

In the Name of Who? Levinas and the Other Side of Theology

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Abstract: "Theology's About Face" makes a tentative and initial link between theology and the ethical concerns of Levinas' writing, particularly around his notion of responsibility for the face of the other as presented in his first major work, *Totality and Infinity*. "Being Faced" echoes themes from Levinas' second major work, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*. This essay explores the metaphor of "being faced" (with the sense of persecution and obligation this "forces" upon us) in contrast to our more familiar and usual stance of "facing being" (with the sense of anxiety and questioning this produces in us).

IN ACADEMIC CIRCLES, Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995) is recognised as one of the most important philosophers and religious thinkers of this century. His work has significantly influenced many "postmodern" thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Maurice Blanchot, Luce Irigaray, Paul Ricoeur and others. He has also influenced Jewish and Christian leaders and educators, including Pope John Paul II. However, his thinking is not generally well known to a broader audience.

Levinas suffered the tragic loss of many of his family members in the *Shoah* and was himself incarcerated as a prisoner of war. His writings comes to us a radical attempt to re-envisage the world of religious and ethical thinking in the face of the tragedies of this century. Levinas is very much a prophetic figure for our times, and his work deserves a wider exposure as we witness the end of this century and the beginnings of a new millennium. At the cornerstone of his thought is ethical responsibility for "the Other".¹ On the "other side" of theology there is the Other in whose name theology is called to listen, to serve, to respond. "In the Name of Who?" suggests that theology must pay

1. For Levinas, "the Other" is in the first place the other human being who calls forth ethical responsibility, yet the Other is also the "Most High". Translators of Levinas ponder the distinction (though Levinas is never entirely consistent) between "Autrui" (the personalised form, often capitalized by Levinas) and "autre" (the more general form, often in lower case). Other/other – I give up on distinguishing these two words that are both big and little, as if capitalisation really matters. I am happy to use one or the other (O/o), even as Levinas himself does, as though we could, in the end, too carefully distinguish between them.

attention once again to the Other who is both the mystery of God, the Holy One, and the face of the neighbour, the stranger, the poor one.

THEOLOGY'S ABOUT FACE

Back in 1974, when "liberation theology" was bursting onto the scene, Gustavo Gutiérrez wrote: "Rediscovering the other means entering his own world. It also means a break with ours. The world of inward-looking absorption with self...is not only interior but is socio-culturally conditioned. To enter the world of the other...with the actual demands involved...is to begin...a process of conversion."²

I find these words of Gutiérrez, written a quarter of a century ago, strikingly resonant with what has come to be known today as our postmodern situation. Where should theology turn in its conversation with the cultural "mood" of postmodernity? According to David Tracy, it should turn around, and face the other:

The turn to the other is the quintessential turn of postmodernity itself. It is that turn, above all, that defines the intellectual as well as the ethical meaning of postmodernity. The other and the different come forward now as central intellectual categories across the major disciplines, including theology...Part of that return to otherness...is the return of biblical Judaism and Christianity to undo the complacencies of modernity, including modern theology.³

One of the reasons Levinas wants to refocus our attention toward the face of the other is his concern that we have enclosed ourselves in a world of "immanence". In other words, we have reduced everything to our being-in-the-world, and we no longer know how to speak of transcendence, the voice of otherness, the desire of infinity, the revelation of God who is otherwise than our being-in-the-world. He wants to speak against the complacencies of an age that thinks itself free of everything that is other than itself and beyond the embarrassment of a relationship with an unknown God.⁴

Levinas introduces his volume, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, with a question like this: How can we speak of God "without striking a blow against the absoluteness that his word seems to signify?" How can we speak of "the infinity or alterity or novelty of the absolute" without

2. Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Liberation, Theology and Proclamation", in Claude Geffré and Gustavo Gutiérrez (eds.), *Theology of Liberation, Concilium* 6/10, June (1974) 59.

3. David Tracy, "Theology and the Many Faces of Postmodernity," *Theology Today* 51/1 (1994).

4. E. Levinas, "Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite" in Adriaan Peperzak, *To The Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1993) 96.

giving it back into immanence?⁵ In other words, if we bring God too quickly and too readily into the ambit of our understanding and our grasp, don't we thereby miss God all together, the God of transcendence and otherness? It seems then, that speaking of God requires "impossible requirements!"⁶ For if we want to respect the "purity" and absoluteness of God's revelation, if we want to expose ourselves to the transcendence of God's word, if we want this word to come to us with a "power of speech" that addresses our lives – it must, somehow, be a word that comes "from on high" – a revelation that is nowhere already known by us, that is nowhere the same as us, that is not a knowledge we already possess or a god already within us. Otherwise, how could we speak of *revelation*?

In "Revelation in the Jewish Tradition" Levinas begins with a similar question: How do we connect the world we inhabit with something which is no longer of this world? How can we make sense of the exteriority of the truths and signs of revelation? How do we speak of an otherness that comes "from outside," from somewhere else? How is this thinkable? Truths from outside? From somewhere else? From where?

Haven't sociologists told us that our truths are the products of our own social constructions of reality? Haven't psychologists reminded us that many of our truths are reflections or projections of our own inner desires and conflicts? Wasn't it Heidegger who revealed that all our knowing reflects the ontological condition of being-in-the-world? And hasn't postmodernism (or at least, a certain type of postmodernism), confidently pronounced that there are no metanarratives, that there is "nothing outside the text?"

All this, for Levinas, is so much immanence, and it only serves to dull the voice of revelation, of that which comes from outside, from somewhere else, from somewhere otherwise, from beyond being. In the midst of "the magnificent funeral celebrations held in honour of a dead god",⁷ Levinas arrives with news that turns everyone's head, that leaves everyone somewhat stunned, for all of sudden, here is a philosopher that dares speak again of revelation, of truths from outside, of an Other that is "otherwise than being".

5. E. Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998) p. xii.

6. Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, p. xii, see also 124. Elsewhere Levinas asks: "What is this thinking we are seeking, which is neither assimilation of the Other to the Same nor integration of the Other into the Same, a thinking which does not bring transcendence back to immanence and does not compromise transcendence in understanding it?" "Transcendence and Intelligibility", in Adriaan Peperzak, Simon Ctrichley, Robert Bernasconi (eds.), *Basic Philosophical Writings* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996) 155.

7. E. Levinas, "Revelation in the Jewish Tradition", in Sean Hand (ed.), *The Levinas Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989.) 193.

Levinas begins one of his major works, *Totality and Infinity*, with the statement: "The true life is absent." Isn't this something we all experience, at rock bottom, we always feel an "absence", or as Augustine said, a "restlessness", that we never seem to find the perfect match between our desires and their fulfilment, that we always experience a basic uneasiness in life, never a sense of total well-being and peace? Somehow, we always feel a separation, a gap, a rift, a rupture, never a feeling of completeness, harmony, perfect unity, communion – never a feeling of "totality", rather, always a feeling of "infinity" – of desires that are infinite, questions that always open out endlessly, yearnings that are never quenched. For Levinas, this experience is a first indicator of an otherness that we are always turned toward, of an "elsewhere" and an "otherwise," of a fundamental movement "from an 'at home' which we inhabit, toward an alien outside-of-oneself, toward a yonder".⁸

In the Greek philosophical tradition, this experience has generated whole systems of thought that attempt to close this gap, that have sought to correlate the structures of our thinking (epistemology) with the structures of being (ontology). "It is the destiny of knowledge to search out and adhere to being, and it is the destiny of being to disclose itself to be known."⁹ The two share a common destiny, are entwined, are a harmonious whole, are fully present because always present to each other. As Levinas says, the whole trajectory of Greek philosophy is its "equation of truth with an *intelligibility of presence*...an intelligibility that considers truth to be that which is present or copresent, that which can be gathered or synchronized into a totality that we would call the world or *cosmos*".¹⁰

In contrast to this search for harmony, unity and presence, Levinas prefers to speak of that "which cuts through and perforates the totality of presence and points towards the absolutely other".¹¹ He prefers to stay with the experience of rupture, because this experience opens us to the voice of the other – that which speaks from outside, that which refuses to be tamed and domesticated into our harmonious worlds of rest and repose. Indeed, the philosopher's desire to get a good night's sleep where all is well in the world, a drowsy self-satisfied presence where there is no interruptive other, where everything is unified into a comfortable Sameness – this experience is contrasted by Levinas with the state of "vigilant insomnia" where the other haunts our ontological

8. E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969) 33.

9. Steven G. Smith, "Reason as One for Another: Moral and Theoretical Argument," in Richard A. Cohen (ed.), *Face to Face with Levinas* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986) 54.

10. Emmanuel Levinas and Richard Kearney, "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas", in *Face to Face With Levinas*, 19

11. "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas", 21.

existence and keeps us awake,¹² keeps us vulnerable and exposed to the revelation of God (“Stay awake! Because you never know when the time will come.” – Mark 13:33). In comparing the Greek tradition of speculative contemplation with the biblical tradition of revelation, Levinas says:

[For the Greek tradition], the opposites of repose – worry, questioning, seeking, Desire – are all taken to be a waste of repose, an absence of response, a privation, a pure insufficiency of identity, a mark of self-inequality. We have wondered whether the Revelation might not lead us to precisely this idea of inequality, difference and irreducible alterity which is “uncontainable”...a mode of thought which is not knowledge but which, exceeding knowledge, is in relation with the Infinite or God...Perhaps the attitudes of seeking, desiring and questioning do not represent the emptiness of need but the explosion of the “more within the less”....¹³

And again:

Should we not go beyond the consciousness which is equal to itself, seeking always to assimilate the Other, and emphasize instead the act of deference to the other in his alterity, which can only come about through the awakening of the Same – drowsy in his identity – by the Other?¹⁴

It seems to me that Levinas is saying: the more “disjuncture” we feel, the more likely we will hear the other’s call. The more harmony and wholeness we feel, the more likely we will fall asleep in our own drowsy, comfortable worlds. Attitudes of “seeking, desiring and questioning”, rather than “rest and repose”, provide the best environment for the revelation of the other. In this sense, Levinas doesn’t have a lot of time for the peace and serenity of contemplation or mysticism – at least not with the “cheap” kind, where “everything is played out in the depths of my self”.¹⁵ Losing myself in prayer and contemplation, being absorbed into the mystery, entering the space of mystical tranquillity – this is the last thing revelation is meant to do. Rather, its task is always to announce, command, perforate, rupture, unsettle – to break open our world and turn us toward the call and demand of the other in our very midst. The other is always the prophetic voice of revelation, not the disclosive voice of being. God is otherwise than being, not the ground of being. And our problem is not so much that we

12. “Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas”, 28.

13. *Levinas Reader*, 208; see also *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 50.

14. *Levinas Reader*, 209.

15. Edith Wyschogrod, “Interview with Emmanuel Levinas”, *Philosophy & Theology* IV/2 (Winter 1989) 105-118.

have been forgetful of being, our problem is rather that we have been forgetful of the other. Levinas writes:

Ethical responsibility is...a *wakefulness* precisely because it is a perpetual duty of vigilance and effort that can never slumber. Ontology as a state of affairs can afford to sleep. But love cannot sleep, can never be peaceful or permanent. Love is the incessant watching over the other; it can never be satisfied or contented with the bourgeois ideal of love as domestic comfort.¹⁶

Much of today's "popular spirituality" goes in search of something that will give our lives a deeper sense of meaning, that will fulfil our desires and yearnings, that will absorb our fragmented, isolated selves into a larger, more integrated whole. For Levinas, this is reflective of an existential need that is too tied to the self and what the self lacks, rather than a Desire that reaches beyond the self toward the Other.¹⁷ To be an "I", to secure my identity, to feel my own authentic subjectivity – this, for Levinas, will only lead us circling back into the Same. The subject is always trying to secure its identity in terms of itself. According to Levinas, however, we need to start elsewhere, outside our selves, "outside the subject". This itself strikes me as an amazing thought, particularly for our Western culture that is so dominated by a quest for my own self-authenticity, that so highly prizes the autonomous, free, self-sufficient individual. Our "enlightened" culture is often suspicious of anything that might impose itself on our lives or threaten our individual freedom. We like to stay in "control" of the world as critical, independent, self-empowered subjects.¹⁸ I have noticed in my own teaching, when dealing with Levinas' texts, that our class often bristles in the face of the priority Levinas gives to responsibility rather than freedom, obligation rather than choice, self-giving rather than self-agency, passivity rather than assertiveness, "exterior-to-me" rather than "interior-to-me". We bristle because Levinas rubs against our cultural habits. In effect, we find ourselves protesting, "What about me?"

What, then, does Levinas propose? What I find rather startling is his ability to speak in the name of the absolutely transcendent, the infinitely other, yet to do so by speaking of a very simple, concrete relation: that of the face-to-face.¹⁹ Every face we encounter is a face of otherness. Every face says, "I am other to you." Every face says, "I am not you." Every face says: "Don't kill me, don't absorb me into your world, don't obliterate me by making me the same as you. I am other. I am different.

16. "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas", 30.

17. "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas", 31.

18. See my own reflections on this enlightened cultural mood in *Living in the Margins: Intentional Communities and the Art of Interpretation* (New York: Crossroad, 1995) 50-55, 188-191.

19. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 185-219.

I am not you." It is important to note that Levinas is talking here about the naked face, the face that is not masked by the whole social apparatus of roles and status. Rather, this is the naked face that stands before us, completely exposed, completely vulnerable, infinitely other, absolutely singular. "The skin of the face is the most naked, most destitute...there is an essential poverty in the face."²⁰ The face is the face of You, and you are vulnerable and dependent on me. Yet you also face me with an "uprightness" – face-to-face. The unique, singular face stands opposed to the indifference of "impersonal, anonymous Being". Rather, the face is "expression" – it is not just "something" that I look upon, that I hold in my gaze. Rather, the face "faces" me, and this "toward me" is both a profound appeal against my indifference to your naked vulnerability, and an accusation that prohibits my violence toward you.

The face of the other breaks into my world and calls out to me. I am not an *I* unto myself, but an *I* standing before the other. The other calls forth my response, commands my attention, refuses to be ignored, makes a claim on my existence, tells me I am responsible. And this always. I will never be freed from the face of the other. So much so, that Levinas says we are always held hostage to the other, that we are never released from the other's speaking to us and calling forth our response. "It is impossible to evade the appeal of the neighbour, to move away".²¹ The other says, "I am here" – and appeals to us, commands us: "do not kill me." What matters for Levinas is not so much the question of meaning in life, but the question of ethics. What matters is not so much our separation from God and the desire for mystical participation; rather, what matters is our disregard for each other, and the desire for sociality, for ethical responsibility. What matters is not so much the declaration of my existence that says, "Here I am", but the "Here I am" that is the response of my existence to the call of the other.

According to Levinas, the "Here I am" is testimony itself to the revelation that comes from outside, from elsewhere, from otherwise than my being.²² Wherever we find people saying "Here I am" – not as an assertion or declaration of their existence – but as a response, then we are witnessing a testimony to the voice of the Other that commands from beyond. For Levinas, this is Revelation, and this is "how God comes to mind".²³

We said right at the beginning: the subject of our enquiry is the very fact of Revelation, and the relation it establishes with exteriority. This exteriority...cannot be transformed into a content with

20. E. Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985.) 86

21. E. Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1991) 128.

22. Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 106.

23. Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 168.

interiority; it remains “uncontainable”, infinite, and yet the relation is maintained. The path I am led to follow, in solving the paradox of Revelation, is one that claims we may find a model for this relation in the attitude of non-indifference towards the Other, in the responsibility towards him; and that it is precisely through this relation that a person becomes his “self”, designated without any possibility of escape, chosen, unique, not interchangeable, and – in this sense – free. Ethics provides the model worthy of transcendence and it is as an ethical kerygma that the Bible is Revelation.²⁴

To turn around, to face the other, this is the conversion required of theology. As David Tracy notes, “surely, on the central question of transcendence, this ethical route to the Absolute Other only by way of the interrelationships of human others is Levinas’ most original, and daring, and for Jewish and Christian theology, both promising...and controversial move”.²⁵ There are some that might question whether Levinas is merely “reducing” religion to ethics.²⁶ Yet this is a question that probably troubles the “theologically comfortable” more than those who know what is at stake in the world of real historical pain and suffering. The initial reception of liberation theology, for example, was dogged by the accusation that it was a “political reduction of the Gospel.”²⁷ Yet liberation theology has continually insisted that the truth of theology will always be judged by the practice of ethical action and the demands of justice. “Any attempt,” Gutiérrez says, “to separate the love of God from the love of neighbour gives rise to attitudes which impoverish the one or the other.”²⁸

If, for Levinas, “ethics provides the model worthy of transcendence,” it is because he is a little nervous about theology providing the “model,” particularly when it is a “worn-out theology...with its transcendence that can be stepped over like a fence”.²⁹ In other words, if there is any “reduction” to be spoken of, it is theology’s complacent reduction of “the Most High God”, the God who commands our attention toward the “widow, the orphan, the stranger and the beggar”.³⁰ This is the transcendence of God that can never be scaled, the height of the Other that rises above us – demanding our attention, commanding our response, requiring our love. As though we could ever finally “jump

24. *Levinas Reader*, 207.

25. David Tracy, “Response to Adriaan Peperzak on Transcendence,” in Adriaan Peperzak (ed.), *Ethics as First Philosophy: The Significance of Emmanuel Levinas for Philosophy, Literature and Religion* (New York: Routledge, 1995) 194.

26. A discussion of this question can be found in Merold Westphal, “Levinas’ Teleological Suspension of the Religious” in *Ethics as First Philosophy*, 151-160.

27. See Claude Geffré’s editorial, “A Prophetic Theology”, in *Theology of Liberation*, 11.

28. Gutiérrez, “Liberation, Theology and Proclamation,” in *Theology of Liberation*, 63.

29. E. Levinas, *Proper Names* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996) 92.

30. *Levinas Reader*, 251.

the fence" and say to ourselves: "no more is required of me". When all the time we are faced with that most demanding of the Gospel sayings: "The poor you will always have with you" (Matt 26:11). The neighbour will always be there. I cannot escape the Other; I will always be hostage to the height of the Other who asks after me. "There will never cease to be poor in the land; I command you, therefore: Always be open-handed with your neighbour, and with anyone in your country who is in need and poor" (Deut 15:11).

Levinas proposes no secular humanism; rather, he protests against the domesticating of the divine. The "low fence" of theology is the fence that reduces God to a "theme" for myself, as though God were "there" to be grasped and known by us, present to us (an easy jump!), when all the time "divinity keeps its distances".³¹ As though theology were all about my identification with God, when all the time it is about God's identification with the other. Like the sensibilities of liberation theology, Levinas wants to keep the human neighbour between myself and God, such that we cannot too readily approach the invisible God without first encountering the height of our neighbour. "Is divinity possible without relation to a human Other?"³² Or, as Gutiérrez says:

We stand before something which challenges our categories, the mystery of God who will not be *reduced* to our mode of thinking, and who judges us on the basis of our concrete, historical actions toward the poor.... Now we face a God who blocks the path of a false love which forgets sisters and brothers while claiming to direct itself spiritually toward God, more to domesticate God than to feel itself questioned by God's word.³³

BEING FACED

I tremble at what exceeds my seeing and my knowing...It is the gift of infinite love, the dissymmetry that exists between the divine regard that sees me, and myself, who doesn't see what is looking at me... (Jacques Derrida)³⁴

An ethical meaning of the relation to the other, answering, in the form of responsibility before the face, to the *invisible that requires me*; answering to a demand that puts me in question and comes to me from *I know not where*, nor when, nor why. (Emmanuel Levinas)³⁵

31. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 297.

32. *Levinas Reader*, 247.

33. Gutiérrez, "Hermeneutical Principle: Preferential Option for the Poor," in James B. Nickoloff (ed.), *Gustavo Gutierrez: Essential Writings* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 105 (my emphasis).

34. Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) 54-56.

35. E Levinas, *Outside the Subject*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993) 92.

It is difficult to talk about the experience of "being faced". It is more common and familiar to talk about the experience of "facing being". Indeed, we probably can all resonate with this phrase, because we continually find ourselves "facing things". We face life's uncertainty, and we wonder about the future. We face life's pain, and we wonder whether we will ever find a measure of peace. We face life's profound ambiguity, and we wonder whether it will ever become clear to us. Facing being primarily means that our own being is a matter of concern for us. "We consider our being, question it, are troubled and afflicted by it, laden with it...We do not engender our being; it is given to us, laid upon us; we are burdened with it and have to bear it. We do not exist, simply; we have to be."³⁶

We face our lives – and at the same time we face our limitations (and that which "outstrips" us). We wonder what life is about and what it all means. We find ourselves facing questions that are of concern to us – about the shape of our lives, the shape of the world around us, questions about our future, our hopes for happiness, questions about pain and suffering. Facing being, we face the finitude of our existence and the vastness of our questions, and we feel caught-up in life's great mystery or, more darkly, in its stark futility. Either way, we are lost in questions about life, its meaning, its purpose, its reason, its mystery, its elusiveness.

Mostly, we hold this experience and these questions in secret. Who can ever say to another what I feel when I find myself "facing being"? Philosophers, theologians and other writers are probably the ones who most "break with secrecy" to talk about this experience. They think deeply about this question and give us all a certain vocabulary to talk about the experience of "facing being". They break with secrecy, such that "facing being" is filled with a multitude of responses. It "means" this. It is "about this". These are the "reasons". This is "why". This is "how it happens" or "fails to happen". The secret need no longer be secretive, and we are overwhelmed with these gallant and noble voices – all "facing being" together.

"Being faced", however, is different. The intuition in this phrase shifts attention from *my gaze*, which tries to bring everything under its surveillance, to *the gaze of the other*, which sees me without my knowing who is looking at me. The question of "facing being" *turns around* to become the question of "being faced" – "with the gaze, look, request, love, command, or call of the other".³⁷ It is no longer I who faces being, but the other who faces me. I am looked upon. I am asked after. Here, I lose a certain hold over myself, and find that I am no longer the one who

36. Alphonso Lingis, "The Sensuality and the Sensitivity", in *Face to Face With Levinas*, 225.

37. Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 68.

interrogates and questions; rather, I am the one who is faced by the other's interrogation and questioning. This is not unlike the "resolution" to the Book of Job, when all those questioners suddenly find themselves placed in question ("Where were you when...?"). God questions more than God answers. The Jewish poet, Edmond Jabès, for example, links God intrinsically to "The Book of Questions".³⁸ God is an "abusive word".³⁹ Rather than our facing God, God faces us and we are left feeling "abused" and subjected. In the midst of all our questions and anxiety, God dares yet to face us and hold us in question, as though we were the ones accused, questioned, held responsible – as though we were meant to answer, not God.

Throughout his second major work, *Otherwise Than Being*, Levinas uses some very extreme words to describe the exposure we undergo in "being faced". He speaks of our being persecuted and held hostage by the face of the other. Rather than the notion of a free ego that chooses its commitments, Levinas speaks of the prior condition of being hostage to the other, a condition that is not rooted in our freedom or our choice, but in our being chosen. We are not the initiators of our own actions and meanings; rather, prior to any choice or intentionality on our part, we are already exposed to the other. The other holds me against my will, persecutes me by entirely dominating me. Prior to any decision on my part, I am born into a world where the other is always asking after me. I am bound and tied to you – to every you – and that is so from my first breath till my last. I am invested with responsibility even when I do not want to be. "The condition of being hostage is not chosen; if there had been a choice, the subject would have kept his 'as-for-me'."⁴⁰ I am always and already obligated to you – chosen – even before I choose. Levinas cites a well known passage from Talmud: "All in Israel are responsible for one another."⁴¹ We can read "Israel" as shorthand for "humanity," which means that being-for-the-other is written into the very fabric of life, is the way life is fundamentally structured. Levinas is also fond of quoting a passage from Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*, "Each of us is guilty before everyone and for everyone, and I more than the others."⁴² To which we could add Derrida's words: "This guilt is originary, like original sin. Before any fault is determined, I am guilty inasmuch as I am responsible.... Guilt is inherent in responsibility

38. Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1972).

39. Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 156.

40. Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 136.

41. Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shevuot, 39a. Quoted by Levinas in *Outside the Subject*, 35.

42. Cited in *Otherwise Than Being*, 146; see also *Outside the Subject*, 44.

because responsibility is always unequal to itself: one is never responsible enough."⁴³

"Being faced" means finding ourselves faced by a continual requirement of obligation and responsibility to and for the other. Even a casual reflection on our lives will reveal how bound we are to others, how constantly we are beset by the demands of obligation and the requirements of love – to family and friends, to those we work with, to neighbours and strangers, to those in our society whom we do not know yet whose claim on our lives we feel nevertheless. "Being faced" is another way (maybe the exemplary way) of speaking of transcendence. As John Caputo notes: "We cannot transcend it, because it is transcendence itself. We are the ones transcended, overcome, lifted up or put down, overtaken, thrown. Obligation is the sphere of what I did not constitute.... Obligations come over us from the other whose transcendence shocks our freedom and autonomy."⁴⁴

While "facing being" turns us inward upon our selves, to our own questioning and anxiety ("where our own being is a matter of concern for us"), "being faced" places us before the other who "opposes" me with the "absolute frankness of his gaze". The other addresses me, speaks to me, asks after me. The face of the other is "the epiphany of what can thus present itself directly, and therefore also exteriorly, to an I".⁴⁵ Being faced means I am no longer able to stay within the realms of my own "being"; rather, I am exposed to another who calls out from beyond my existence. "It is as though I were destined to the other before being destined to myself."⁴⁶ The presence of "me to myself" is broken, and I am no longer able to persevere in my being, in the project of myself. "I am no longer able to have power... true exteriority is in this gaze which forbids me my conquest".⁴⁷ In a crystalline phrase of diamond-like insight, Levinas writes: "The Other must be closer to God than I."⁴⁸

We may wonder about the excessive rhetoric that Levinas' language forces upon us. To be so obsessed by the other is indeed to be persecuted by the other. To be so bound to the other is indeed to be held hostage. Yet who of us has not known countless times in our lives when, faced with love's requirements, we have taken the very form "of worrying about the other, a spending without counting, a generosity, goodness, love, obligation to others. A generosity without recompense,

43. Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 51. See also Levinas *Ethics and Infinity*, 111: "One is never without debt with regard to another."

44. John D. Caputo, *Against Ethics: Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Deconstruction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993) 27.

45. E. Levinas, "Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite", in Adriaan Peperzak, *To The Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1993) 110.

46. Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 165.

47. Levinas, "Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite", 110.

48. Levinas, "Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite", 111-12.

a love unconcerned with reciprocity, duty performed without the 'salary' of a good-conscience-for-duty-performed..."⁴⁹ How else would we describe the condition of responsibility if not in this way? How else would we describe the requirements of love if not in this way? What else could obligation mean if it did not mean this *kenosis* and hollowing out of ourselves?

Is that not what the self emptying itself of itself would mean?...It is being divesting itself, emptying itself of its being, turning itself inside out, and if it can be put this way, the fact of 'otherwise than being'...It is through the condition of being hostage that there can be in the world pity, compassion, pardon and proximity – even the little there is, even the simple 'After you'⁵⁰

Sometimes, as Kafka once wrote, we need texts that wound us and in the process transform us: "A book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us."⁵¹ Levinas knows what he is up against in trying to break the hold of our own self-absorption and self-obsession. Unlike the ethical theories of "social contract" or "rational agency" that attempt to *adjudicate* self-interest (whereby the self is always primary, and the other a secondary consideration requiring amelioration), Levinas is concerned with delimiting and even *renouncing* self-interest.⁵² Indeed, he leaves the reader feeling both inundated by and resistant to the radical otherness he announces. It is quite amazing, really, how much it takes to convince me of the "real presence" of the Other, how much I am always blocking this announcement, resisting this impingement on my life (how much I evade this invasion). In many ways, Levinas' language is a persecution. As Adriaan Peperzak says: "*The Other* halts the movement through which the I tries to unfold." I do not belong to myself, not because I am a mysterious essence, but because "my essence consists in a being *toward* and *for the Other*". There is quite a real sense in which the Other "makes me suffer by urging me to endlessly detach myself from the desire to return to myself as a ravenous center of the universe."⁵³ Levinas' language marks us as people of response rather than self-agency, people who are "assigned" rather than self-determined. His writing bears a rhetorical force that is "an undoing of the substantial nucleus of the ego that is formed in the same, a fission of the mysterious nucleus of inwardness of the subject by this *assignation to*

49. Levinas, *Outside the Subject*, 87.

50. Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 111,117.

51. Franz Kafka, *Letters to Friends, Family, and Editors* (New York: Schocken, 1978) 16.

52. See Edith Wyschogrod's discussion in *Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990) 65ff.

53. Adriaan Peperzak, *Beyond: The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997) 184-5.

respond, which does not leave any place of refuge, any chance to slip away, and is thus despite the ego, or, more exactly, despite me".⁵⁴

Edith Wyschogrod reminds us that this language of extremity and excess (of self-denial and self-giving, self-sacrifice and self-donation) has always been the language of the saints. In her book, *Saints and Postmodernism*, Wyschogrod has little trouble linking the language of saints with the language of postmodernity. Sainthood has always been connected to the compassion, mercy and love of the great religious traditions, for example, "the *karuna* or compassion of Buddhism, the *rachamim* or mercy of Judaism, or the *agape* of Christianity".⁵⁵ Saints are not people of moderation, reasonableness or nuanced argument. Rather, "the saintly desire for the Other is excessive and wild".⁵⁶ According to Wyschogrod, "a saintly life is defined as one in which compassion for the Other, irrespective of cost to the saint, is the primary trait".⁵⁷ The world's religious traditions have always "addressed the problems of the wretched of the earth in the person of saints, those who put themselves totally at the disposal of the Other". Wyschogrod's text speaks of "the saint's recognition of the primacy of the other person and the dissolution of self-interest".⁵⁸ Saints are "fleshly signifiers of compassion, generosity, self-sacrifice".⁵⁹

And lest we wonder about this – this "utopian excess", or this quaint, "pre-modern" reminiscence of saints and "fools" long since banished by our modern enlightenment – lest we wonder whether the life of the saint is still a real and living presence for us today, lest we too readily dismiss the extremity and excess of Levinas' philosophy, Caputo does well to remind us:

From time to time, here and there, it happens that men and women respond, answer a call, spend themselves, using themselves up entirely for the Other. They spend years, maybe a lifetime, serving others, giving themselves up for the good of others.... Fools spend their lives working to feed and house the poor, or teaching in crime-ridden schools, or protecting defenseless wildlife; they lead a celibate life serving the peasants in Central America, only to be dragged out of bed one night and shot to death by right-wing gangsters; they spend the better part of their adult life in prison, refusing to cut a deal with a racist government, trying to make a point.⁶⁰

54. Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 141.

55. Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism*, 186.

56. Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism*, 255.

57. Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism*, p. xxiii.

58. Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism*, p. xiv.

59. Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism*, 59.

60. Caputo, *Against Ethics*, 126-27.

We may consider them fools, “excessive and wild,” but in the end the lives of these obsessive and mad saints *do* make a point; we know that “what matters is the amazing grace, the amazing gift they make”.⁶¹

Saints are exemplary people whose exemplary stories we tell over and over again because their unbelievable lives are testimonies to the divine. Their lives are full of “insatiable compassion” which is a desire that is also a “diaconate.” They place themselves in service, in the “welcome of the absolutely other”.⁶² Their lives are testimony to the transcendence of “being faced by the other.” The only chance the Other has of interrupting our world is through the saint who bears witness to this revelation and this calling. In the presence of the saint who lives the life of responsibility, service and answerability, we know that we are in the presence of what is other than us through this very vocation. As Levinas says, the witness of an answerability that says “Here I am” is the very “glory of the Infinite”, because it witnesses to that which is before us, prior to us, that which is first and foremost and facing us because always engendering our response. “The glory of the Infinite is glorified in this responsibility.”⁶³ It is not to us, but to the Other, to your Name, that glory is given (see Psalm 115:1):

When in the presence of the Other, I say “Here I am!”, this “Here I am” is the place through which the Infinite enters into language, but without giving itself to be seen...I will say that the subject who says “here I am!” *testifies* to the Infinite. It is through this testimony...that the revelation of the Infinite occurs. It is through this testimony that the very glory of the Infinite glorifies *itself*.⁶⁴

“Here I am” is a “prophetic signification”⁶⁵ that recalls the Hebrew phrase of the scriptures, *heneni*. Abraham says *heneni* when called to sacrifice his son Isaac (Gen 22:1); Moses says *heneni* when standing before the burning bush (Exod 3:4); Isaiah says *heneni* when God asks who he shall send (Isa 6:8). *Heneni* – “here I am” – is the very sign of “the-one-for-the-other”.⁶⁶ Here I am, for You. This for-the-other is often perceived as “a seed of folly,” an obsession, a “sickness” (“I am sick with love”, *Song of Songs* 2:5; 5:8),⁶⁷ yet for Levinas, *heneni* is “a marvellous accusative: here I am under your gaze, obliged to you, your servant. In the name of God.”⁶⁸

61. Caputo, *Against Ethics*, 128.

62. E. Levinas, “The Trace of the Other” in Mark C. Taylor (ed.), *Deconstruction in Context* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986) 351, 353.

63. Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 144.

64. E. Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985) 106-7).

65. Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 75.

66. Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 151.

67. Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 142, 198 (f/n 5).

68. Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 75.

"Here I am...for you...in the Name of God" expresses the deeply felt religious sensibility that when we clothe the naked or respond to the one in need, when we welcome the stranger or answer for the defenceless, we are "testifying" to God's presence. It is as if we sense that in these gestures of human response and love toward the other, we feel "the passing itself of the Infinite".⁶⁹ As though a touch of infinite goodness, a hint of immeasurable love, a trace of divinity *itself* passed this way. The giving over of oneself to the other, to the one who calls out in human need, invites and signals the very presence of God's passing by, of having been this way.⁷⁰ Indeed, this very passing of God, which can neither be contained nor caught nor stilled (nor least, "thematized" as a presence belonging to me) – "this is how God comes to mind".⁷¹

"Here I am under your gaze." When speaking of the experience we undergo in being faced by the other, "Levinas employs a vocabulary so deeply religious as to awaken even the sleepest reader that something unusual is going on."⁷² Indeed, as Levinas himself says, "one is tempted to call the plot religious".⁷³ One such "religious plot" can be found in the story about Abraham welcoming the three strangers (Gen 18:1-15). When we look at what the rabbis have to say about this story, it is striking how their commentary lingers at some length in the "space" between verse one and verse two.⁷⁴ Gen 18:1 says: "The Lord appeared to him at the Oak of Mamre while he was sitting by the entrance of the tent during the hottest part of the day." The second verse says: "He looked up and there he saw three men standing near him. As soon as he saw them he ran from the entrance of the tent to meet them, and bowed to the ground." A large question looms in "the gap" between verse one and verse two that engages the rabbis' interpretive attention. They offer at least two possible readings (among others!), to which I will add Levinas' own voice (who is himself familiar and practiced in Talmudic commentary).

The first reading follows along these lines. Verse one suggests a revelation of God, and verse two that this revelation is "interrupted" by the appearance of three wandering strangers. According to this reading, the rabbis say: "The deed of hospitality is greater than the welcoming of the Divine Presence."⁷⁵ In other words, Abraham does not linger to

69. Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 150.

70. This passing of God is neither the presence of God nor the absence of God, but the very passing of God, the "trace" of God. See Levinas' reflections in "The Trace of the Other".

71. Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 168.

72. Merold Westphal, "Levinas' Teleological Suspension of the Religious," in *Ethics as First Philosophy*, 152.

73. Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 147.

74. I am relying here on Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Bereshit (Genesis): In the Context of Ancient and Modern Jewish Bible Commentary* (Jerusalem: Eliner Library, no date) 161ff.

75. Leibowitz, *Studies in Bereshit*, 161.

enjoy communion between himself and God (v 1), but runs in haste to attend to the needs of three desert travellers who require food, shelter and rest (v 2). Abraham becomes an exemplary model of true service and hospitality toward the stranger that has inspired generations of Jewish tradition: "The stranger did not lodge in the street; My doors I opened to the roadside." (Job 31:32). In the space between verse one and verse two, the rabbis suggest that Abraham rightly interrupts his own peace and communion with God to attend to the real, concrete needs of tired and weary strangers. In a similar fashion, Levinas accords some sympathy with this reading when he writes: "To give, to-be-for-another, despite oneself, but in interrupting the for-oneself, is to take the bread out of one's mouth, to nourish the hunger of another with one's own fasting."⁷⁶

(It is always interesting the way commentary leads to commentary. Here I offer a brief aside. When Levinas speaks of taking the bread out of one's own mouth, I wonder whether he is alluding to the inmates of the camps who gave their very own meagre portion of bread, from their very mouths, to help keep another alive. Perhaps, in a similar way, Mark's gospel speaks of the widow who did not give from her surplus, but from the "little she had, gives everything she possessed, *all she had to live on*" [13:44]).

The second reading (interpretation) wonders about the confusion evident in the opening verses (and the whole of Genesis 18) between the speech of God and the speech of the strangers addressed to Abraham. According to this reading, the rabbis suggest that the strangers *are* the "way" God appears to Abraham. In this sense, the "gap" between verse one and verse two holds these two verses together, rather than separating and distinguishing them. As Levinas suggests in one of his own Talmudic readings, "The respect for the stranger and the sanctification of the name of the Eternal are strangely equivalent. And all the rest is a dead letter."⁷⁷ According to this reading, there is a certain confluence between the voice of "the Most High" and the arrival of three strangers requiring Abraham's attention. The "gap" between verse one and verse two suggests the very passing of God, of which Levinas says: "Is not this imposition on me, this devolving-upon-me of the stranger, the way by which there 'arrives on the scene', or comes to mind, a God who loves the stranger who puts me in question by his demand, and to which my 'here I am' bears witness?"⁷⁸

These are only two possible readings of the opening verses of Genesis 18. The gap between the first and second verse creates an immense opening that engages the rabbis' interpretive attention. In the story

76. Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 56.

77. E. Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990.) 27

78. Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 167.

about Abraham and the strangers, they are wondering about the experience we undergo in being faced by the other, standing "under your gaze". Perhaps Levinas captures a sense of both these readings of God's revelation to Abraham when he writes:

The Justice rendered to the Other, to my neighbour, gives me an unsurpassable proximity to God.... One follows the Most High God, above all by drawing near to one's neighbour, and showing concern for "the widow, the orphan, the stranger and the beggar", an approach that must not be made with "empty hands".⁷⁹

What about today, even as I am writing now? Jerusalem, like other major cities, has many beggars on its streets. It is easy to pass them by, just as I pass by so many other strangers on the streets. Of late, however, I have found it increasingly difficult to remain indifferent to the beggar on the street. There is a very real sense in which a beggar's face presses up against me, and against the myriad of other faces in a bustling street. The beggar stands out, singularly, and I feel the "absolute frankness" of her gaze. Though she sits on a cobble-paved street in a pool of squalor – ragged, dirty, nursing an infant, her hand outstretched, pleading, begging, with completely "defenceless eyes" – she nevertheless looks at me with such commanding authority, such "height", such strength of appeal. She is the destitute one who nevertheless rises above me as the one "for whom I can do all and to whom I owe all".⁸⁰ Though I know that a "hand out" to an outstretched hand is but a small charity that pales before the injustices embedded in larger social structures, I nevertheless cannot pass her by. Now, I stop and give into her empty hand, and inevitably she smiles and says in a language I do not understand, "thank you". This incident is undoubtedly small, less than a mite, yet I feel as though in this place, on the streets of Jerusalem, "the Most High" was facing me.

79. E. Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1990.) 18, 26.

80. Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 89.