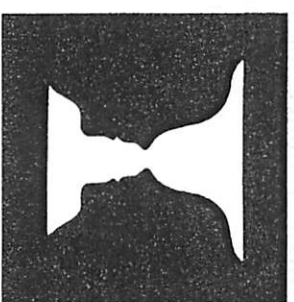



EMMANUEL LEVINAS

ETHICS
AND
INFINITY



Conversations with Philippe Nemo
Translated by Richard A. Cohen

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taught us that it is impossible to *put* an idea into a thought without it already having been found there.

Now, in the face such as I describe its approach, is produced the same exceeding of the act by that to which it leads. In the access to the face there is certainly also an access to the idea of God. In Descartes the idea of the Infinite remains a theoretical idea, a contemplation, a knowledge. For my part, I think that the relation to the Infinite is not a knowledge, but a Desire. I have tried to describe the difference between Desire and need by the fact that Desire cannot be satisfied; that Desire in some way nourishes itself on its own hungers and is augmented by its satisfaction; that Desire is like a thought which thinks more than it thinks, or more than what it thinks. It is a paradoxical structure, without doubt, but one which is no more so than this presence of the Infinite in a finite act.



Eight

Responsibility for the Other

(intentionally blank)

Ph.N.: In your last great book published, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, you speak of moral responsibility. Husserl had already spoken of responsibility, but of a responsibility for the truth; Heidegger had spoken of authenticity; as for yourself, what do you understand by responsibility?

E.L.: In this book I speak of responsibility as the essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity. For I describe subjectivity in ethical terms. Ethics, here, does not supplement a preceding existential base; the very node of the subjective is knotted in ethics understood as responsibility.

I understand responsibility as responsibility for the Other, thus as responsibility for what is not my deed, or for what does not even matter to me; or which precisely does matter to me, is met by me as face.

Ph.N.: How, having discovered the Other in his face, does one discover him as he to whom one is responsible?

E.L.: In describing the face positively, and not merely negatively. You recall what we said: meeting the face is not of the order of pure and simple perception, of the intentionality which goes toward adequation. Positively, we will say that since the Other looks at me, I am responsible for him, without even having *taken* on responsibilities in his regard; his responsibility *is incumbent on me*. It is responsibility that goes beyond what I do. Usually, one is responsible for what one does oneself. I say, in *Otherwise than Being*, that responsibility is initially *a for the Other*. This means that I am responsible for his very responsibility.

Ph.N.: What in this responsibility for the Other defines the structure of subjectivity?

E.L.: Responsibility in fact is not a simple attribute of subjectivity, as if the latter already existed in itself, before the ethical relationship. Subjectivity is not for itself; it is, once again, initially for another. In the book, the proximity of the Other is presented as the fact that 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.

Ph.N.: I can know someone to perfection, but this knowledge will never by itself be a proximity?

E.L.: No. The tie with the Other is knotted only as responsibility, this moreover, whether accepted or refused, whether knowing or not knowing how to assume it, whether able or unable to do something concrete for the Other. To say: here I am [*me voici*].¹ To do something for the Other. To give. To be human spirit, that's it. The incarnation of human subjectivity guarantees its spirituality (I do not see what angels could give one another or how they could help one another). Dia-chrony before all dialogue: I analyze the inter-human relationship as if, in proximity with the Other — beyond the image I myself make of the other man — his face, the expressive in the Other (and the whole human body is in this sense more or less face), were what *ordains* me to serve him. I employ this extreme formulation. The face orders and ordains me. Its signification is an

1. Cf., *Genesis* 22, lines 1, 7 and 11, and *Isaiah* 6, line 8, for *Hineni*. Also, cf., Emmanuel Levinas, "God and Philosophy," in *Philosophy Today*, Vol. XXII, no. 2, Summer 1978, pp. 127-145. [Tr. note]

order signified. To be precise, if the face signifies an order in my regard, this is not in the manner in which an ordinary sign signifies its signified; this order is the very signifyingness of the face.

Ph.N.: You say at once "it orders me" and "it ordains me." Is this not a contradiction?

E.L.: It orders me as one orders someone one commands, as when one says: "Someone's asking for you."

Ph.N.: But is not the Other also responsible in my regard?

E.L.: Perhaps, but that is *his* affair. One of the fundamental themes of *Totality and Infinity* about which we have not yet spoken is that the intersubjective relation is a non-symmetrical relation. In this sense, I am responsible for the Other without waiting for reciprocity, were I to die for it. Reciprocity is *his* affair. It is precisely insofar as the relationship between the Other and me is not reciprocal that I am subjected to the Other; and I am "subject" essentially in this sense. 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.*"¹ This

2. Cf., Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, transl. by Constance Garnett (New York: New American Library, 1957), p. 264.

is not owing to such or such a guilt which is really mine, or to offenses 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.

Ph.N.: That means that if the others do not do what they ought to do, it is owing to me?

E.L.: I have previously said elsewhere — I do not like mentioning it for it should be completed by other considerations — that I am responsible for the persecutions that I undergo. But only me! My "close relations" or "my people" are already the others and, for them, I demand justice.

Ph.N.: You go that far!

E.L.: Since I am responsible even for the Other's responsibility. These are extreme formulas which must not be detached from their context. In the concrete, many other considerations intervene and require justice even for me. Practically, the laws set certain consequences out of the way. But justice only has meaning if it retains the spirit of disinterestedness which animates the idea of responsibility for the other man. In principle the I does not pull itself out of its "first person"; it supports the world.

Constituting itself in the very movement wherein being responsible for the other devolves on it, subjectivity goes to the point of substitution for the Other. It assumes the condition — or the uncondition — of hostage. Subjectivity as such is initially hostage; it answers to the point of expiating for others.

One can appear scandalized by this utopian and, for an I, inhuman conception. But the humanity of the human — the true life — is absent. The humanity in historical and objective being, the very breakthrough of the subjective, of the human psychism in its original vigilance or sobering up, is being which undoes its condition of being: *dis-inter-estedness*. This is what is meant by the title of the book: *Otherwise than Being*. The ontological condition undoes itself, or is undone, in the human condition or uncondition. To be human means to live as if one were not a being among beings. As if, through human spirituality, the categories of being inverted into an “otherwise than being.” Not only into a “being otherwise”; being otherwise is still being. The “otherwise than being,” in truth, has no verb which would designate the event of its un-rest, its *dis-inter-estedness*, its putting-into-question of this being — or this *estedness* — of the being.

It is I who support the Other and am responsible for him. One thus sees that in the human subject, at the same time as a total subjection, my primogeniture manifests itself. My responsibility is untransferable, 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 subject. It is in this precise sense that Dostoyevsky said: “*We are all responsible for all for all men before all, and I more than all the others.*”