas's ethical responsibility for the *Other* begins with the analysis of human existence. Emmanuel Levinas was born in Lithuania. In 1923 he went to Strasbourg University, where his studies included the philosophy of Henri Bergson. From 1928 to 1929 Levinas was at Freiburg university, where he studied first with Husserl and then with Heidegger. This led in 1930, to his publishing his first book, *The*

Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology. This book was a reading of Husserl that was informed by Heidegger's criticisms of Husserl's intellectualism. Since that time almost all of Levinas's philosophical works have taken their point of departure from either Husserl or Heidegger. Through the method of phenomenology Levinas examined human existence. He first presented his own thoughts in his essay on *On Escape*, 1935,[1] and in two short studies published immediately after the Second World War, *Existence and Existents*[2] and *Time and the Other*.[3] These works offer analysis of human embodied existence through the experience of nausea, fatigue, pain, aging and insomnia. In his analysis, Levinas came to the conclusion that our human existence emerges on the background of an evil and anonymous existence. Levinas calls this original and ever-returning, and threatening situation of evil as "il y a" or "there is." This 'there is' has the tendency to reduce everything in its way into a *non-being*. The being has to make an effort to stand above this "there is" and to assert its existence. Levinas also calls this process a liberation from the "there is." In fact, Levinas's ethical thought can be read as a path towards liberation or, rather, as a movement towards redemption and liberation. This development towards liberation is seen in Levinas's thought as a liberation from the situation of "there is" or "Il y a," and a movement to the level of "hypostasis" and "economic existence" and, lastly, towards the face-to-face embodied encounter with the *Other*.

FACING THE VOID: EMBODIED ENCOUNTERS WITH LEVINAS'S *IL Y A*

Developed in *Existence and Existents* and *Time and Other*, the "il y a" or "there is" represents one of Levinas's most unsettling philosophical insights. While appearing less frequently in his later works, this concept of an impersonal, anonymous existence continues to haunt his ethical

1 Emmanuel Levinas, *On Escape: De l'évasion*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

2 Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, 1978th ed. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978).

3 Emmanuel Lévinas, *Time and the Other and Additional Essays* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987).

thought. The "il y a" manifests itself as a crushing presence that precedes consciousness itself a primordial horror that cannot be directly described but can be approached only through metaphor and negative description. As Philip Lawton notes, it represents "the 'elemental,' the 'indeterminate,' the background of being in which the self first discovers itself as a self, and from which it thereby detaches itself to become a separate(d) being who can meet others."[4]

This anonymous presence lies beyond direct experience or conceptualization, as we are always already constituted beings in relation to existence. Yet the "il y a" persists as a threatening absence-presence, an insomniac vigilance that allows no rest. The "il y a" represents a constant threat to the subject's identity and stability, an impersonal force that could at any moment reclaim the being that has temporarily escaped its grasp. The subject's very emergence as a conscious being represents a desperate attempt to flee from this oppressive weight of anonymous existence. Through phenomenological investigation, Levinas reveals how this horror of "there is" or anonymous existence manifests itself in various experiential situations in the darkness of night, in states of insomnia, in moments when the familiar world dissolves into an uncanny foreignness.

Certainly, "there is" is a kind of a background for the emergence of being which cannot be named and objectified. Such a being remains absolutely anonymous. This anonymous being cannot be confirmed or negated, as it appears against an indefinite background before every affirmation or negation. Therefore, we can say that the "il y a" is not a thing, not an object of perception or of thought; it is not approached, or intentionally constituted; nor is it grasped by a mind or a concept. It is not a thing; rather, it is the background of being from which things emerge and detach themselves. In *Ethics and Infinity* Levinas, in an interview with Philip Nemo mentions about his reflection on the impersonal being, which he had during his childhood days, as follows:

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4 Philip Lawton, "Levinas' Notion of the 'There Is'," *Tijdschrift Voor Filosofie* vol. 37, no. 3 (1975): p. 477.

> My reflection on this subject starts with childhood memories. One sleeps alone, the adult continues life; the child feels the silence of his bedroom as 'rumbling.'…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*.[5]

Levinas even uses a vocal image for this image of "silence." He says that this silence was as if full of noise, such as when one takes an empty shell and, keeping it close one's ears, one can hear the rumbling sound of the emptiness. This experience of the darkness of the night threatens to overpower the subjectivity of the "I". The "I" has nowhere to run against the radical depersonalization of "there is." The subject can no longer withdraw; it has no refuge anymore. Ciocan and Semon describe this experience as follows:

> Being does not show itself in a positive light, as in Heidegger—as the source of all intelligibility, as light and meaning—but negatively: as a heaviness, as weight, as something one wants to escape. Moreover, Being does not show itself, as in Heidegger, in (preontological) understanding, but in sensibility: more precisely in the suffering of this sensibility, in the 'impossibility of getting out of the game,' in this 'irremovability itself of our presence' (OE 52, translation modified).[6]

For Levinas, horror is somehow a movement which will strip consciousness of its very "subjectivity."[7] "The rustling of the there is … is horror."[8] In contrast to nausea, which expresses the bodily feeling of the

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5 Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*: *Emmanuel Levinas,* trans. Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), p. 47.

6 Cristian Ciocan and Kascha Semon, "The Problem of Embodiment in the Early Writings of Emmanuel Levinas," *Levinas Studies* vol. 4 (2009): p. 7, https://doi.org/10.5840/levinas200943.

7 Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, p. 60.

8 Levinas, p. 60.

impossibility of escaping from one's own being-subject"[9], "Horror expresses the feeling that one is stripped of one's own being-subject."[10] The significance of this threatening presence becomes clear in understanding how subjectivity itself emerges as a response to this horror. The subject's initial movements toward separation, toward economic existence and enjoyment, can be understood as desperate attempts to establish distance from the crushing weight of the "il y a." Yet this threat never fully disappears it remains as a perpetual possibility, haunting the edges of consciousness and reminding the subject of the precariousness of its existence.

ESCAPING THE BURDEN: LEVINAS ON HYPOSTASIS AND ECONOMIC EXISTENCE AS EVASION OF ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY

Only through the emergence of a self-aware being, capable of appropriating its own existence and of disrupting the terror it inspires, can the all-encompassing "there is" be overcome. Levinas calls this contraction into particularity, whereby separate and distinct being comes into being, the event of hypostasis.[11] Levinas says in *Existence and Existents* says that the "hypostasis is not a destruction of being but an attempt a hard fight, a struggle for life in order to rid being of its poisonous sting by means of particularising it into a being that exists here and now and thereby accords being a new significance."[12] The new calamity situation of the human being is in a paradoxical manner linked to the positive event of becoming-subject. Subjectivity is, on the one hand, the mastery of the "I" over the anonymous and depersonalising "there is" and is thus liberation, but on the other hand, it likewise again is calamity, namely the return of the self to the "I", the hindrance of the "I" by itself. In this new situation of evil, the dark clouds of the "there is" begin to appear against the background of fatigue and laziness. Through the concept of "il y a" or "there

9 Levinas, *On Escape,* pp. 66–68.

10 Levinas, *Existence and Existents,* p. 61.

11 Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, pp. 82–83.

12 Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, p. 83.

is," Levinas reminds us that we are fundamentally incarnate subjects, bound to our bodies in both suffering and senescence. Levinas portrays vulnerability as an inescapable aspect of embodied existence, revealed through pain and aging. The self, trapped in its own flesh, experiences a profound connection to its corporeal form that cannot be severed without losing the self's identity. According to Jacob Meskin, "in the pain and senescence (ageing) I find myself inescapably connected to myself in a way I wish I could terminate. The vulnerability of incarnate sensibility reveals that my perduring self-identity comes from outside me, for as much as I might want to dispense with it, I cannot without ceasing to be the integrated, self-identical ego that I am. Pain and ageing disclose that I am forced or compelled into remaining the one I am despite myself."[13]

The embodied subject, seeking respite from fatigue and loneliness, often engages in "economic existence," a process that encompasses both the acquisition of knowledge and the enjoyment derived from nourishing oneself with the elementals. This pursuit of relief, experienced through the body, reveals a fundamental connection between our material and intellectual endeavors and our corporeal being. The subject attempts to mitigate the weight of its existence by engaging in a cycle of knowledge acquisition and elemental enjoyment, each mediated and experienced through their physical form. This highlights how both knowing and nourishing, as components of "economic existence," are fundamentally embodied activities, shaping and being shaped by our corporeal reality.

By the term "economic existence" Levinas means that a being makes the world outside itself part of its ego. Through the process of labor and knowledge, a being comprehends the world and makes it part of its ego or self. This process helps the being to set out of itself for the *Other* and, hence, to avoid falling back into the evil of "there is." The pursuit of "knowledge" and "understanding" serves as another escape route. The pursuit of knowledge represents an attempt by the self to transcend its physical limitations and existential burdens, offering a cognitive escape

13 Jacob Meskin, "In the Flesh: Embodiment and Jewish Existence in the Thought of Emmanual Levinas," *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* vol. 76, no. 1 (1993), p. 176.

from the immediate concerns of corporeal life. Through understanding, individuals seek mastery over their environment, creating a sense of control of and distance from their embodied vulnerabilities. However, Levinas is critical of the tendency in Western philosophy to prioritize knowledge as a means of grasping and totalizing reality. He argues that this approach can lead to the objectification of the world and others, reducing them to mere objects of comprehension rather than recognizing their irreducible alterity.

Through the processes of "economic existence," the being attempts to escape its own insufficiency, yet paradoxically discovers both dependence and independence in its relationship with the world. Unable to find fulfillment in itself, the being moves toward otherness, seeking identity through its engagement with the world. This relationship reveals a fundamental paradox: while the being depends on the world to escape its self-enclosure, this very dependence enables its separation from the oppressive anonymity of the "there is." Levinas's phenomenological analysis illuminates how this movement unfolds through embodied experiences of nourishment, labor, and possession. The being finds pleasure and happiness in its engagement with the world, experiencing what Levinas terms "enjoyment." This emphasis on enjoyment highlights the crucial role of embodiment in Levinas's phenomenology the body is not merely an instrument but is the very condition through which the being relates to and finds satisfaction in the world. Through these acts of nourishment and possession the embodied subject establishes itself as separate and independent, yet simultaneously it remains in need of what is other than itself. This complex dialectic of dependence and independence, mediated through bodily engagement with the world, forms a crucial stage in the being's journey from self-absorption toward ethical relationship with the *Other*.

EMBODIED EXISTENCE AS NOURISHMENT AND EVERY-DAY LIFE

The embodied being or ego tries to establish its identity through nourishment. In the act of nourishment, the elementals, such as air, water, and food, etc. become part of the embodied being. The *Other*, which is out there in the world, is transformed into the same through nourishment. In this act of nourishment, the being feels a great sense of joy. Levinas mentions in *Totality and Infinity* that "nourishment is the transmutation of the other into the same. This is the essence of enjoyment. In enjoyment, the energy that is recognized as other becomes my own energy, my strength."[14]

The embodied ego attempts to overcome its fear of the "there is" by converting everything it encounters into something familiar and controllable—something that belongs to itself. Through its corporeal existence, when the ego encounters the world or *Others*, its first bodily instinct is to strip away their foreignness or difference (their alterity) and to make them part of its own understanding and possession. This process of turning the *Other* into the same through embodied engagement is how the ego builds and strengthens its identity. By physically possessing things, understanding them through bodily experience, and using them for its own corporeal needs, the ego creates a sphere of sameness around itself a domain where everything is reduced to what the embodied ego can grasp and control.

This bodily transformation of otherness into sameness is the concrete manifestation of egoism the embodied ego's fundamental drive to make everything its own. When the ego encounters food, it doesn't just eat it but physically incorporates it into itself. When it encounters knowledge, it doesn't just learn but embodies that knowledge through lived experience. When it encounters objects, it doesn't just use them but claims them as physical possessions that extend its bodily domain. Through these acts of corporeal possession and transformation, the ego establishes itself as

14 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, pp. 110–111.

an embodied being separate from and independent of the threatening void of the "there is." According to Levinas, "We live from 'good soup,' air, light, spectacles, work, ideas, sleep, etc. These are not objects of representations. We live from them, and through them. Nor is what we live from a 'means of life,' as the pen is a means with respect to the letter it permits us to write nor a goal of life, as communication is the goal of the letter."[15] The more the embodied ego can convert the foreign into the familiar through its physical engagement with the world, the stronger its sense of corporeal self becomes and the more it feels protected from the anonymous existence it fears. To the extent that the world of dwelling, eating, and drinking satisfies the needs of the ego and confirms its position as ruler and owner, it can be called the world of "economy."[16] Just as history objectifies and engulfs the lives it synthesizes, so too the interiority of the "I" and its relations to need, labor, and habitation reduces alterity. [17] According to Jolanta Saldukaitytė, "Enjoyment is naïve and innocent, as Levinas suggests in *Totality and Infinity*. It is 'happy,' in the sense of 'carefree.' Nevertheless, despite the positive side of enjoyment, this kind of material existence appears to a more complex and differentiated account as indifference and exploitation of the other." [18]

Levinas does not condemn this initial self-absorption of ego but sees it as a prerequisite for ethical engagement. The separation achieved through enjoyment, labor, and possession creates a subject capable of encountering the *Other*. However, it's important to note that, while Levinas legitimizes this initial egocentrism, he does not see it as the ultimate goal. Rather, it is a stage that prepares the subject for the ethical encounter with the *Other*, which encounter transcends mere economic existence and opens the possibility for true ethical responsibility.

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15 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity,* p. 110.

16 Adriaan Peperzak, *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (Purdue University Press, 1993), p. 24.

17 Edith. Wyschogrod, "Derrida, Levinas and Violence," in *Continental Philosophy II: Derrida and Deconstruction,* ed. Hugh. J Silverman (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 187.

18 Jolanta Saldukaitytė, "Emmanuel Levinas and Ethical Materialism," *Religions* vol. 12, no. 10 (2021): p. 3, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12100870.

THE ETHICAL DEMAND: ARISING FROM THE FACE-TO-FACE ENCOUNTER WITH THE EMBODIED OTHER

Levinas discovers in his phenomenological investigation that the ego is never alone. Even before it attains consciousness it is already *face to face* with the embodied *Other*. The *Other* shares the same vulnerability of embodiment as the self. This appearance of the *face* is sudden and disturbing. The epiphany of the *face* also brings about restlessness in the being because it distracts the self from its totalizing attitude and questions it regarding whether the self is living according to its vocation for the *other*. Saldukaitytė argues as follows:

> For Levinas the face is given empirically, it is a "body expression" (Levinas [1961] 2007, p. 258), but at the same time, it breaks from its context: it is not a surface but an expression. The face is abstract, not in the sense of empty, intellectualized, but without context, deeper, more demanding than any context, and as such it "enters into our world from an absolutely foreign sphere, that is, precisely from an absolute, that which in fact is the very name for ultimate strangeness. (Levinas 1987, p. 96)[19]

The word *face* has a Hebrew origin. It comes (from the word "panin"), from which the word compassion derives. Levinas uses face and the *Other* to refer to the alterity or the divinity of the *Other*. He uses this term to refer to the *face of the Other*, to the *Other* person and for him *face* is a remarkable presentation of the alterity of the *other*. According to Levinas, the encounter with the *Other* is affected only through the *face*. The alterity of the *face* is intrinsic, metaphysical, and absolute because the other is totally beyond the "I" and its possessive powers and it is totally unencompassable and transcendent.[20] Hence, *face* becomes the alterity which the ego is trying to seek so that it can lead itself beyond itself. Hence, the *face* represents the *Other*.

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19 Saldukaitytė, "Emmanuel Levinas and Ethical Materialism," p. 6.

20 Robert Bernasconi and David Wood, *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 179.

When we hear the word *face*, we spontaneously associate it with "countenance," that is to say, with the physiognomy, facial expression, and, by extension, character, social status and situation, past and "context" from which the other person becomes visible and describable for us. But what Levinas really means by the *face of the Other* is not his or her physical countenance or appearance, but precisely the noteworthy fact that the *Other* not only in fact, but in principle does not coincide with his or her appearance, image, photograph, representation or evocation. Levinas would say that "the *face* is present in its refusal to be contained."[21] When the ego encounters the *face* of another, it becomes aware that there is something beyond itself, ungraspable by its comprehension, in the *Other*. The *face* manifests as the presence of the *Other* that resists totalization. The *face* breaks away from the ego's totalizing attitude of claiming everything as its own. *Face* refuses to be contained by the ego's drive to possess and comprehend.

What is the look of the *face*? "It is an event."[22] It is not necessarily a phenomenon, but it is the frailty and the need of the *Other* of which the ego becomes aware of. It is not something for which the ego asks, but something that breaks through to it. The encounter with the *face* is fundamentally an embodied encounter, where two vulnerable corporeal beings meet in their shared fragility. The *face* appears not merely as a physical countenance but as an embodied presence that both reveals the vulnerability of the *Other* and reminds the ego of its own susceptibility to suffering and death. This mutual recognition of corporeal vulnerability is central to the ethical moment the *face of the Other*, in its material need and exposure to harm, awakens the ego to its pre-existing responsibility. The *Other's* embodied presence, manifest in hunger, cold, or pain, speaks without words of a primordial duty to respond. The *face* thus appears as both command and reminder it commands ethical response while simultaneously reminding the ego that this responsibility precedes its very

21 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity,* p. 194.

22 Tamara Wright, Peter Hughes, and Alison Ainley, "The Paradox of Morality: An Interview with Levinas," in *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 168.

emergence as a conscious being. Saldukaitytė suggests, "If [the] body is the chains, the prison, we want to overcome it, but if we see that human life is embodiment and the body, unavoidably, is vulnerable, we have to deal with it. For Levinas that is the possibility for ethics, for social relations between humans."[23]

Through this corporeal encounter, the ego discovers that its own embodied existence has always already been pledged in responsibility to the *Other*. The vulnerable body of the *Other* awakens the ego to its own embodied nature, not as a source of power or self-sufficiency, but as the very condition that makes ethical responsibility possible and necessary. In the *face's* exposure, the self-absorbing ego recognizes both its capacity to harm and its calling to protect a recognition that emerges precisely because both self and *Other* share in the fundamental vulnerability of embodied existence. This shared corporeality becomes the foundation for ethical responsibility, as the ego realizes that its very existence as an embodied being carries with it an inescapable obligation to respond to the *Other's* need.

The encounter with the *face* leads a being to become aware of its responsibility for the *Other*. This is the basis of ethics. For Levinas ethics is first philosophy. It begins even before we are aware of our existence. "To aid the Other is no lack in the self, but to rise to one's proper height, one's responsibilities. Not for one's own sake, to be sure, but in the course of helping the other: such is infinite obligation, to always do more. The vulnerability, the suffering of another human being, puts the subject into question, and being put-into-question is the very height of our humanity."[24]

THE EMBODIED RESPONSE: SUBSTITUTION AND SMALL GOODNESS

Ethics for Levinas is a response to this appeal of the *face*. So, the beginning of philosophy is not the knowing subject which dominates the

23 Saldukaitytė, "Emmanuel Levinas and Ethical Materialism," p. 4.

24 Saldukaitytė, "Emmanuel Levinas and Ethical Materialism," p. 7.

world but the responsible subject which is placed in and awakened to responsibility by the *face of the Other*. Hence, we can say, in Dostoyevsky's words, "We are all responsible for all for all men before all, and I more than all the other." Authentic existence of the self is seen as "I am for the *Other*." Levinas states that, "The radical responsibility for the other or the inter human reality is the very structure of the subject itself."[25]

The responsibility for the *Other* has its origin not in the individual's initiative; rather, responsibility precedes the individual's freedom. Without being asked, one becomes responsible because of the *Other's* appearance. This responsibility is attributed to the subject before it is in a condition to make a decision. The individual is essentially "related to the *Other*" through their embodied existence, and this occurs before any examination, consent, or dialogue from either side. Since such a responsibility precedes conscious subjective freedom, it must be construed as "pre-original" and "an-archic." In other words, before individuals give their existence meaning and a definitive direction by affirming responsibility as their vocation, they have been called into being and to responsibility. Responsibility is to be completely open to the *Other*.

The ethical response demanded by this embodied encounter cannot be satisfied through abstract ideas or theoretical understanding. Ethical responsibility implies that the responsibility should lead one towards acts of mercy for the *Other*. This responsibility needs to be tangible, seen, felt, and experienced by the *other*. The *face* calls for concrete acts of goodness for giving one's bread to the hungry, offering shelter to the homeless, caring for the sick. This concept of responsibility is beautifully narrated in the Parable of the Good Samaritan in the New Testament (Mt. 10). Respect for and acknowledgement of the *Other* must be concretized in tangible forms of caring for the *Other* and its well-being. Hence, responsibility must become flesh - in and through our body. It would be hypocritical to meet the *Other* with empty hands. The test of this responsibility consists in not abandoning the *Other* to its suffering and dying even when the *Oth-*

25 Emmanuel Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond* Essence, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), p. 27.

er cannot recompense or repay. I must not let the *Other* die alone because the *Other* is vulnerable. We have the example of Mother Teresa who attracted the entire humanity not so much by her life of prayer but through her acts of mercy, by caring for the least, the lost, and the abandoned of society. Her act surpassed all holiness and religion.

The ego's responsibility manifests itself in physical acts of substitution, where it puts its own bodily comfort and security at risk for the sake of the *Other*. This substitution is not a choice made by a free subject but emerges from the very condition of embodied existence: the ego finds itself already responsible, already commanded to respond through tangible acts of care and sacrifice. In one of his interviews Levinas speaks about *substitution* as follows:

> 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 nor, if he be destitute and desperate, the courage of [facing] such a trial. Rather, substitution entails bringing comfort by 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 turns into responsibility for the other.[26]

Substitution represents the ultimate expression of ethical responsibility, where the ego takes upon itself the suffering and needs of the *Other*. This is not a metaphorical substitution but a concrete, bodily one: feeling hunger in place of the *Other's* hunger, experiencing cold so the other might be warm, sacrificing rest to tend to the *Other's* pain. Through substitution, the ego's very corporeal existence becomes a gift offered to the other. This offering is not heroic or grandiose but manifests in what Levinas calls "small goodness", the modest, everyday acts of care and concern that respond to the immediate needs of the *other* in their vulnerability.

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26 Emmanuel Levinas, *Is It Righteous to Be?: Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas,* ed. Jill Robbins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 228.

These small acts of goodness sharing food, offering shelter, tending wounds, providing comfort constitute the concrete manifestation of ethical responsibility. They represent not abstract moral principles but embodied responses to the *Other's* corporeal needs. In these modest gestures, the ego finds its authentic meaning beyond mere economic existence. The vulnerability revealed in the face-to-face encounter demands this immediate and tangible embodied response. Through these material acts of care, the ego fulfills its pre-original responsibility to the *Other*, discovering that true ethical life consists not in grand theories or universal principles, but in the humble, bodily acts of substitution that answer the *Other's* need. This is how the ego transcends its selfish existence: not through philosophical contemplation but through concrete acts of goodness that put the *Other's* needs before its own comfort and security.

When the ego responds to this call of responsibility it is drawn beyond itself towards the *Other*. Therefore, it is able to break away from the bondage of itself and establish its identity as a being oriented towards the *Other*. For Levinas ethics *and responsibility for the Other* will lead the being away from the danger of "there is.". The being is able to establish its identity only is responding to the call of the *Other* that reminds the ego of is responsibility as vulnerable corporeal being that shares the same death and suffering as the *Other*. The being experiences liberation and purpose through process of living its *responsibility for the Other*.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this exploration of Levinas's embodied ethics presents a radical departure from traditional Western metaphysics, ultimately grounding moral responsibility in the corporeal encounter between subjects. Levinas redirects philosophical inquiry towards the ethical demand of the *Other*. This shift necessitates a reimagining of subjectivity, one that recognizes the limitations of self-knowledge and the inescapable responsibility that arises from our shared corporeal vulnerability.

By examining the emergence of the ethical subject from the anonymous "there is" through "hypostasis" and "economic existence," and

then tracing the transformative potential of the *face*-to-*face* encounter with the embodied *Other* in their shared vulnerable corporeality, this analysis demonstrates the centrality of embodiment in Levinas's ethical vision. Unlike approaches that prioritize abstract principles or rational calculation, the approach of Levinas locates ethical obligation in the concrete, physical realm of vulnerable bodies encountering one another in specific moments of space and time. Through his phenomenological examination of experiences such as nausea, fatigue, pain, and aging, Levinas exposes the ever-present threat of the "il y a," a force that seeks to reduce everything to non-being, and highlights the ethical imperative to resist this depersonalization by embracing our responsibility for the *Other*.

Ultimately, Levinas's embodied ethics offers a compelling vision of moral responsibility that emerges precisely at the intersection of vulnerable bodies. It is in the encounter with the embodied *Other* in it's suffering and need that an absolute ethical demand is made, one that transcends abstract principles and rational calculations. This demand, born from our shared corporeal suffering of death and pain, offers the possibility of transcendence through ethical response, a salvation found not in self-preservation but in the selfless dedication to the well-being of the *Other*. Thus, Levinas's work provides a powerful framework for understanding the ethical dimensions of embodiment and the profound responsibility we bear for one another as vulnerable, interconnected beings.

While Levinas's ethics profoundly emphasizes the face-to-face encounter and reciprocal vulnerability, its anthropocentric focus presents challenges when extending ethical responsibility beyond human beings. Critics question how Levinas's principles can be applied to animals or the natural world, which lack the capacity for conscious, reciprocal engagement. The *face*, central to Levinas's ethical demand, becomes problematic in these contexts, as it is difficult to discern a comparable *face* in non-human entities. Extending ethical consideration to animals and nature would require either a redefinition of the *face* or a development of alternative ethical frameworks that still uphold Levinas's emphasis on responsibility and the priority of the *Other*, but are not solely reliant on

the encounter between human consciousnesses. This remains a significant challenge for Levinasian ethics in addressing contemporary concerns about animal rights and environmental ethics.

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