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2011

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### **citation for published version (APA)**

Lok Wing-Kai, P. (2011). *Foucault, Levinas and the Ethical Embodied Subject*.

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## **Chapter Three. Levinas on the Body and Ethics**

### **A. Levinas: Towards an Ethical Understanding of the Embodied Subject**

Having looked at Foucault's notion of the body and ethics, I will now examine Levinas' embodied ethics. Levinas' embodied ethics shares the focus of Foucault's embodied ethics, treating the body as a necessary ground of making up an ethical subjectivity and criticizing a rational and legalistic notion of morality. They agree that one's ethical identity is primarily conditioned or determined by one's bodily life, not by a rule or social norm. But, unlike Foucault, Levinas does not view the subject per se as a self-sufficient ethical subject that can simply construct its own ethical identity through practicing different bodily exercises and techniques of care of the self without the intervention of the other. Rather, for Levinas, the construction of ethical subjectivity is not possible without the intervention of the other's bodily life. Unlike the active nature of Foucault's ethical embodied subject who can care for his or her bodily life either through cultivation or mentorship, Levinas' ethical embodied subject is totally passive, having an ethical identity mediated by the subject's passive exposure of his or her body to the other's fragile bodily life.

For Levinas, one never escapes the other's moral urge in one's life since the other's

fragile bodily life is already incarnated in one's bodily life. The other's fragile face, which serves as an irresistible moral urge, not only demands the subject to take responsibility for his or her life, but also demands the subject to risk his or her life for the other. For Levinas, the subject cannot reject the "moral urge" of the other since the urge is mediated through the subject's bodily and sensual experience and not through the subject's consciousness or any intermediation of concept. The other's moral urge is given through the sense-bestowing function of the pre-original accusation of the other's face that not only commands the subject but also makes the subject susceptible to trauma and pain prior to the subject's will. In other words, it is the "affective content" not the "representational content" of the face of other that enables the subject to respond the need of the other.

Thus, for Levinas, the subject's ethical identity is formed by a passive bodily exposure towards the other; the essence of the subject's ethical body is determined by an incarnated relationship with the other's body. Levinas regards such incarnated relationship as proximity. As John Drabinski rightly says: "The essence of the ethical body, for Levinas, lies in the materiality of its proximity to the other. The materiality of the body in proximity to the face of the Other is described as the exposure of the body. Exposure as the condition of the ethical subject makes a reversal of the constitution of the

subject's identity possible... The vulnerable skin of the subject bears the trace of the hither-side. The exposed body is marked concretely, in its vulnerability, by the pre-history of the I."<sup>1</sup>

Thus, Levinas' subject is an ethical embodied subject. First, the subject's ethical sense and identity are formed through his or her passive bodily exposure towards the other's fragile body. The other's bodily life is already incarnated in the subject's bodily life. Second, what connects the subject to the other's moral urge is not the subject's intention or will, but the subject's bodily sensation. One's bodily sensation serves as a primary mode prior to will or consciousness that makes the subject ethical. Simply, one's bodily exposure conditions one's ethical identity.

This chapter will explore how Levinas' ethical subjectivity is made possible through the intervention of the other, in which the bodily sensation serves as an important condition in relating the subject and the other in a non-violent way. I argue that, although Levinas criticizes a universal and ontological notion of human beings, this does not mean that he no longer looks for an ethical ground for the value of human beings. This is because Levinas' critique of rationalism and ontology does not reject the existence of the lived body, nor does it reduce the lived body to the linguistically constructed body as

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<sup>1</sup> John E. Drabinski, *Sensibility and Singularity: The Problem of Phenomenology in Levinas* (Albany: State

some anti-essentialist thinkers such as Butler do. Rather, Levinas recognizes the ethical potentiality of the bodily sensation that generates an embodied ethics to replace a dogmatic disembodied ethics. Thus, this chapter not only examines how Levinas understands and criticizes essentialism and rationalism but also sees how he constructs an embodied ethics and an embodied subject after the critique of rationalism.

### **B. Levinas' Critique of Rationalism and Its Repression of Body/Sensation: Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger**

Because Western philosophy has been obsessed with an ontological understanding of Being, it has treated the subject as an epistemological subject who can grasp the other and the world conceptually and rationally. Western philosophers and scientists have treated human beings (the other) and world as graspable and static objects so as to build up different knowledge systems that can apprehend the essence of the world and human beings. Levinas' critical project challenges such an ontological understanding of the world and the subject, which he thinks has destroyed, neglected, and forgotten the otherness and infinity of the other: "philosophy has lost its place at the top. Its desire for an overall and absolute knowledge expresses its desire of possessing and mastering conceptually the universe from an absolute standpoint: the standpoint of an unshaken and

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University of New York, 2001), p. 207.

unconquerable ego.”<sup>2</sup> For Levinas, the rational apprehension of the other and the world is attached to the subject’s desire and power of mastering the universe and the other via knowledge and ontology.

According to Levinas, the desire to grasp the other and the world through knowledge has turned the human subject into an egoistic as well as a manipulative subject. Thus, Western rational philosophy is a form of egoism. Like Foucault, Levinas criticizes Descartes and rationalism since they simply reduce the subject to a rational conscious subject. More important, Levinas stresses that the problem of the Cartesian subject and the rational subject in general is its disembodiment: the ethical potentiality of the body cannot be recognized since the body or bodily sensation is treated as an “inferior material” that cannot offer a “stable material” for the subject’s mind to manipulate.

Although both Foucault and Levinas criticize rationalism and its hierarchical understandings of body and mind, the theoretical ground of their critiques is different. Foucault’s critique is a genealogical critique. It explores critically how rational and scientific discourses have served as a manipulative and productive power towards the subject. But Levinas’ critique is a phenomenological critique, through which he shows how Descartes, Husserl, and Heidegger’s notions of human consciousness (Descartes and

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<sup>2</sup>Adriaan Theodoor Peperzak, *Beyond: The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern

Husserl) and understanding (Heidegger) serve as the most primordial mode of the subject that finally generates an immanent violence towards the other. Levinas worries that human consciousness, which aims at theorizing everything through finite concepts, finally domesticates the infinity of other.

Thus, the starting point of Levinas' ethics is to interrogate how modern Western philosophy, especially rationalism, generates immanent violence towards the other. Then he reasserts an ethical embodied relation between subject and other that precedes the conceptual or epistemological relation between subject and other sustained by traditional Western philosophy. Brian Schroeder regards Levinas' critique of consciousness as a "deconceptualization of metaphysics," an "attempt not only to decenter onto(theo)logical discourse, but to stress that the metaphysical-ethical (identical terms for Levinas) relation not only precedes determination by self-same consciousness, but is contingent upon a certain refusal on the part of the selfsame to conceptually totalize the other. Levinas' reformulation of metaphysics emphasizes the radical alterity (*altérité*) and the ethical supremacy of the Other (*l'autrui*), insists on the priority of difference over identity, and contests the logic of Western philosophy both traditional and Hegelian, at its very core."<sup>3</sup>,

This section will explore Levinas' phenomenological critique of three

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University Press, 1997), p. 34.

philosophers—Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger—who highlight the totalizing power of the consciousness towards the alterity of the other.

## 1. Hegel

For Levinas, the problem of the Western philosophy is that it takes searching for universal knowledge to be the most important task of philosophy, thereby reducing subjectivity to only a conscious subject.<sup>4</sup> Once consciousness is treated as the basis for defining the essence of the world and the other, Levinas argues, at least two problems arise. First, the subject becomes the source of the meaning of the world, in the sense that he or she is the master who can determine this meaning. Levinas calls this an ontological understanding of the world. Second, the distinction between subject and being is collapsed or confused, such that the world or the other becomes the projection of the subject: “Hegel and Heidegger try to empty the distinction between the subject and being of its meaning. In reintroducing time into being they denounce the idea of a subjectivity irreducible to essence, and, starting with the object inseparable from the subject, go on to reduce their correlation, and the anthropological order understood in these terms, to a modality of being.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, for Levinas, Hegel denies there is a radical break between

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<sup>3</sup> Brian Schroeder, *Altered Ground: Levinas, History, and Violence* (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2002), p. 103.

<sup>5</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 17.

subjectivity and the knowable. In the end consciousness fulfills the being of entities. That is to say, Hegel understands essence as the immanence of a knowing and reduces it to “a moment of the concept, of thought or of absolute essence.”<sup>6</sup>

For Levinas, the problem of Hegel’s system is that it not only turns the subject into an absolute knower but also reduces the otherness of the world and the other to a concept or an absolute essence, so that it allows no “room” for infinity. The infinity of the other is either domesticated by consciousness or treated as an abstract universality. Levinas says that infinity does not enter into the idea of infinity, and cannot be grasped. The infinite is “the radically, absolute, other.”<sup>7</sup> As Levinas says, “For the venerable tradition to which Hegel refers, the ego is an equality with itself, and consequently the return of being to itself is a concrete universality, being having separated itself from itself in the universality of the concept and death.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, universality ignores or negates particularity by turning it into an abstract universal rule, Spirit or a conceptual dialectic. In particular, universality represses the otherness of the singular person and reduces the otherness of human being to a concept or theme, thereby making the subject faceless. As Brian Schroeder says, “[a]ccording to Hegel, subjectivity is fully realized in its

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<sup>6</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 17.

<sup>7</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity,” in Emmanuel Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), p. 54.

<sup>8</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 115.

conceptual dialectical relation with its other. This relation is predicated upon the concept of *totality*, a concept that logically equates otherness with non-being, and being with nothingness. The totality of Spirit is infinite becoming for Hegel... He [Levinas] argues that the dissimulation and reconstruction of the Other into the simulated order of a conceptual totality is violent in that it makes faceless the individual existent and strips away one's primal alterity."<sup>9</sup>

Thus, the violence of the immanence of consciousness, as the *cogito*, destroys the otherness of the world and human beings. Hegel or Hegelianism "has accustomed us to think that truth no longer resides in the evidence acquired by myself, that is, in the evidence sustained by the exceptional form of the *cogito*, which, strong in its first person form, would be first in everything. It has made us think that it rather resides in the unsurpassable plenitude of the content thought. In our days, truth is taken to result from the effacing of the living man behind the mathematical structures that *think themselves out* in him, rather than he be thinking them."<sup>10</sup> In fact, Levinas worries that the tendency of domination that is already embedded in the *cogito* might be further manifested as political power and violence in that the individual is subordinated to rational movement within the rational and mathematical structure. In other words, Levinas' critique of the

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<sup>9</sup> Brian Schroeder, *Altered Ground*, p. 7.

Hegel's universalism is not simply a "deconceptualization of metaphysics"; rather it is also a political critique of power.

## 2. Husserl

Levinas says that Husserl is the origin of his writing, having taught him that the thought--object, theme, meaning--refers back to the thought that thinks it, and also determines the subjective articulation of its appearing: being determines its phenomena.<sup>11</sup>

Levinas claims this is the essential contribution of phenomenology.<sup>12</sup> For Levinas, the contribution of Husserl's phenomenology is to develop a rigorous philosophy in which Being is defined as meaning in its givenness to consciousness. For Husserl, "Being is neither an appearance behind which some thing or some structure is ruling, nor anything behind the appearances, but that which is meaningfully present to consciousness."<sup>13</sup>

Being has two fundamental modes: the being of the objects of external perception and the being of consciousness. These two modes are structured in a harmonic relation. Levinas explains: "The phenomenon of the world is precisely that: the fact that there is a guaranteed harmony, in the act of grasping, between the thinkable and the thinking, that the appearing of the world is also a *giving of itself*, and that the knowledge of it is a

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<sup>10</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, pp. 57- 8.

<sup>11</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "Nonintentional Consciousness," in Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (London: The Athlone Press, 1998), p. 123.

<sup>12</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "Nonintentional Consciousness," p. 123.

satisfaction, as if it fulfilled a need. Perhaps this is why Husserl describes theoretical knowledge in its most accomplished forms--objectifying and thematizing knowledge--as fulfilling the intention--empty intentionality fulfilling itself."<sup>14</sup> In other words, the essence and meaning of the object fulfill intentionality.

For Levinas, the problem of Husserl's phenomenology is its privileging the theoretical, knowing, representation and the ontological meaning of being, in which the otherness and exteriority of the self is recaptured in immanence.<sup>15</sup> More important, it totally negates the importance of bodily sensuality or the role of the lived body.<sup>16</sup> Husserl's new ontology of consciousness puts the sensorial impression and consciousness together in order to domesticate the flow of the sensory experience. For Levinas, such an ontological understanding of consciousness is basically a repression of sensing to the extent it ignores the ethical function or the nature of bodily sensation.<sup>17</sup> (A detailed account of this process will be discussed later.)

Of course, we should not say that Husserl totally neglects the importance of sensation since sensation is an important means to supply the material to consciousness, without which consciousness is nothing. But the problem is that Husserl treats sensibility

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<sup>13</sup> Adriaan Peperzak, *Beyond*, p. 40.

<sup>14</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "Nonintentional Consciousness," p. 126

<sup>15</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "Nonintentional Consciousness," p. 125.

<sup>16</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "Nonintentional Consciousness," p. 124

<sup>17</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 32.

as only a vehicle to transmit raw material to consciousness so as to enable consciousness to present it as a stable image and representation. The flow of the lived experience attached to the sensibility is finally reduced to pure immanent object domesticated by intentionality. In other words, Husserl fails to recognize the ethical nature of a “raw sensory experience,” the lived sensory experience that can help the subject get in touch with the vulnerability of the other.

For Levinas, the immediacy of the sensible serves as one of the necessary conditions for the subject to build up an ethical relationship with the transcendent other. Because the bodily sensation can make the subject sense the suffering face of the other, the subject can respond to the need of the other immediately. Levinas argues that, since Husserl’s intuition conceptualizes all sensible experiences, intention has lost the immediacy of the sensible.<sup>18</sup> Thus, Husserl’s subject fails to sense the suffering of the other. Moreover, the image generated by intention (knowing) always represses the immediacy between the subject’s body and the other’s body. Suppression of the sensible can never make possible a truly ethical embodied communication between subject and other, because the disembodiment of knowing denies sensibility and bodily communication. Rather it only makes possible a disembodied communication that privileges the analytical, synthetical,

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<sup>18</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, pp. 62-3.

dialectical exchange of ideas. Levinas regards such a disembodied communication as non-ethical communication.

Moreover, Husserl's desire to grasp the objectivity of the world makes his model privilege a synchronic mode of time over a diachronic mode of time, because only the former enables the conscious subject to capture and stabilize the unstable object. For Husserl, the time structure of sensibility is a time of what can be captured.<sup>19</sup> The notion of the living present and the notion of the origin have to be intelligible so that the consciousness can thematize the present moment/time. Levinas says, "We find in Husserl a privilege of presence, of the present, and of representation. The dia-chrony of time is almost always interpreted as a privation of synchrony. The coming to be of the future is understood in terms of protention, as if the temporality of the future were only a kind of taking in hand, an attempt at recuperation, as if the coming to be of the future were only the entrance of a present."<sup>20</sup> Whereas Husserl's time model privileges the synchronic mode of time, the intervention of the other, as before and as after the subject, is always beyond the synchronic mode of time and belongs to the diachronic mode of time. Thus, Husserl's privileging the synchronic time model would finally repress the infinity of the other through subsuming the other into a synchronic model. That is to say, it synthesizes

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<sup>19</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 34.

alterity into the same. Levinas prefers the diachronic mode of time to the synchronic mode of time because the former can retain the “past” or “time” in the Ur-impression, a primary impression, which is still non-modified by consciousness. Such a model of time makes possible the intervention of the other towards the subject.

### **3. Heidegger**

Heidegger’s notion of human being (Dasein) is not a static form of essentialism in which the essence of human being is pre-given. His philosophical anthropology presumes that the being of Dasein is disclosed in the process of his or her self-understanding. That is to say, the “essence” of Dasein is always in making and becoming, not pre-given. However, while Heidegger is regarded as an anti-humanist philosopher, critical of the Cartesian rational subject, Heidegger’s proposal is still not radical enough for Levinas, because it treats comprehension not sensibility as the basic mode of human being. Levinas says that, although Heidegger views understanding as a “contextual understanding” constituted by temporality, distinct from Cartesian notion of “context-free understanding,” he still treats understanding as the most basic ontological mode of Dasein through which Dasein makes sense of the world and the other. In other words, Heidegger’s Dasein is still a sense-making subject, for which comprehension or understanding is the most basic mode

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<sup>20</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Nonintentional Consciousness”, p. 125.

of existence.

While Heidegger claims that a cognitive model is the fundamental model of human being, Levinas argues that enjoyment, a sensual activity, is the basic mode of living. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas charges that Heidegger's Dasein is not hungry: "Heidegger does not take the relation of enjoyment into consideration."<sup>21</sup> For Levinas, enjoyment is "an ultimate relation with the substantial plenitude of being, with its materiality that embraces all relations with things."<sup>22</sup> That is to say, Levinas views the basic form of the self as a sensual self, not a cognitive self. Bodily sensibility, not cognition, serves as a basic mode of existence, in the sense that sensibility is prior to reason. Levinas says, "I am myself, I am here, at home with myself, inhabitation, immanence in the world. My sensibility is here. In my position there is not the sentiment of localization, but the localization of my sensibility."<sup>23</sup> For Levinas, it is sensibility that makes the sense of existence possible.

According to Levinas, because Heidegger's notion of being cannot detach from the conscious being that he criticizes, being in Heidegger's project is still domesticated by consciousness, even though consciousness per se is bounded by temporality:

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<sup>21</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001), p. 134.

<sup>22</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 133.

<sup>23</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 138.

“Heidegger’s being-in-the-world is a comprehension: technological activity itself is openness, discovery of Being, even if in the mode of a forgetting of Being. The ontic, which at least involves an opaqueness, everywhere yields before the ontological, before a covered-over luminosity to be disengaged. The *existentiell* reveals its meaning in the existential, which is an articulation of ontology. An entity counts only on the basis of knowing, of appearing, of phenomenology.”<sup>24</sup> Although Dasein does not comprehend the world via the invention of theory or method, Levinas argues that the Heideggerian model still maintains the founding primacy of cognition that makes the subject attach to knowing and showing effected by intentionality.<sup>25</sup>

For Levinas, Heidegger’s privileging the mind, rather than sensibility and the body, generates a dualist rationalist ideology that makes the subject perceive the world and the other in a disembodied way. Since cognition requires the subject to repress his or her feeling or emotion while apprehending the world and the other, this makes the subject fail to “sense” the world and the other with his or her body. Thus, Heidegger’s privileging the subject’s understanding is inconsistent with his anti-rationalism, because both Heidegger and the rationalists assert a disembodied cognitive model. Tina Chanter charges that Heidegger’s privileging of understanding cannot consider the importance of the subject’s

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<sup>24</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 80.

bodily experience, and this makes his project remain consonant with the disembodied transcendental subjectivity presumed by the rationalism that he rejects: “Heidegger’s account of Dasein remains more consonant with the disembodied transcendental subject that Kant inherited from Descartes than Heidegger admits... Except insofar as bodies signify as a contributing factor to the meaning of Dasein’s projects, and their significance is thereby subsumed by Dasein’s ways of understanding, Heidegger pays very little attention to them.”<sup>26</sup> For Levinas, then, Heidegger’s Dasein is anonymous due to his failure to take seriously the concrete bodily experience: “[t]he Heideggerian being-with-one-another [*das Miteinandersein*] appears to me always like marching-together. That is not for me; there is no face there. However, being-toward-the-other is not an anonymous relation.”<sup>27</sup> In other words, for Levinas, Heidegger’s negation of the body not only fails to make his project become a truly radical anti-rationalist project but also fails to develop an embodied ethical relationship with the other.

In sum, for Levinas, the problem of Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger is their assertion of human cognition that treats consciousness or intentionality as the most elementary

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<sup>25</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, pp. 66-7.

<sup>26</sup> Tina Chanter, *Time, Death, and the Feminine: Levinas with Heidegger* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 83.

<sup>27</sup> Jill Robbins (ed.), *Is It Righteous To Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 137.

capacity of human being. This either generates an immanent violence towards the other or fails to take into account the ethical potentiality of the body/bodily sensation. Levinas' project not only criticizes rationalism and its repression of the body but also reconstructs an ethical embodied subject and an ethical relationship with the other. In other words, Levinas searches for a new ethical ground for the ethical life of human beings after the critique of rationalism. As a phenomenologist, Levinas asks, if the most basic form of intersubjective life should not be built upon an epistemological relation that privileges cognition and understanding, then what kind of pre-theoretical relation should be built upon after the critique of rationalism? Levinas argues that the most basic form of intersubjective life should be first an ethical relation mediated through bodily sensibility, not through consciousness. That, he thinks, is the only way to make possible a new ethical life after the critique of rationalism. The next section will explore the content of Levinas' ethical embodied subject, through which a radical embodied ethics is also articulated.

### **C. Levinas on the Ethical Embodied Subject**

Perhaps one could ask, should we not treat Levinas as an anti-subjectivist or anti-humanist philosopher, due to his radical rejection of the conscious subject and of an essentialist understanding of human being? Does not his radical rejection of subjectivity

make Levinas only a philosopher of the other? Does Levinas' anti-essentialism generate an ethically ungrounded understanding of human being? I think we cannot do justice to Levinas' work if we treat his philosophy as simply a philosophy of anti-subjectivity or a philosophy of the other without considering his constructive understanding of subjectivity.

Because the main theme of Levinas' earlier work *Totality and Infinity* is to save the other from being totalized by Western ontology, some philosophers regard Levinas as only a philosopher of the "other." For instance, Alain Badiou's critique of Levinas' ethics rests on such a popular understanding and regards his ethics as undesirably religious due to his obsession with the absolute Other. If the religious element in Levinas' ethics is taken away, Badiou says, nothing but a "dog's dinner" remains, a "pious discourse without piety."<sup>28</sup> Similarly, in his brief introduction to Levinas' thought for an anthology on twentieth-century continental philosophy, William Desmond regards *Totality and Infinity* as Levinas' only mature work on the topic of the Other, and reads his later work *Otherwise than Being* as merely a supplement of his earlier discussion on the responsibility for the other. Desmond seems not to be fully aware of a new ethical

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<sup>28</sup> Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (London: Verso, 2002), p. 23.

subjectivity that Levinas articulates in *Otherwise than Being*.<sup>29</sup>

I argue in this chapter that while Levinas' project emphasizes the other, the making of the ethical embodied subject is the main concern of his work. That is to say, Levinas' affirmation of the other is for the sake of building a new metaphysical understanding of the embodied ethical subject to replace the egoist subject. As Simon Critchley rightly states, "Subjectivity is a central and constant theme in Levinas's work,"<sup>30</sup> and "the precondition of the ethical relation to the other is found in Levinas's picture of the ethical subject."<sup>31</sup> Peperzak also argues that *Otherwise than Being* is concerned more with the position and meaning of the subject than with the other.<sup>32</sup> That is to say, Levinas does not neglect the importance of the subject, despite his critique of the rational subject. We should read his emphasis on the other as a preparation for the "birth" of an ethical subject. Although in *Totality and Infinity* Levinas treats the intervention of the other as a way of subverting the rational subject, this does not mean that he abandons the subject. In the preface of *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas says: "This book then does present itself as a defense of subjectivity, but it will apprehend the subjectivity not at the level of its purely

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<sup>29</sup> William Desmond, "Philosophies of Religion: Marcel, Jaspers, Levinas," in Richard Kearney (ed.), *Twentieth-Century Continental Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 156 and 167.

<sup>30</sup> Simon Critchley and Peter Dews (eds.), *Deconstructive Subjectivities* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), p. 29.

<sup>31</sup> Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (London: Verso, 2007), p. 62.

<sup>32</sup> Adriaan Peperzak, *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1993), p. 212.

egoist protestation against totality, nor in its anguish before death, but as founded in the idea of infinity.”<sup>33</sup>

Thus, Levinas’ rejection of the conscious subject does not mean that he wants to destroy the subject or denies an ethical understanding of human being; rather his project attempts to redeem the subject from being totalized by consciousness and intentionality. In other words, Levinas tries to explore whether understanding the subject as a conscious subject is an ideal understanding of subjectivity. If consciousness or reason is not definitive of the subject, then what can truly constitute a nonviolent ethical subject who can also show responsibility towards the other? For Levinas, this is a very important ethical issue after the Holocaust, because the Holocaust challenges us to think of the limited, violent and unethical character of rationality, especially its violent attitude towards the other.

In the following subsection, I will explore how Levinas constructs an ethical embodied subject that he thinks can replace a rational subject. In particular, I will show that Levinas’ subject cannot become ethical in itself; rather it is the intervention of the other that makes the subject ethical. In other words, the subject becomes ethical only through taking care of the other, not through taking care of the self. Furthermore, I also

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<sup>33</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 26.

want to argue that Levinas' subject is an ethical embodied subject because the subject's ethical response towards the other is only possible with the aid of the bodily sensibility.

Although my analysis rests on his later work *Otherwise than Being*, I will first discuss his earlier work *Totality and Infinity*.

### **1. Levinas on Sensibility in *Totality and Infinity***

This subsection will explore how Levinas' phenomenology rediscovers the ethical dimension of sensibility, so that an ethical embodied subject is made possible. In particular, we will explore Levinas' notion of sensibility. Interestingly, for Levinas, the subject's sensibility per se is neither ethical nor non-ethical; rather the ethical potentiality of the subject's sensibility is triggered only under certain intersubjective conditions.

Levinas attempts to discover what intersubjective conditions that can and cannot make sensibility ethical.

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas discusses the ethical and unethical dimensions of sensibility. This prepares a solid ground for the discussion on ethical subjectivity developed in *Otherwise than Being*. Levinas argues that the primordial mode of the human existence is a sensible existence, which is an irreducible and pure form of life. Human beings are the sensitive beings who find themselves first immersed in a sensuous world without being totalized by any conceptualized representations. The sensibility does

not “belong to the order of thought but to that of sentiment.”<sup>34</sup>

Human beings first sense and enjoy the world through their sensual body, not apprehend the world through their conscious mind. Sensibility does not constitute the world, whereas it “constitutes the very contentment of existence.”<sup>35</sup> Lingis says that for Levinas, sensibility is “sense-perception, apprehension of sense.”<sup>36</sup> In sensibility, “we find ourselves steeped in a depth before we confront surfaces and envision the profiles of objects. Sensibility opens us not upon empty space, but upon an extension without determinate frontiers, a plenum of free-floating qualities without substrates or enclosures, upon luminosity, elasticity, vibrancy, savor...we find ourselves in it, in light, in the elemental, buoyed up, sustained by it.”<sup>37</sup> For Levinas, sensibility is irrational or “essentially naïve,”<sup>38</sup> and its irrational and naïve character can enable the subject to sense his or her existence without the support of reason.

The Western rational tradition, as was mentioned before, privileges intelligibility over sensibility, treating representation and intelligibility as a primordial way to perceive the world. In particular, Husserl privileges the primacy of the objectifying act that turns our sense of the world into theoretical thought so as to generate knowledge about the

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<sup>34</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 135.

<sup>35</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 135.

<sup>36</sup> Alphonso Lingis, *Sensation: Intelligibility in Sensibility* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1996), p. 77.

<sup>37</sup> Alphonso Lingis, *Sensation: Intelligibility in Sensibility*, p. 80.

world and the other. For Husserl, although sensibility can offer the subject some sensual elements to construct theoretical content, it does not have a self-sufficient character because sensibility per se is not intelligible. That is to say, sensibility cannot offer the content and idea that Husserl privileges. Levinas says that the problem of “Husserl’s excessive attachment to theoretical thought”<sup>39</sup> is that it reduces reality to thought and representation, thereby reducing the alterity of the world to the same.<sup>40</sup> In other words, life is reduced to a thought or a rational form of life: “Intelligibility, the very occurrence of representation, is the possibility for the other to be determined by the same without determining the same, without introducing alterity into it; it is a free exercise of the same.”<sup>41</sup>

According to Levinas, sensual enjoyment is a basic form of life that is prior to reason, representation and reflection: “What I live from is not in my life as the represented is within representation in the eternity of the same or in the unconditional present of cogitation;”<sup>42</sup> rather, “To live is to play... simply play or enjoyment of life.”<sup>43</sup> Therefore, sensibility is described not “as a moment of representation, but as the instance

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<sup>38</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 135.

<sup>39</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 123.

<sup>40</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 127.

<sup>41</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 124.

<sup>42</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 128.

<sup>43</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 134.

of enjoyment.”<sup>44</sup> In other words, sensibility is enjoyment.<sup>45</sup>

Lingis clarifies Levinas’ notion of sensibility and enjoyment: “The sensual sensibility is receptivity for this elemental materiality. Sensuality is not intentionality... Steeped in the elemental, contented with the plenum, its movement is that of enjoyment...being sensual, one enjoys the light, the color, the solidity, the spring, the monsoon, and one enjoys one’s enjoyment.”<sup>46</sup> For Levinas, “to sense is to be within, without the conditioned... Sensibility, essentially naïve, suffices to itself in a world insufficient for thought.”<sup>47</sup> That is to say, sensibility is self-sufficient and not pre-determined because it “establishes a relation with a pure quality without support, with the element.”<sup>48</sup> John Drabinski says that Levinas gives sensibility a transcendental role: “The concretion of sensation opens upon a transcendental conception of sensibility, specified in the modalities of Desire and Enjoyment.”<sup>49</sup>

Levinas claims, however, that such a sensitive subject, who treats enjoyment as his or her basic mode of sensitive life, would become an egoist: “ the movement to self in

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<sup>44</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 136.

<sup>45</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 136.

<sup>46</sup> Alphonso Lingis, “The Sensuality and the Sensitivity,” in Richard A. Cohen (ed.), *Face to Face with Levinas* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), p. 223.

<sup>47</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 135.

<sup>48</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 136.

<sup>49</sup> John E. Drabinski, *Sensibility and Singularity: The Problem of Phenomenology in Levinas* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), p. 109.

enjoyment and happiness marks the sufficiency of the I.”<sup>50</sup> In enjoyment, the sensitive subject will separate from the other, because “enjoyment is a withdrawal into oneself, an involution.”<sup>51</sup> Separation is “solitude” and enjoyment is “isolation.”<sup>52</sup> Such an egoist I is presence at home with itself. The basic mode of life for such a sensitive subject is to satisfy his or her sensual needs, such as hunger, thirst, or nakedness, and thereby it always turns him or her into a happy, safe but egoist subject. Happiness, as Levinas says, is “accomplishment: it exists in a soul satisfied and not in a soul that has extirpated its needs, a castrated soul.”<sup>53</sup> Thus, the personality of the person is the particularity of the happiness of enjoyment, and “one becomes a subject of being not by assuming being but in enjoying happiness.”<sup>54</sup> In brief, Levinas primarily views the subject as a sensitive subject who takes enjoyment and self-satisfaction as his or her basic form of life. Such a sensitive subject is not necessarily unethical at this stage, because he or she is not hostile to the other even though his or her egoist attitude might generate an unethical and indifferent attitude towards the other.

However, if both the sensitive subject and the rational subject are the egoist subject, why does Levinas privilege the former over the latter? At first glance, both the sensitive

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<sup>50</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 143.

<sup>51</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 118.

<sup>52</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 117.

<sup>53</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 115.

<sup>54</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 119.

and rational subjects privilege the fulfillment of one's desire. The rational subject fulfills his or her metaphysical desire by reducing the particularity of the other to ontology and knowledge; and the sensitive subject fulfills his or her bodily desire by caring for his or her enjoyment first, not the need of the other. Thus, if both the rational and sensitive subjects are egoist subjects, why does Levinas privilege the sensitive subject? Would the sensitive subject have a greater potentiality than the rational subject for being ethical?

In fact, for Levinas, sensibility is ambiguous because it has both self-directed and the other-directed tendencies. In other words, sensibility has two dimensions, which are the dimensions of interiority and exteriority. The former generates an egoist life, whereas the latter generates an ethical life. Lingis says two kinds of sensibility are mentioned in *Totality and Infinity*: “a sensibility for the elements and the things of the world, sensuality, which is appropriation and self-appropriation, and a sensibility for the face of another, which is expropriation”<sup>55</sup> Thus, the sensitive subject, for Levinas, is an ambiguous subject because he or she has two tendencies: the tendency for self-fulfillment and the tendency for the other.

Sensitivity, for Levinas, is pre-reflective: it is “not predetermined as

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<sup>55</sup> Alphonso Lingis, “The Sensuality and the Sensitivity”, p. 227.

objectifications.”<sup>56</sup> This immediate and pre-reflective nature of sensitivity can make the sensitive subject become ethical. Diane Perpich says, “...it is the ego’s enjoyment that give[s] it the weight or ‘substance’ (though Levinas uses the latter term advisedly) that make[s] of it a genuinely independent being and that provide[s] it with an interior life. But at the same time, this interiority must not be so closed in upon itself as to make a relation with exteriority impossible. Somehow, in the midst of interior life, without destroying its reality and without stopping its movement, it must be possible for a ‘shock’ to register and for the ego thus to find itself exposed to an absolute exteriority.”<sup>57</sup> On the one hand, the sensuality of the sensitive subject can turn him or her into an interior egoist subject by directing the subject to care for his or her immediate bodily need; but on the other hand, the immediate and pre-reflective nature of the sensitivity can interrupt the interior and egoist life of the subject and arouse the ethical sense of the subject.

What can arouse the ethical sense of the subject? According to Levinas, sensing the other’s suffering and pain can arouse the ethical sense of the subject. But how can the suffering of the other arouse the subject’s ethical sense? What does the subject sense from the suffering of the other?

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<sup>56</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 188.

<sup>57</sup> Diane Perpich, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), p. 100.

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas argues that the fragile and suffering face of the other serves as an “imperative face” to awaken the ethical sense of the sensitive subject. That is to say, the other’s face is a “moral urge” that calls the subject to respond to his or her life. Interestingly, Levinas does not simply regard the other’s face as a material face, even though it has a material dimension. Rather face has a “sensible appearance.”<sup>58</sup> The sensitive subject can sense the other’s face, but he or she cannot conceptually grasp the face since the face is only a sensible expression, an epiphany.<sup>59</sup> The face is neither the object of vision nor “a plastic form like a portrait”<sup>60</sup> that can be grasped and named through system and language; rather it is a sensible appeal, demand and order: “The face is not of the order of the seen, it is not an object, but it is he whose appearing preserves an exteriority which is also an appeal or an imperative given to your responsibility: to encounter a face is straightaway to hear a demand and an order... One can say once more: the face, behind the countenance that it gives itself, is like a being’s exposure unto death; the without-defense, the nudity and the misery of the other... The face offers itself to your compassion and to your obligation.”<sup>61</sup> Levinas does not regard the other as simply the subject’s dialogue partner that Martin Buber suggests; rather, as Lingis says, what the

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<sup>58</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 198.

<sup>59</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 197.

<sup>60</sup> Jill Robbins, *Is it Righteous To Be?*, p. 166.

<sup>61</sup> Jill Robbins, *Is it Righteous To Be?*, p. 48.

other signals to me in his or her word, face, and expression as not only indicative, informative, but also vocative and imperative.<sup>62</sup> In other words, the face of the other does not simply tell the subject something about his or her life; rather the face per se is a “moral urge” that commands the subject to take on an ethical obligation for the other.

According to Levinas, the subject cannot treat the other as an object of knowledge. The face of the other is infinitely transcendent and cannot be conceptually apprehended by the subject: “the relation between the Other and me, which dawns forth in his expression, issues neither in number nor in concept. The Other remains infinitely transcendent, infinitely foreign; his face in which epiphany is produced and which appeals to me breaks with the world that can be common to us, whose virtualities are inscribed in our *nature* and developed by our existence.”<sup>63</sup> Thus, the structure of comprehension or the “constative dimension of language”<sup>64</sup> cannot exhaust the meaning of the infinite relationship between subject and other: “the face is present in its refusal to be contained. In this sense it cannot be comprehended, that is, encompassed. It is neither seen nor touched--for in visual or tactile sensation the identity of the I envelops the alterity of the object, which becomes precisely a content.”<sup>65</sup> In other words, the

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<sup>62</sup> Alphonso Lingis, *Sensation: Intelligibility in Sensibility*, p. 84.

<sup>63</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 194.

<sup>64</sup> Diane Perpich, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas*, p. 75

<sup>65</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 194.

transcendent other is always beyond the subject, and it is never in the symmetrical I-thou relationship that Buber claims. Rather it is an asymmetrical relationship where every other to the subject is a singular other that cannot be replaced by another other. Here, the singularity of the other does not refer to a property or character of the other; rather, as Perpich says, “the singularity signified in transcendence is not something we encounter or discover in the other...[but] is produced or performed in an orientation toward the other.”<sup>66</sup> In other words, the singularity of the other is not about the essence of the other, but a specific orientation towards the other.

Although the relationship between subject and other is asymmetrical, this does not mean that the other does not approach the subject or detaches from the subject. Rather the other, as Levinas says, “breaks with the world that can be common to us,”<sup>67</sup> “breaks through the form that nevertheless delimits it,”<sup>68</sup> “speaks to me”<sup>69</sup> and “thereby invites me to a relation incommensurate with a power excised, be it enjoyment or knowledge.”<sup>70</sup> In particular, the infinity of the face has an imperative force that resists and commands us: “you shall not commit murder.”<sup>71</sup> Levinas regards such imperative force as the “ethical

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<sup>66</sup> Diane Perpich, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas*, p. 75.

<sup>67</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 194.

<sup>68</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 198.

<sup>69</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 198.

<sup>70</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 198.

<sup>71</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 199.

resistance,”<sup>72</sup> in which “the epiphany of the face brings forth the possibility of gauging the infinity of the temptation to murder, not only as a temptation to total destruction, but also as the purely ethical impossibility of this temptation and attempt.”<sup>73</sup> Such a non-violent nature of the other’s face, which serves as an infinite and irresistible moral command urging the subject not to kill but to protect the other’s life, turns the self-centered subject into an other-centered ethical subject.

To summarize, in *Totality and Infinity* Levinas shows us that the human being is basically a sensual subject, and sensual enjoyment is a basic form of life that is prior to reason, representation and reflection. Such a sensual life is a basic condition for the subject to become ethical, because the sensual mode of life can expose the subject’s life towards the fragile face of the other. However, in *Totality and Infinity* Levinas does not precisely show how the other transforms the structure of the ethical subject. As is obvious, his focus is mainly on the other, not the subject. Not until *Otherwise than Being* does Levinas finally reveal the ethical structure of the embodied subject. In particular, he identifies the ethical embodied subject as a mourning subject who not only senses the other’s suffering but also risks his or her bodily life for the other.

## **2. Levinas on Sensibility and the Ethical Embodied Subject in *Otherwise than***

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<sup>72</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 199.

## ***Being***

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas explores how the sensitive epiphany of the face of the other serves as an imperative power to divert the sensitive subject from an egoist subject to an ethical subject. He does not formulate a new ethical subject that can replace the egoist and rational subject. Instead, he simply explores how the other puts the subjective life into question in a sensitive world. However, in *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas highlights the formulation of a new ethical subject. In particular, he describes how the other helps to reconstruct a new ethical subjectivity through questioning the self-identity of the egoist subjectivity. John Drabinski identifies the theoretical difference between *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being* as follows: “ In *Totality and Infinity*, the excessive exteriority of the Other ruptures the constitutional confines of my own subjective life and the representational modality of my being-in-the-world that the idealist’s notion of subjectivity presupposes and assumes. The Other questions my powers. In *Otherwise than Being*, the radical absence of the original manifestation of the Other, and the centrality of that trace in the notion of identity, does not simply call my subjective life into question. Rather this absence calls the very notions of subjectivity and

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<sup>73</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 199.

self-identity themselves into question.”<sup>74</sup>

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas emphasizes the infinite relationship between the subject and other, especially highlighting the transcendence of the other, rather than exploring how an intersubjective bodily relation generates a new ethical subject. While Levinas emphasizes the infinite distance between the subject and the other’s subversion of the egoist subject, he fails to show how such an infinite relation works and how it nurtures the subject’s life. Levinas simply shows how the other “destroys” the subject’s egoism. In other words, in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas approaches the infinite relationship from the other’s side, not the subject’s side, so he fails to show how a dynamic intersubjective life can function constructively within an infinite relation.

In *Otherwise than Being*, however, Levinas approaches the theme of transcendence and infinity from the position of the subject, rather than from the position of the other. Peperzak says “Levinas has chosen another perspective in *Otherwise than Being* for his approach to transcendence and the infinite. In *Totality and Infinity*, the central place was taken by the Other and its visage; in *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas meditates on the ‘position’ and the meaning of the subject; of the self who meets the other... Whereas *Totality and Infinity* attempted, with Plato, to think beyond the totality of all beings and

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<sup>74</sup> John E. Drabinski, *Sensibility and Singularity*, p. 217.

closed with eschatological questions, *Otherwise than Being* goes back to a sort of (under)ground: it attempts to trace down the underlying ‘fundament’ and subject of the various relations that it describes.”<sup>75</sup> In other words, in *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas attempts to explore how encounter with the other changes the subject’s self-identity. He argues that the ethical selfhood of the subject is always already subjected to the ethical demand of the other. In the following subsections, I will show how *Otherwise than Being* describes a dynamic ethical relationship that transforms the structure of the subject. I want to argue that, for Levinas, caring for the other and taking responsibility for the other are the sufficient condition in formulating the ethical subjectivity. Bodily sensation is an important condition in formulating such an embodied ethical relationship.

## **2.1 Proximity: Ethical Embodied Relation**

In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas employs the notion of proximity to describe an intersubjective ethical relation mediated by sensibility. Claire Elise Katz says, “unlike *Totality and Infinity*, which emphasized distance and height, *Otherwise than Being* emphasizes proximity.”<sup>76</sup> For Levinas, proximity is an obsessive bodily relationship between subject and other, where the subject is captured and obsessed by the other:

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<sup>75</sup>Adriaan Peperzak, *To the Other*, p. 212.

<sup>76</sup> Claire Elise Katz, *Levinas, Judaism, and the Feminine: The Silent Footsteps of Rebecca* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), p. 129.

“proximity is not a state, a repose, but, a restlessness, null site, outside of the place of rest... No site then, is ever sufficiently a proximity, like an embrace... Never close enough, proximity does not congeal into a structure ... and reverts into a simple relation. Proximity, as the ‘closer and closer,’ becomes the subject.”<sup>77</sup>

Does Levinas want to eliminate the infinite distance between subject and other proposed in *Totality and Infinity* by using the notion of proximity? Here we need to clarify that “proximity is nothing to do with spatial contiguity,” as Edith Wyschogrod says.<sup>78</sup> It is better to understand proximity as the immediacy of the relation, not a physical closeness. It refers to a “bodily relationship” or an “inter-corporeal relationship,” that is mediated by bodily affection and “bodily exposure to the other,”<sup>79</sup> not by rational dialogue or deliberation. Levinas says, “The non-thematized proximity does not simply belong to the ‘horizon’ of the contact, as a potentiality of this experience. Sensibility--the proximity, immediacy, and restlessness which signify in it--is not constituted out of some apperception putting consciousness into relationship with a body. Incarnation is not a transcendental operation of a subject that is situated in the midst of the world it represents to itself; the sensible experience of the body is already and from the start incarnate. The

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<sup>77</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 82.

<sup>78</sup> Edith Wyschogrod, *Emmanuel Levinas: The Problem of Ethical Metaphysics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), p. 149.

<sup>79</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 49.

sensible--maternity, vulnerability, apprehension--binds the node of incarnation into a plot larger than the apperception of self. In this plot I am bound to others before tied to my body.”<sup>80</sup> In other words, proximity is a relationship with a singular other without any conceptual meditation that is united neither by the synthesis of consciousness nor by any universal knowledge.

Thus, we should not simply regard Levinas’ notion of proximity, a sensual intersubjective relationship, as the dialogical relationship suggested by Buber, even though proximity has a linguistic or signifying dimension (to be discussed later). The subject and the other in proximity are primarily tied by the sensual touch, not by conceptual communication. Thus, Levinas’ ethics is not simply a dialogical ethics, because the cognitive implication of dialogue cannot fully characterize the “bodily” and “sensual” nature of Levinas’ proximity.

Levinas views proximity as an irreducible primordial relation between the subject and the other, in which the subject’s life and moral consciousness are already obsessed and possessed by the other. That is to say, the subject cannot reject the “approach”, “invasion” and “commandment” of the other. Levinas argues that the other’s life is already incarnated in the subject’s life, and the subject has to face or accept such an

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<sup>80</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 76.

obsessive relation with the other unconditionally. Thus, the intersubjective relation in proximity is not a reciprocal relation, but a non-reciprocal relation. That is to say, it is not the reward, e.g., the other's appreciation, but the pre-given ethical command of the other, that motivates the subject to respond to the need of the other. Nor should the subject ask for a reward after responding to the need of the other. For the subject does not share the privileged status that the other has: "The subject affected by the other cannot think that the affection is reciprocal, for he is still obsessed with the very obsession he could exercise over him that obsesses him. Not to turn into relations that reverse, irreversibility, is the universal subjectness of the subject."<sup>81</sup>

Of course, we should not say that the subject gets no "reward" or "bonus" in his or her care of the other, because caring for the other can make the subject become ethical. But if one wants to earn the other's appreciation through caring for the other, one is still an egoist and simply views caring for the other as a self-rewarding benevolent act (to be appreciated by the other). This turns caring for the other into an "option" that the subject can freely choose, whereas caring for the other is not an "option," for Levinas, but an "absolute command."

Levinas employs the metaphor of maternity to illustrate the notion of proximity and

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<sup>81</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 84.

to characterize the ethical relation between subject and other, especially its affective nature. “Maternity” can be understood in two ways. First, Levinas regards proximity as a “relation of kinship outside of all biology,”<sup>82</sup> where “I am bound to him, him who is, however, the first one on the scene, not signaled, unparalleled.”<sup>83</sup> Although maternity always signifies an intimate relationship between mother and child, this does not mean that Levinas’ ethics excludes the male role. Rather, he attempts to illustrate an inborn and pre-given kinship relation that is already assigned to the subject: “Rather than a nature, earlier than nature, immediacy is this vulnerability, this maternity, this pre-birth or pre-nature in which the sensibility belongs.”<sup>84</sup> In other words, the notion of maternity is used to emphasize a “pre-birth” and pre-nature” primordial relationship between subject and other.

Second, Levinas uses maternity to illustrate a merciful relationship between subject and other, in which the subject is like a father or a mother, who not only loves his or her child but also takes responsibility for his or her child: “In maternity what signifies is a responsibility for others, to the point of substitution for others and suffering both from the effect of persecution and from the persecuting itself in which the persecutor sinks.

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<sup>82</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 87.

<sup>83</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 87.

<sup>84</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, pp. 75-6.

Maternity, which is bearing par excellence, bears even responsibility for the persecuting by the persecutor.”<sup>85</sup> In other words, the subject not only takes care of the other but also faces the risk of being persecuted by the enemy or hurt by the other while protecting the life of the other. That is to say, responsibility for Levinas is associated as a risk-taking act. According to Katz, “In Levinas’s discussion, maternity does not function simply as a metaphor derived from the physical proximity between mother and child, although certainly he does not overlook the immediacy of the relationship. Levinas equates maternity with mercy (*rakhamim*, derived from the Hebrew word for uterus, *rekhem*). And mercy is the ethical response to the other.”<sup>86</sup>

Levinas understands the subject-other’s relationship as an affective and merciful relationship, which differs from Sartre’s understanding of the human relationship. The latter simply treats the subject’s other as “hell.” In *No Exit*, Sartre argues that since the other always limits the freedom and autonomy of the subject, the other is “hell” to the subject. He also characterizes the subject and other’s relation as a relation in conflict; nothing can help overcome such an alienated human condition. Clearly, Levinas rejects Sartre’s pessimistic and negative view of human relationship, a view of intersubjective

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<sup>85</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 75.

<sup>86</sup> Claire Elise Katz, *Levinas, Judaism, and the Feminine*, p. 132.

relationship as governed by hatred, not by love and responsibility.<sup>87</sup>

Moreover, for Levinas, since the subject's body in proximity is passively animated and elected by the other, this makes Levinas' body differ from the body of Husserl's *Fifth Cartesian Meditation* and the body of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*.

While Levinas shares Husserl's pre-reflective embodied life and Merleau-Ponty's historicity of the body, he gives priority to an absolute passivity of the subject's body that Husserl and Merleau-Ponty fail to offer. For Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, embodiment is either a psycho-physical unity (Husserl) or the coincidence of the sensing and the sensed (Merleau-Ponty). Both privilege the activity of the subject's body over the passivity of the subject's body; both assert that one can unite one's body with the outside world in an instinctive intentionality. That is to say, Husserl and Merleau-Ponty privilege the epistemological dimension of the body over its ethical dimension.

But Levinas does not view the subject's body in such an "active" manner. He never privileges the epistemological dimension of the body; rather he views the subject's body as passively exposed to the other and as unconditionally sacrificed for the other. Thereby the subject's body is an ethical body. As Drabinski says, "Both Husserl's and Merleau-Ponty's conceptions of the body entail genetic projects that either give a

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<sup>87</sup> Having said that, Sartre modifies his negative position towards the other in *Existentialism and*

privilege to activity--the former--or intermingle activity and passivity--the latter. For Levinas, the exposed body of ethical subjectivity is animated as a for-the-other. It is animated to the point of obsession by the Other through the relation of passivity. There is not a psyche that inhabits the body prior to awakening by the Other. Nor is there a reciprocal or reversible character to our embodied presence to the Other. The body exposed to the Other is animated and awakened otherwise.”<sup>88</sup> For Levinas, the passive exposure of the subject’s body is “unique in the unexceptional requisition of responsibility.”<sup>89</sup> Of course, this does not mean that Levinas completely rejects intentionality. As Wyschogrod argues, proximity still has an intentional character, but it is a “new ethical intentionality”<sup>90</sup> that does not relate the subject to the other by conceptual synthesis, but by bodily sensation.

Thus, Levinas’ “passive body” can offer the more solid ethical ground for the subject that Husserl and Merleau-Ponty’s “active body” fails to offer. Like Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, Levinas continues a phenomenological path that fully affirms one’s bodily experience as a primordial mode of human life. But what makes Levinas’ approach distinctive is his discovery of the ethical dimension of the body in which one’s

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*Humanism*, where he asserts the importance of responsibility towards the other.

<sup>88</sup> John E. Drabinski, *Sensibility and Singularity*, pp. 207-08.

<sup>89</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 53.

<sup>90</sup> Edith Wyschogrod, *Emmanuel Levinas*, p. 149.

ethical act is triggered by one's bodily exposure towards the other.

Yet the subject rarely recognizes such a pre-given possessive relationship with the other. Levinas says that "the neighbor concerns me before all assumption, all commitment consented to or refused. I am bound to him, him who is, however, the first one on the scene, not signaled, unparalleled; I am bound to him before any liaison contracted. He orders me before being recognized."<sup>91</sup> How does the subject recognize such an incarnated and obsessive relation with the other? How does the other order the subject before being recognized by the subject?

While Levinas views the other as the transcendent other, who cannot be grasped conceptually by the subject, this does not mean that the subject cannot "sense" or "recognize" the "existence" and "approach" of the other. It is tempting, however, to think that Levinas' ethics generates a complete split between the infinity of the other and the finitude of the subject that negates any sensual contact between subject and other. That is to say, the subject cannot sense or touch the other, such as the face of the other, since the transcendent other has an incomprehensible character. For instance, David Couzens Hoy says that, for Levinas, the face is not the physical countenance: it refuses to be contained and is neither seen nor touched. He concludes that Levinas privileges language over

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<sup>91</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 87.

sensation in theorizing the face.<sup>92</sup> The problem with Hoy's interpretation is his ignoring the sensual nature of Levinas' proximity, in which the bodily sensation is viewed as a "way" or "condition" for the subject to "recognize" the "existence" of the other. Levinas says, "...sensibility must be interpreted as touch first of all... In reality, the caress of the sensible awakens in a contact and tenderness, that is, proximity, awakens in the touched only starting with the human skin, a face, only with the approach of a neighbor."<sup>93</sup> In other words, although the transcendent character of the face of the other cannot be grasped conceptually, this does not mean that the face is totally "untouchable." While Levinas refuses to turn the face of the other into a "concept" or "knowledge," he does not negate sensual contact between the subject and the other.

In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas argues that bodily sensibility not only mediates the subject and the other but also makes the subject aware of a pre-given intimate relation with the other. In particular, the other's pain and suffering can penetrate the subject's heart and sensation and arouse the subject's ethical sense: "Pain penetrates into the very heart of the for-oneself that beats in enjoyment, in the life that is complacent in itself, that lives of its life. To give, to-be-for-another, despite oneself, but in interrupting the

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<sup>92</sup> David Couzens Hoy, *Critical Resistance: From Poststructuralism to Post-Critique* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005), p. 157.

<sup>93</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "Language and Proximity," in Emmanuel Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), p. 118.

for-oneself, is to take bread out of one's own mouth, to nourish the hunger of another with one's own fasting."<sup>94</sup> Thus, the Levinasian ethical subject is an embodied subject: one's ethical identity is transformed and one's ethical sense is awakened when the other's bodily suffering and pain overwhelms one's body. Here, Levinas continues the analysis of the ethical dimension of sensuality in *Totality and Infinity*. He shows how the sensuality of pain and suffering serves as an important "medium" to transform the egoist subject, who lives for self-enjoyment, into an ethical subject, who lives for the other. In particular, Levinas highlights the "ethical function" of pain, which is to subvert the subject's egoist mentality.

As Wyschogrod rightly says, for Levinas, the sensible is not known; it is approached.<sup>95</sup> It is the sensation, not consciousness, that approaches the subject and awakens the subject's ethical sense towards the other. That is to say, the affective sensation, not rational intentionality, serves as a mode to mediate the subject and the other. The problem of synthesis is that it privileges the "sameness" and "oneness" between subject and other over the "difference" between subject and other. This negates the alterity and infinity of the other because synthesis reduces the multiplicity of human beings to oneness so as to acquire an ontological understanding of human beings. In

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<sup>94</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 56.

particular, the consciousness of synthesis only allows the subject to conceptualize the other, not sense the other. This not only represses and negates different kinds of sensual communication between the subject and the other but also prevents the subject from being interrupted by the other's pain.

Although the other, for Levinas, is transcendent, this does not mean that the other does not leave any "footprints" or "hints" for the subject to recognize the other's existence. Levinas argues that the other has left a "trace" for the subject so as to "arouse" the subject's ethical responsibility. But what is the trace of the other? In an earlier essay, titled "The Trace of the Other," Levinas gives the meaning of trace a biblical implication with reference to *Exodus*, chapter 33: "And the Lord said: 'Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand upon the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.'" Then Levinas says, "The revealed God of our Judeo-Christian spirituality maintains all the infinity of his absence.... He shows himself only by his trace."<sup>96</sup> Here Levinas attempts to define trace as an ambiguous contact between infinity and finite. We can discover only

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<sup>95</sup> Edith Wyschogrod, *Emmanuel Levinas*, p. 150.

<sup>96</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "The Trace of the Other," in M. Taylor (ed.), *Deconstruction in Context* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 345-9.

the trace of God, not the face of God. Within a finite time, we can discover the trace of infinity, but we never grasp the infinite God conceptually (“you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen”). God’s trace is ambiguous because it discloses both the absence and presence of the transcendent God.

For Levinas, the trace of the other is ambiguous, like God’s trace. The trace is a special kind of sign left by the other to the subject from the past. It is a specific modality of signification that cannot be reduced to the present and presence. It articulates the very inordinateness of infinity.<sup>97</sup> Levinas regards the trace as the “weak sense” of the face, which escapes any representations: “It [the face of the other] escapes representation; it is the very collapse of phenomenality. Not because it is too brutal to appear, but because in a sense too weak, non-phenomenon because less than a phenomenon. The disclosing of a face is nudity, non-form, abandon of self, ageing, dying, more naked than nudity. It is poverty, skin with wrinkles, which are a trace of itself.”<sup>98</sup> Due to the transcendent nature of the face, the trace cannot represent, but only signifies or signals the weakness and vulnerability of the face of the other.

In other words, the subject cannot comprehend the face of the other by simply interpreting the traces left by the other, because the trace, as Levinas says, is “not its signs

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<sup>97</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 94.

that would await an ontological interpretation, nor some knowing that would be added to its 'essence.' ... [I]t is the infinition or glory of the infinite."<sup>99</sup> The transcendent other leaves the trace, whereas the trace is only a trace of infinity, not infinity per se. That is to say, the trace never allows us to fully represent the ultimate picture of the other. Thus, the trace is against ontology, escaping the capture of any ontological discourses. The trace only hints to the subject how to trace the other. Peperzak says: "The trace can be seen as a specific kind of sign, insofar as a detective, a hunter, or a historian examine it for clues to the reconstruction of the activities and the character of those who left it behind. They did not intend to leave traces; they even tried to wipe them out, but in effacing them, they left other traces. A trace signals a certain past but contains no presence: the past it indicates is absolutely gone. The possibility of the trace and its specific form of signaling is based on the fact that it functions in a 'world' ... The sign is left as the trace of those who communicated it; it traces the speaker's or writer's passing by."<sup>100</sup> Jill Robbins regards the trace as "residual phenomena," which "is a mark *in* the world, the *effect* of a cause *in* the same world...[and] accessible to an interpreter who would decode them."<sup>101</sup>

According to Levinas, the other leaves the trace. Through the trace, the other does

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<sup>98</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 88.

<sup>99</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 94.

<sup>100</sup> Adriaan Peperzak, *Beyond*, pp. 105-6.

<sup>101</sup> Jill Robbins, "Tracing Responsibility in Levinas's Ethical Thought," in Adriaan Peperzak (ed.), *Ethics as First Philosophy: The Significance of Emmanuel Levinas for Philosophy, Literature, and Religion*

not simply want to show the subject the “mark” of his or her existence; rather the trace of the other signifies an infinite responsibility and order: “A face does not function in proximity as a sign of a hidden God who would impose the neighbor on me. It is a trace of itself, a trace in the trace of an abandon... It obsesses the subject without staying in correlation with him, without equalling me in a consciousness, ordering me before appearing, in the glorious increase of obligation.”<sup>102</sup> In other words, the other’s trace not only tells the subject that the other has lived in the world but also serves as an ethical command for the subject. And such an ethical command not only “disrupts” the comfort and the very subjectivity of the subject and the order of the world but also “orders” the subject to be an ethical subject, and does so with an obsessive gesture, to the extent that the subject cannot reject the other’s order.

The other’s trace also invites the subject to join a risky journey with him or her. Levinas says that the trace is “an invitation to the fine risk of approach qua approach, to the exposure of one to the other, to the exposure of this exposedness, the expression of exposure, saying”<sup>103</sup> in which the subject becomes ethical while exposing his or her life to the other. The journey is risky because it demands the subject to expose his or her

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(New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 177.

<sup>102</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 94.

<sup>103</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 94.

bodily life to the other unconditionally. Exposure of one's life to the other might cost one's life. Such a risky journey is also a challenging journey because it challenges the egoist subject to be obedient to the other. Peperzak asserts that "Transcendence touches us by leaving traces which challenge and resist our comprehension. The obscure and enigmatic character does not diminish the overwhelming certainty of their practical relevance, however: the Infinite 'speaks' by creating subjects as already obedient delivered over to the infinite demands of responsibility."<sup>104</sup> It is tough for the egoist subject, a rational and calculative subject, because the trace resists the subject's comprehension and calculation before exposing his or her life to the other.

Since the ethical command of the other "disrupts" the subject in an "arbitrary" or "unexpected" way through the trace, this does not allow the subject to calculate the cost or consequence before responding to the other. In other words, the other's ethical command is irresistible for the subject; the subject needs to respond to the command of the other involuntarily and passively. Levinas says, "The neighbor assigns me before I designate him. This is a modality not of knowing, but of an obsession, a shuddering of the human quite different from cognition.... In an approach I am first a servant of a neighbor, already late and guilty for being late. I am as it were ordered from the outside,

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<sup>104</sup> Adriaan Peperzak, *Beyond*, p. 107.

traumatically commanded, without interiorizing by representation and concepts the authority that commands me.”<sup>105</sup> To a certain extent, we may view ethical responsibility as an “assignment” that is already prepared for the subject by the other (“the neighbor assigns me before I designate him”). For the other, the subject’s response is always late and the subject is guilty for being late. Thus, the subject’s response is “never enough” for the other. The other, not the subject, is the “final judge” who judges the righteousness of subject and justifies the subject’s ethical act. Thus, Levinas’ ethical subject is not a self-righteous subject because his or her righteousness is justified by the other, and not by the subject per se.

Thus, the face of the other has both finite and transcendent characters. On one hand, the other’s suffering context is concrete, not abstract, the concrete suffering of a person; on the other hand, the ethical command generated from the other’s suffering or revealed from the other’s face is infinite so that the subject never “fulfills” the other’s ethical demand. As Perpich rightly states: the face of the other “is *both* finitude *and* transcendence. On one side, the face is body, morality, hunger, destitution, and nudity, and on the other, infinity, height, and command.”<sup>106</sup> For Levinas, only such a contradictory nature of the other’s face that contains both the representable/the visible

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<sup>105</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 87.

and unrepresentable/invisible nature can reveal the infinite and bodily nature of ethics.

Perpich explains:

“Suspended between the visible and the invisible, the immanent and the transcendent par excellence, the figure of the face is not a thesis about ethics but is the performance of ethical life. The tension between what this figure *does* (when it represents the other) and what it *says* (that the other is unrepresentable) is the enactment of our original ethical situation... Ethics is a matter not of having a secure principle, but of realizing that the principle is never secure enough. It is a matter of being overwhelmed by the infinity of the demand, the ever renewed demand of preserving ethical practices of reason-giving--and reason-giving that must meet not some abstract theoretical conditions, but that must respond to the hungry face, the embodied self, that here and now demands my aid.”<sup>107</sup>

In other words, although the face of the other has a transcendent character, this does not mean that the subject cannot approach the other. If it did mean this, the other would never be helped by the subject; the subject’s egoist mentality would never be interrupted by the

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<sup>106</sup> Diane Perpich, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas*, p .68.

other; and the subject's ethical being would never be actualized by the other. Thus, for Levinas, what cannot be represented or exhausted by concept is the subject's ethical relation to the other in proximity, not the suffering situation of the other.

Thus, for Levinas, any ethical responsibility that stems from deliberation or reasoning is not "ethical enough" because ethics and responsibility are about a self-sacrifice or a self-exposure to the other. Caring for the other is a "fine risk," not a "calculative act." Claire Elise Katz asserts: "His [Levinas'] conception of responsibility, described in *Otherwise than Being*, moves further away from a conventional understanding of responsibility. Responsibility is response to the other... To respond to the other is to be vulnerable to the other; it is not to know what might happen in that response."<sup>108</sup> Thus, Levinas' notion of responsibility differs from the traditional notion of ethics. For the latter, since responsibility stems from the will and reason of the subject, the ethical subject does not need to take risks. The subject has eliminated all the "risky factors" before taking any ethical responses. Such a calculative ethics turns ethics into a disembodied rational judgment. James Olthuis rightly says, "modern ethical theory in the spirit of the Enlightenment has striven to construct a rational foundation of morality.... Inspired by the scientific ideal of objectivity, ethical theory attempted to secure so-called

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<sup>107</sup> Diane Perpich, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas*, p. 77.

objective moral judgments free from the subjective desires, beliefs, and narratives of the agents who make them.... Moreover, the transcendental turn to the subject, especially in Descartes, Kant, and Husserl, led to an emphasis on a timeless, omniscient, disinterested observer and the loss of attention to the pain and suffering of bodies.”<sup>109</sup> Levinas does not treat the conceptual foundation as the ground of ethics; rather he treats an intersubjective relationship as the ground of ethics.

According to Levinas, if one’s ethical responsibility were primarily determined by consciousness or intentionality, it would involve an egoist ethics, since it stems from the calculation of cost and consequence,<sup>110</sup> not from the other’s ethical demand. This would privilege the subject’s interest over the other’s interest. For instance, some applied ethics, which simply treats responsibility as decision-making, has reduced ethics to cost-calculation and turned the ethical subject into a self-centered subject. Of course, this does not mean that we should not apply Levinas’ ethics in our daily life.<sup>111</sup> But I want to emphasize that Levinas does not view ethics as a rational deliberation that can help

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<sup>108</sup> Claire Elise Katz, *Levinas, Judaism, and the Feminine*, p. 128.

<sup>109</sup> James H. Olthuis, “Face to Face: Ethical Asymmetry or the Symmetry of Mutuality?” in James H. Olthuis (ed.), *Knowing Other-Wise: Philosophy at the Threshold of Spirituality* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), p. 133.

<sup>110</sup> I agree with Lambert Zuidervaart’s comment that Kant’s deontological ethics is not consequentialist and explicitly opposes consequentialism. Thus, although Kant ethics is a modern ethical theory, it is not the egoist ethics that Levinas criticizes.

<sup>111</sup> For instance, Sharon Todd attempts to apply Levinas’ ethics in social justice education. See Sharon Todd, *Learning from the Other: Levinas, Psychoanalysis, and Ethical Possibilities in Education* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2003).

people make “correct” and “safe” ethical decisions so as to eliminate any risky factors or costly consequences. Instead, he wants to reveal the most fundamental form of ethical life, which rests on the self-sacrifice of subject. Accordingly, ethical responsibility is mediated by bodily suffering, not by rational deliberation. As Katz rightly says, “the proximity that Levinas emphasizes indicates how my responsibility for the other is not mediated by choice or cognition.”<sup>112</sup> What matters for Levinas is the meaning of being ethical and the condition of being ethical, not “what actions we should perform, what rules should govern our conduct, what end states we should pursue, what virtues we should cultivate and how we can justify claims about all of these matters.”<sup>113</sup>

It is also incorrect to view Levinas’ ethics as a virtue ethics, as some thinkers argue. Although Levinas’ ethics includes virtuous elements such as responsibility, sacrifice, courage or love, we cannot simply regard Levinas’ ethics as virtue ethics, because Levinas does not view cultivation and practice as the sufficient way to become virtuous that some virtue ethicists, such as Aristotle, suggest. For Levinas, the subject’s ethical character or identity is formed by the interruption by the fragile face of the other, not by practices, education or cultivation. Unlike Levinas’ ethics, virtue ethics rests on the

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<sup>112</sup> Claire Elise Katz, *Levinas, Judaism, and the Feminine*, p. 130.

<sup>113</sup> Edith Wyschogrod and Gerald P. McKenny, “Introduction,” in Edith Wyschogrod and Gerald P. McKenny (eds.), *The Ethical* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), p. 1.

subject's will and concern to decide what moral character to cultivate and practice, which means that the subject can actively and freely determine the content of his or her ethical identity. For Levinas, however, the subject cannot actively and freely form his or her ethical identity. It is the other who primary interrupts the subject's egoist life and urges the subject to give up his or her life, thereby forming the subject's ethical identity. Simply put, the subject cannot determine the content of his or her ethical identity. The subject is completely passive in the formation of ethical identity and character.

Therefore, Levinas refuses to regard the ethical subject as "committed subjectivity": "Commitment already presupposes a theoretical consciousness, as a possibility to assume, before or after the event, a taking up that goes beyond the susceptiveness of passivity."<sup>114</sup> Rather Levinas's subject "is a denuding, an exposure to being affected, a pure susceptiveness. It does not posit itself, possessing itself...; it is consumed and delivered over, dis-locates itself, loses its place, is exiled, relegates itself into itself...exposed to wounds and outrage, emptying itself in a no-grounds, to the point of substituting itself for the other, holding on to itself only as it were in the trace of its exile.... It is not commitment that describes signification; it is signification, the-one-for-the-other

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<sup>114</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 136.

characteristic of proximity, which justifies all commitment.”<sup>115</sup> Levinas asserts that if one’s will and freedom initiate one’s ethical acts without the participation of the other, this can generate egoism and self-righteousness. It is an egoist claim if one says one can commit to the other by oneself, since the motivation of commitment never stems from the subject’s will, but from the other’s interruption. Levinas employs “maternity” to illustrate a pre-given subject-other relationship (proximity), mediated by love and passion, as a mother embraces her baby with her body. That is to say, this is not simply an issue of commitment; rather this is an issue of responsibility. Of course, this does not mean that a mother should not commit to her child; but for Levinas, it is the pre-original responsibility embedded in proximity, not a theoretical form of commitment, that sustains the subject’s commitment.

Certainly, for Levinas, the other or the neighbor is the subject’s “imperative force.”<sup>116</sup> But this is not the Kantian categorical imperative. For Kant, the moral imperative is a universal principle or law, whereas the moral imperative, for Levinas, is the face of the other: “The *way* of the neighbor is a face. The face of a neighbor signifies for me an unexceptionable responsibility, preceding every free consent, every pact, every contract.... The disclosing of a face is nudity, non-form, abandon of self, ageing, dying,

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<sup>115</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 138

more naked than nudity.”<sup>117</sup> The main difference between Kant and Levinas is that the former regards the universal moral law as an ethical source to motivate the ethical subject to take responsibility for the other, whereas the latter treats the particular face of the other as an ethical force to arouse the ethical sense of the subject. Catherine Chalier rightly adds that Kant establishes his groundwork with the idea of a principle, and its condition with the idea of a good will; conversely, Levinas asserts that “the ethical dimension of the subject reveals itself only on the condition that one starts from the infinite and from what is required by the particular presence of the other person standing before the subject.”<sup>118</sup>

While Kant gives primacy to autonomy, Levinas regards heteronomy as the basis of the ethical act.<sup>119</sup> For Kant, the subject is moral and free by reason of its autonomy to the extent that the subject can discover the universality of the law as a “fact of reason.”

According to Levinas, the subject cannot become ethical through obeying the rule of universal moral law; rather it is the infinite other who makes him or her be ethical. As

Chalier says, “Levinas’s reflection, unlike Kant’s, is moored not in the concern to

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<sup>116</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 93.

<sup>117</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 88.

<sup>118</sup> Catherine Chalier, *What Ought I to Do? Morality in Kant and Levinas* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 24.

<sup>119</sup> Simon Critchley says that both Kant and Levinas can have some agreements in two areas. First, Levinas would agree with Kant’s second formulation of the categorical imperative, namely respect for persons, where the subject should not treat the other person as a means to an end. Second, Kant’s understanding of the incomprehensibility of the moral law discussed in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* is similar to Levinas’ incomprehensibility of the other. See Simon Critchley, “Introduction,” in Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 12.

preserve an abstract and formal universality--the idea of humanity linked to moral autonomy--but rather in the concern to watch over concrete singularities. Levinas shows how, thanks to the heteronomy characteristic of the encounter with the foreign and vulnerable face, another idea of universality is brought to mind. That universality does not depend on principles...but rather on the responses given here and now, before it is too late, to the uniqueness of faces.”<sup>120</sup> To a certain extent, Levinas does not reject the idea of universality, provided that it is not an abstract law, but the singularity and concreteness of the fragile face of other. What he rejects is the abstractness of universality such as law and rational principle, not the concreteness of universality such as the other. The problem of the former is its disembodied character, which not only reduces the embodied subject to an abstract disembodied system but also domesticates the difference and singularity of the subject.

We should not say that Levinas completely rejects Kant, especially Kant’s second formulation of the categorical imperative, in which the subject is called to respect the other. In an interview, Levinas affirms the importance of Kant’s ethics: “I like the second formulation of the categorical imperative, the one that tells [me] to respect man in myself when I respect the other. In this expression, we are not in pure universality, but already in

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<sup>120</sup> Catherine Chaliel, *What Ought I to Do?* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 83.

the presence of the other. You know, the rights of man are nothing new; we already find their traces in Cicero. Much more important to me is that the rights of the other come before my own. That is much more important. We must understand that the rights of the other do not only begin with the defense of my own rights.”<sup>121</sup> The difference between Kant and Levinas is that the latter believes the right of the other comes before the subject. That is to say, the right of the other is neither given by the subject nor formulated by the universal moral law; rather it precedes the right of the subject. The other first commands the subject to respect his or her right, such that the subject does not grant the right of the other. It is the priority of the right of the other that makes Levinas’ ethics differ from Kant’s ethics.

In *Otherwise than Being*, then, Levinas uses “proximity” to describe how bodily sensation generates a pre-given obsessive bodily relationship between subject and other, where the subject is totally captured and obsessed by the other. In proximity, the other’s overwhelming pain and suffering penetrate the subject’s heart and arouse the subject’s ethical sense, in that the subject is commanded to expose his or her bodily life for the other unconditionally. The other overcomes one’s egoism and transforms one’s ethical life and subjectivity. In other words, for Levinas, one cannot become ethical in oneself;

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<sup>121</sup> Jill Robbins (ed.), *Is It Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford, CA: Stanford

rather it is the intervention of the other that makes one ethical. Thus, for Levinas, the ethical subject is never an autonomous and rational subject, but a passive and sensual subject; ethics is no longer a safe rational deliberation, but a risky bodily exposure that costs the subject's life.

## **2.2. Saying, Bodily Communication and Life Exposure**

Although the other, for Levinas, is the transcendent other who cannot be conceptually grasped by the subject, this does not mean that the other would not “communicate” or “interact” with the subject in proximity. As was mentioned before, the transcendent other does not leave the subject “alone”; rather the other commands the subject to take responsibility for him or her. The other can command the subject: “you shall not kill.” That is to say, the subject-other relationship, for Levinas, is an ethical communicative relationship, which helps signify the other's ethical command and the subject's ethical response.

Yet Levinas rejects any purely rational communication or dialogue between the subject and the other since he refuses to regard rationality as the only valid criterion to qualify an ideal communication. In particular, rational communication aims at “knowing,” which, Levinas thinks, destroys the immediacy of the sensible. Since

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University Press, 2001), p. 163.

knowing is “conceptual” and “a priori,” “incapable of opening intuitively upon the things themselves,” regarding communication as simply understanding or knowing can negate “the immediacy of the sensible.”<sup>122</sup> This fails to generate an embodied ethic that rests on the immediacy of the sensual touch.

For Levinas, sensibility is a “non-representational sensation”<sup>123</sup> that “contains” all the affective sensations before being conceptualized and domesticated by the consciousness. He says, “the immediacy on the surface of the skin characteristic of sensibility” can become “the exposure to wounding and to enjoyment, an exposure to wounding in enjoyment, which enables the wound to reach the subjectivity of the subject complacent in itself and positing itself for itself.”<sup>124</sup> The other’s ethical command, which stems from bodily exposure, is irresistible to the subject, because the immediacy of sensibility always interrupts the subject before being conceptualized by the subject’s consciousness. The subject can “feel” or “sense” what the other “feels” or “senses” immediately, such that the subject cannot reject the other’s call for help (the ethical command). Since the other’s suffering is an overwhelming sensation, it totally tears the subject from his or her egoist world. In other words, it is bodily sensibility per se that

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<sup>122</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 62.

<sup>123</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 67.

<sup>124</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 64.

makes possible the “interruption” of the other towards the subject. Reasserting the non-representative nature of the sensibility is important for Levinas because it offers a ground of contact for the finite subject and the infinite other.

Thus far, it seems that Levinas views the intercorporeal communication between subject and other as only a sensual or “fleshly” interaction without a cognitive dimension. But the non-representative nature of the intercorporeal communication does have a cognitive dimension. First, the other’s trace can signify, thus it can awaken the subject’s ethical sense. The sign of the trace can signal the trace of the other, even though the subject cannot conceptually grasp the infinity of the other.

Second, Levinas’ body is a sign that can signify the need of other and the response of subject. Robert Gibbs says that, for Levinas, “there is no ethics without bodies that know hunger, that need food, shelter, comfort. The giving of oneself, therefore, that characterizes the risk in communication requires a material body that can suffer in the giving.”<sup>125</sup> If the other’s contact with the subject were simply a sensual contact that cannot generate any concrete ethical meanings or contents, then the ethical command would not be powerful because it is not indicative. But what makes the ethical command indicative? For Levinas, it is a suffering and wounded body, which can show the concrete

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<sup>125</sup> Robert Gibbs, *Why Ethics? Signs of Responsibilities* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press,

meaning and content of hunger, suffering and comfort, indicating the subject is to take action to help the other. Although proximity is a pre-given ethical relationship, this does not mean that its ethical meaning is self-evident. That is to say, the other uses his or her body to show his or her suffering status to the subject; and the subject uses his or her body to perform the ethical meaning of responsibility. Thus, the other's need and the subject's response have to be signified through the body. The body, to a certain extent, is an "ethical medium."

In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas interprets subjectivity and sensibility as modes of signifying, in which the body is a sign to indicate my relation to another person. Gibbs says that "this requires an interpretation of corporeality that focuses on how the body itself is first not for itself but for the other person. To 'have' a human body, according to Levinas, is to be for other people's bodily needs. Nurturing, sheltering, nursing, even bearing a child all define the self's 'being in' a body."<sup>126</sup> That is to say, the subject's ethical act per se is also a signifying process. The exposure of the subject's body to the other is not only a sensual contact but also a cognitive contact. In proximity, the other not only "feels" or "senses" the care and the help of the subject, but also "knows" that the subject's bodily life is open to him or her. The other can decode an ethical meaning

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2000) pp. 52-3.

generated from the subject's self-sacrificial act. In other words, what the other receives from the subject in proximity is not only an "affective feeling" but also an "ethical meaning."

While Levinas asserts the importance of linguistic communication between the subject and the other, how can he insure that the linguistic system does not domesticate the immediacy of bodily sensibility? If the body per se is a signifying body, then what does it signify? To answer these questions, we need to explore Levinas' notion of the saying and the said.

For Levinas, language has two dimensions: saying and said. Levinas says, "saying no doubt precedes the language that communicates propositions and messages: it is a sign given from one to another by proximity about proximity.... A sign is given from one to the other before the constitution of any system of signs, any common place formed by culture and sites, a sign given from null site to null site. The fact that a sign, exterior to the system of evidences, comes into proximity while remaining transcendent, is the very essence of language prior to every particular language."<sup>127</sup> According to Levinas, saying refers to the act of speaking<sup>128</sup> that precedes a propositional language and gives signs a

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<sup>126</sup> Robert Gibbs, *Why Ethics*, p. 51.

<sup>127</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "Language and Proximity," pp. 121-2.

<sup>128</sup> Robert Gibbs, *Why Ethics*, p. 47.

definite and concrete meaning. Thus, saying is exterior to the linguistic system and remains transcendent.

Since human beings need language to construct the identity of entities in world, the saying is teleologically turned to the *kerugma* of the said<sup>129</sup> or the content.<sup>130</sup> The said is not the origin of saying; if it were, the saying would become the graspable present that Levinas wants to reject.<sup>131</sup> For the said is identified with “the linguistic system” and “ontology” which is “the price that manifestation demands.”<sup>132</sup> In particular, “essence fills the said,”<sup>133</sup> which means that the said, as Peperzak states, “encompasses all discourses or narratives in which beings are identified and essence verbalized.”<sup>134</sup>

According to Levinas, since saying “opens me to the other before saying what is said,”<sup>135</sup> it is not simply an “idle talk” or dialogue. Instead, it is a risk-taking communication because the subject needs to expose his or her life before the other. Saying is “in the risky uncovering of oneself, in sincerity, the breaking up of inwardness and the abandon of all shelter, exposure to traumas, vulnerability.”<sup>136</sup> Thus, saying is not an exchange of information, but a “naked life exposure.” Saying approaches the other by

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<sup>129</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 37.

<sup>130</sup> Robert Gibbs, *Why Ethics*, p. 47.

<sup>131</sup> Adriaan Peperzak, *Beyond*, p. 67.

<sup>132</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 6.

<sup>133</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 9.

<sup>134</sup> Adriaan Peperzak, *Beyond*, p. 60.

<sup>135</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Language and Proximity,” p. 170.

<sup>136</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 48.

breaking through the noema involved in intentionality, turning inside out. The subject in the saying approaches a neighbor in expressing itself, in being expelled.<sup>137</sup> Saying “is the very *respiration* of this skin prior to any intention. The subject is not *in itself*, at home with itself, such that it would dissimulate itself in itself or dissimulate itself in its wound and its exile, understood as *acts* of wounding or exiling itself.... The subject of saying does not give signs, it becomes a sign, turns into an allegiance.”<sup>138</sup> In other words, the subject in the saying or the subject’s body becomes a sign. The subject does not need any external linguistic systems to express his or her ethical concern towards the other; rather his or her bodily exposure to the other itself is the sign itself. As Gibbs rightly says, “It is not despite the materiality of my body that I signify and use signs, but because of it. I am not the referent of a term in a linguistic system, not a topic to be talked about. Instead, I am a sign, vulnerable in my body.”<sup>139</sup>

In saying, the subject has to take a risk to share his or her wounded bodily experience with the other. Since the subject is exposed to the other, the saying uncovers the subject who speaks. The speaking subject discloses him/herself by neglecting his or her defenses, leaving a shelter, exposing himself or herself to outrage, to insults and

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<sup>137</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 48.

<sup>138</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 49.

<sup>139</sup> Robert Gibbs, *Why Ethics*, p. 52.

wounding. Thus, for Levinas, the subjectivity of a subject in the saying is vulnerability, “exposure to affection, sensibility, a passivity more passive still than any passivity, an irrecuperable time, an unassemblable diachrony of patience, an exposedness always to be exposed the more, an exposure to expressing, and thus to saying, thus to giving.”<sup>140</sup> Here, Levinas shows us that a truly ethical communication is not a rational communication, but a self-disclosure of the subject towards the other. It is also not a “truth-speaking” discursive act, in which the subject simply speaks unreservedly to the others in order to show his or her truthfulness or faithfulness. Rather, what the subject discloses to the other in saying is the vulnerability, fear, suffering, and painfulness of his or her bodily life, which no concept or system can grasp.

Thus, bodily communication in proximity, as Levinas says, only signifies a “witness” and “testimony” of the subject, in which the responsibility of the subject towards the other is revealed.<sup>141</sup> Simply speaking, “saying is witness:”<sup>142</sup>

“Saying, before setting forth a said, is already the testimony of this responsibility--and even the saying of a said, as an approach to the other, is a responsibility for him.... A pure

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<sup>140</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 50.

<sup>141</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Language and Proximity,” p. 170.

<sup>142</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 150.

testimony, it is a martyr's truth which does not depend on any disclosure or any 'religious' experience; it is an obedience that precedes the hearing of any order. A pure testimony, it does not testify to a prior experience, but to the infinite which is not accessible to the unity of apperception, non-appearing and disproportionate to the present.... The infinite is not 'in front of' me; I express it, but precisely by giving a sign of the giving of signs, of the 'for the other' in which I am dis-interested: here I am [me voici]! The accusative [*me voici!*] here is remarkable: here I am, under your eyes, at your service, your obedient servant."<sup>143</sup>

Saying is a "fleshy testimony" or "embodied witness" that testifies to the infinite responsibility and obedience of the subject. Although the witness can signify, it cannot be manipulated or exhausted by any cognitive concepts, for it is about one's self-sacrificing obedience, "a martyr's truth," which Levinas thinks, is prior to any concepts and orders. That is to say, life testimony per se, not any external linguistic systems or grammars, serves as the reference of saying. Testimony differs from story-telling because the latter needs a narrative framework to re-construct one's experience; but testimony occurs only when one sacrifices one's life toward the other. Thus, it is life-exposure, not any

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<sup>143</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "Language and Proximity," p. 170.

conceptual framework, that serves as the ultimate reference of saying. Testimony has a propositional dimension, but it cannot simply be reduced to a propositional discourse. It is embodied life, not concept or word, that determines the content of testimony. Simply put, the testimony is an “embodied ethical discourse.” Thus, proximity, which is mediated by the saying, an infinite witness, can maintain its cognitive function without being manipulated by the cognitive sign.

Moreover, the witness, for Levinas, is a trace that cannot be effaced by the said. Although the exposure of the body does signify, it does not say a word. It only leaves a trace through which the glory of the witness is signified: “This witness is not reducible to the relationship that leads from an index to the indicated. That would make it a disclosure and a thematization. It is the bottomless passivity of responsibility, and thus, sincerity. It is the meaning of language, before language scatters into words, into themes equal to the words and dissimulating in the said the openness of the saying exposed like a bleeding wound. But the trace of the witness given, the sincerity or glory, is not effaced even in its said.”<sup>144</sup> While the bodily witness is a language, it is not a conceptual language structured by grammar or system (the said). The meaning of bodily witness can be grasped metaphorically but it cannot be exhausted by a concept. For instance, Levinas

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<sup>144</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 151.

regards the witness as a “bleeding wound.” Such a metaphor simply characterizes the vulnerable nature of witness, however. We should not simply identify “the witness” as “bleeding wound.” Thus, the witness is only a trace of witness. In other words, although inter-corporeal communication has a cognitive dimension, its cognitive nature can never dominate the flow or circulation of the sensation between the subject and the other because the sign of trace in the saying only signifies, does not rationalize. It signifies what cannot be conceptualized, namely, the witness of the subject.

According to Levinas, however, culture always turns the saying into ontological discourse, into the said. Indeed, Levinas does not completely reject ontological discourse; he only rejects the domination and absolutization of the ontological discourse. Peperzak says, “Levinas explicitly recognizes the positive and necessary aspects of the practical and theoretical totalizations produced by all people in every civilization. More than once he insisted that a systematic totality is indispensable for human practice and theory; what he fights against is not totality as such, but rather its absolutization: totality cannot be the ultimate.”<sup>145</sup>

To fight against the said, a systematic totality, one needs to reduce the said to the saying. Levinas says that we should disturb the said through the saying in order to turn

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<sup>145</sup> Adriaan Peperzak, *Beyond*, p. 11.

any inter-subjective communication into an ethical communication: “it is the ethical interruption of essence that energizes the reduction.... To enter into being and truth is to enter into the said; being is inseparable from its meaning! It is spoken. It is in the logos. But the reduction is reduction of the said to the saying beyond the logos, beyond being and non-being, beyond essence, beyond true and non-true. It is the reduction to signification, to the one-for-the-other involved in responsibility..., to the locus or non-lieu, locus and non-lieu, the utopia, of the human. It is the reduction ... to its diachrony, which ... being can not eternalize.”<sup>146</sup> Reducing the said to the saying is to reduce all the disembodied relationships mediated by rationality and concept to an embodied relationship mediated by sensation.

In sum, Levinas privileges the saying over the said because the former rests on an inter-subjective bodily communication. Speaking to the other differs from reducing the other to the noema through intentionality. The latter enables the subject to have an epistemological, theoretical and technical character that can reduce the other to a theme or image. This is unethical, for Levinas, because it discourages the subject from disclosing his or her life towards the other. This destroys the most important condition for building up an embodied ethical relation between the subject and the other. Moreover,

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<sup>146</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, pp. 44-5.

Levinas shows us that without the aid of any external linguistic systems, one's body, bodily sensation and bodily exposure can generate an ethical meaning that transgresses various kinds of boundaries. In other words, the body per se is a signifying ethical body that can facilitate an ethical communication between subject and other.

### **2.3. The Passive Structure of the Ethical Subject**

Levinas's philosophy is not only a philosophy of the other but also a philosophy of subjectivity. After showing the inter-subjective dimension of Levinas' philosophy, this subsection will highlight the structure of the Levinasian subject. Unlike the Cartesian or Husserlian active cognitive subject who can treat the other as his or her object of apprehension, Levinas' ethical subject, who is already subordinated to the other in proximity, is simply a "passive subject." Critchley states it clearly: for Levinas, "the relation to the other lives on as an imprint in the subject to which it responds but which it cannot comprehend. That is, there is something at the heart of me, that arguably makes me the 'me' that I am, but which is quite opaque to me."<sup>147</sup> The Levinasian ethical subject is passive because its subjectivity is pre-formed or pre-determined by the non-I (the other). That is to say, the other, not the subject, determines the "content" of the subject's identity.

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<sup>147</sup> Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, p. 62.

Levinas asserts the importance of the passivity of the subject because he wants to counteract the active and manipulative nature of the rational subject that fails to recognize the ethical potentiality of the passive subject. In fact, the Western philosophical tradition, which has a strong metaphysical desire to search for the order of things, never “knows” passivity. Levinas says, “Western philosophy ... remains faithful to the order of things and does not know the absolute passivity, beneath the level of activity and passivity, which is contributed by the idea of creation. Philosophers have always wished to think of creation in ontological terms, that is, in function of a preexisting and indestructible matter.”<sup>148</sup> For Levinas, passivity is the primordial mode of subjectivity prior to intentionality and will. Levinas affirms the passivity of the subject in *Otherwise than Being* in order to distinguish prevoluntary, previrtuous, preconscious and pre-moral “passivity” from the constellation of free will, choice, consent, or denial, and in this sense, of autonomy and heteronomy.<sup>149</sup>

Passivity does not mean merely that the subject gives up his or her own right before the other or fails to control the other; rather it primarily refers to a predestined attachment to the other. Levinas says that “the oneself cannot form itself; it is already formed with absolute passivity... This passivity is that of an attachment that has already been made, as

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<sup>148</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 110.

something irreversibly past, prior to all memory and all recall.”<sup>150</sup> In other words, passivity refers to the other’s obsessive attachment to the subject’s life that is prior to the subject’s consciousness. The subject cannot reject such an obsessive attachment.

Thus, passivity, for Levinas, also refers to the powerlessness of the subject before the other’s irresistible ethical command. Since proximity is mediated by bodily sensibility, not by consciousness, the immediacy of sensibility makes the subject passively and powerlessly respond to the suffering other without any deliberation: “In the exposure to wounds and outrages, in the feeling proper to responsibility, the oneself is provoked as irreplaceable, as devoted to the others, without being able to resign, and thus as incarnated in order to offer itself, to suffer and to give. It is thus one and unique, in passivity from the start, having nothing at its disposal that would enable it to not yield to the provocation.”<sup>151</sup> The passivity of the subject is reinforced in his or her bodily exposure to wounds and outrages that makes the subject incapable of resigning or escaping from the other. For Levinas, the body is neither “obstacle” nor “tomb”, which is what Plato and some rationalists such as Descartes think; rather the body is an important condition for the incarnation of the other’s life in the subject’s life: “The body is neither

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<sup>149</sup> Adriaan Peperzak, *Beyond*, p. 76.

<sup>150</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 104.

<sup>151</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 105.

an obstacle opposed to the soul, nor a tomb that imprisons it, but that by which the self is susceptibility itself. Incarnation is an extreme passivity; to be exposed to sickness, suffering, death, is to be exposed to compassion, and, as a self, to the gift that costs.”<sup>152</sup> Here, incarnation does not simply mean an “intimate relationship ” between subject and other; rather it refers to a compassionate intercorporeal relationship.

Levinas’ passive and powerless subject is not a “coward subject” who is indifferent to the injustice of the other or the suffering of the world. Paradoxically, it is passivity that makes the subject become ethical. Thus, “passivity” is a keyword for us to characterize the basic structure of Levinas’ ethical subject. In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas employs various metaphors such as “substitution”, “hostage”, “persecuted” or “obsessed” to illustrate the passive structure of the ethical subject. As Peperzak says, “the structure of subjectivity is extensively analyzed in chapter 4 of *Otherwise than Being*. The central word there is ‘substitution’, but a host of other expressions clarify, interpret, or deepen its meaning: to be human is to be ‘the-one-for-the-Other,’ a hostage, a mother, obsessed, persecuted, etc.”<sup>153</sup> The following subsections will further explore the passive character of Levinas’ ethical subject.

### **2.3.1. The Guilt Structure of the Subject**

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<sup>152</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 195.

According to Levinas, the subject has to respond to the suffering of the other in proximity, but the subject's ethical response is never "enough" for the other because of the asymmetrical relationship between subject and other. An "unlimited responsibility" or "infinite responsibility" makes the ethical subject always "the accused subject":

"Obsessed with responsibilities which did not arise in decisions taken by a subject 'contemplating freely,' consequently accused in its innocence, subjectivity in itself is being thrown back on oneself. This means concretely: accused of what the others do or suffer, or responsible for what they do or suffer. The uniqueness of the self is the very fact of bearing the fault of another. In responsibility for another subjectivity is only this unlimited passivity of an accusative which does not issue out of a declension it would have undergone starting with the nominative. This accusation can be reduced to the passivity of the self only as a persecution, but a persecution that turns into an expiation. Without persecution the ego raises its head and covers over the self. Everything is from the start in the accusative."<sup>154</sup>

For Levinas, the uniqueness of the ethical subject is not formed by his or her moral

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<sup>153</sup> Adriaan Peperzak, *Beyond*, p. 108.

achievement, but by his or her fault. In particular, the Levinasian subject is accused that he or she always fails to take responsibility for the other or gives an inadequate care for the suffering other. Thus, the ethical subject has a “guilt sense,” because “bearing the fault of another” is the “destiny” of the subject. Of course, this does not mean that it is impossible for the passive subject to reject or to disagree with the other. But as Peperzak says, for Levinas, if the subject wants to reject the other, he or she is also against his or her ethical being: “ my being for-the-other, my being responsible, a hostage and a substitute, does not wait for my consent to make me fulfill this responsibility. I am not capable of preventing this transcendence; if I tried, I would at the same time be involved in destroying my being what I always already am.”<sup>155</sup>

Persecution, for Levinas, finally “turns into an expiation.” Taking responsibility for the other is not a “charity”, in which the subject attempts to show or testify his or her righteousness and generosity to the other through caring for the other. Rather it is a religious sacrifice. Jeffrey L. Kosky says, “Expiation is not an act that an I, after conscious deliberation, chooses to do.... Rather, expiation befalls me from the other; and in its befalling me, I am myself--as if I, the I, were a hostage. I am myself in my being an expiation for others without my willing it. I am myself in my being sacrificed for others

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<sup>154</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 112.

without this happening on my own initiative.”<sup>156</sup> For Levinas, if offering one’s life were assumed by its own generosity,<sup>157</sup> it would be an egoist or self-righteous offering.

Thus, for Levinas, understanding the ethical subject as the “persecuted subject” is necessary to defeat the egoist mentality of the subject: “In obsession the accusation effected by categories turns into an absolute accusative in which the ego proper to free consciousness is caught up. It is an accusation without foundation, to be sure, prior to any movement of the will, an obsessional and persecuting accusation. It strips the ego of its pride and the dominating imperialism characteristic of it.”<sup>158</sup> A subject’s being persecuted or accused by the other denies the manipulative character of the subject. This not only urges the subject to be liable for the other but also strips the pride and the imperialist character of the subject.

The infinite ethical demand of the other undermines the competence of the imperialist and egoist subject because the subject finds that his or her responsibility for the other is “unlimited.” In particular, in persecution, the subject finds that the “debt” of the other is already incarnated in his or her life. Thus, the subject’s freedom and freewill are restricted and limited by the persecution of the other. The other assigns the

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<sup>155</sup> Adriaan Peperzak, *Beyond*, p. 76.

<sup>156</sup> Jeffrey L. Kosky, *Levinas and The Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 154.

<sup>157</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 54.

<sup>158</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 110.

responsibility to the subject without first asking for his or her permission. As Gibbs says, for Levinas, if one in persecution has found that one is liable for what is not only contrary to one's will but what destroys one's will, then one finds the element of responsibility that is only a being for the other and cannot be for itself: "the assignment of responsibility, the ethical need to respond is not chosen or assumed, but happens to me, making me into a me. Suffering is not invited by an act of will (without making the *act* intervene), but in undergoing it is accepted or asked for without attention."<sup>159</sup> Since the assignment of responsibility just happens to the subject, the unpredictability of responsibility further undermines the manipulative character of the subject.

In sum, a righteous subject, for Levinas, is not a subject free from persecution; rather the more righteous I am, the more guilty I am: "The more I return to myself, the more I divest myself, under the traumatic effect of persecution, of my freedom as a constituted, willful, imperialist subject, the more I discover myself to be responsible; the more just I am, the more guilty I am. I am 'in myself' through the others."<sup>160</sup> That is to say, a righteous subject is not a morally perfect subject or "saint"; rather the subject is always guilty of his or her "late or inadequate response" towards the other. Paradoxically, only such a sense of guilt can motivate the subject to become ethical. Thus, being

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<sup>159</sup> Robert Gibbs, *Why Ethics?*, p. 56.

persecuted by the other is a way of humbling oneself and giving up one's power through suffering for the other.

### **2.3.2 The Traumatic Structure of the Subject**

In addition to the guilt structure of the subject, Levinas' subject also has a traumatic structure. In order to respond to the ethical command of the other, the Levinasian subject has to expose himself to the other and substitute for the suffering other with his or her fragile body. Since the immediacy of the bodily communication between the subject and the other leaves no "room" for the subject to choose not to be wounded by the other, Levinas' subject becomes "defenseless": "In the exposure to wounds and outrages, in the feeling proper to responsibility, the oneself is provoked as irreplaceable, as devoted to the others, without being able to resign, and thus as incarnated in order to offer itself, to suffer and to give. It is thus one and unique."<sup>161</sup> The subject suffers in this exposure because he or she is being knotted with the other (the other's suffering bodily life is already incarnated in the subject's life), so that the subject can feel and experience what the other feels or experiences in the substitution.

In other words, the other brings a traumatic shock to the subject in proximity.

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<sup>160</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 112.

<sup>161</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 105.

Trauma is unpredictable; it is a psychological violence brought by the other to the subject. Accident always causes traumatic neurosis in the subject, because the subject is not ready to face the suffering experience or even death brought by the unpredictable accident. This turns the subject's organized world into a disorganized and chaotic world. Thus, trauma is a harsh attack on the subject's ego, because it always shocks the subject without warning.

For the subject, meeting with the other is a traumatic experience. The subject never predicts and knows when the traumatic other will interrupt him or her with an unexpected traumatic experience. Since the traumatic command comes suddenly to the subject, it drastically shocks the subject. And such a traumatic shock turns Levinas' subject into a traumatic subject. Critchley says, "for Levinas, the ethical demand is a traumatic demand, it is something that comes from outside the subject, from a heteronomous source, but which leaves its imprint within the subject. At its heart, the ethical subject is marked by an experience of hetero-affectivity. In other words, the inside of my inside is something outside, the core of my subjectivity is exposed to otherness."<sup>162</sup> Since the traumatic experience of the other not only shocks the subject but also embraces the subject's life, the trauma has divided the subject. Thus, to a certain extent, Levinas' subject is also a split subject, because his or her core is already divided by the ethical demand of the other

in his or her exposure to the other. The subject's ego is shaken by the overwhelming trauma. Yet, paradoxically, the ethical identity of the subject is re-formed in such a "destructive split." As Critchley says, "the ethical subject is defined by the approval of a traumatic heteronomous demand at its heart. But, importantly, the subject is also *divided* by this demand, it is constitutively *split* between itself and a demand that it cannot meet, but which is that by virtue of which it becomes a subject."<sup>163</sup> In other words, Levinas' subject is formed in a "destructive construction" brought by his or her bodily exposure to the other.

Furthermore, since no one can replace the subject's ethical position to suffer for the other, this intensifies his or her degree of suffering in the trauma. But such an irreplaceable character of the subject also marks the uniqueness of the subject. By uniqueness, Levinas refers to "the impossibility of slipping away and being replaced.... The uniqueness of the chosen one or required one, who is not a chooser, is a passivity not being converted into spontaneity. This uniqueness not assumed, not subsumed, is traumatic; it is an election in persecution."<sup>164</sup> For Levinas, what characterizes the unique identity of the subject is not knowledge or virtue, but the suffering and traumatic

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<sup>162</sup> Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, p. 61.

<sup>163</sup> Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, pp. 62-3.

<sup>164</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 56.

experience of the subject: “To be oneself, otherwise than being, to be dis-interested, is to bear the wretchedness and bankruptcy of the other.”<sup>165</sup> Interestingly, the subject per se cannot determine his or her uniqueness; rather it is the persecuting other who determines the uniqueness of the subject.

In fact, we can see that the later Levinas’ notion of the subject of suffering is a response to his earlier notion of the subject of enjoyment. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas treats enjoyment as the basic concern of the subject. The subject is an egoist being whose only concern is his or her own “happiness” and “self-interest.” The subject must first take care of his or her self; caring for the other is never the subject’s first priority. Now Levinas stresses that the presence of the suffering other must divert the subject from the care of the self to the care of the other. Moreover, caring for the other is never enjoyable; rather it is painful since it conflicts with the basic living mode of the subject (enjoyment). Although both enjoyment and suffering are modes of sensation, only the sensibility of suffering, for Levinas, can make possible a truly ethical subject: “The subjectivity of subjection of the self is the suffering of suffering, the ultimate offering oneself, or suffering in the offering of oneself. Subjectivity is vulnerability, is sensibility.”<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 117.

<sup>166</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 54.

For Levinas, pain is not simply a negative feeling or an emotional damage; rather it is “a pure deficit, an increase of debt in a subject that would be for itself.” More important, “pain comes to disturb an enjoyment in its very isolation,” “tears me from myself.” and “penetrates into the very heart of the for-oneself that beats in enjoyment.”<sup>167</sup> Pain is not simply an interruption, but an ethical interruption. The more pain one feels, the more debt one has. In pain, the subject senses the urge of responsibility. In particular, pain makes one give one’s life in proximity, like a mother who nurtures and protects her fragile baby in parenting. To give, for Levinas, is proximity itself, in which the subject “is to take the bread out of one’s mouth, to nourish the hunger of another with one’s own fasting.”<sup>168</sup>

In other words, pain has an ethical intentional character that not only interrupts the subject’s self-centered life but also “diverts” the subject from a mode of enjoyment to a mode of suffering, in which the subject can sense the suffering of the other. Thus, pain enriches the bodily life of the subject. Since the subject in enjoyment is always the separated subject detaching from the other and indifferent to the other, an ethical sensibility can help re-unite the body of the separated subject with the body of the other. But “unity” is neither an abstract conceptual unity such as synthesis nor a metaphysical unity such as ontology. Rather it is a corporeal unity that mingles two concrete bodies

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<sup>167</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 56.

mediated through the physical bodily pain. As Levinas says, it is the corporeality that unites “for the other,” “despite oneself,” “the pain of labor in the patience of ageing” and “the duty to give to the other.”<sup>169</sup> In other words, unity, for Levinas, is a bodily unity, which is mediated by how the subject feels, responds and acts for the pain of another suffering body.

In sum, while Levinas rejects the pleasure as an essential sensual mode to make one become ethical in *Totality and Infinity*, he affirms the pain as an essential sensual model in *Otherwise than Being*. Pain, for Levinas, is an ethical sensation that not only makes one sense the other’s suffering, but also arouses one’s ethical responsibility towards the other.

#### **D. Conclusion**

This chapter has argued that, while Levinas criticizes rationalism and essentialism, his anti-essentialism and anti-rationalism do not eliminate an ethical ground for defending the dignity of human beings. In fact, Levinas’ anti-foundational critique of the ontological discourse of human being does not reject the value of human beings or subjects; rather it “deconstructs” a rational or totalizing apprehension of human beings that destroys the alterity and infinity of human beings. More important, after “deconstructing” the rational

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<sup>168</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 56.

construction of subjectivity, Levinas reconstructs a new ethical embodied subject for whom sensation, not consciousness, is a primordial way to connect with the other. Since such a new ethical embodied subject no longer masters the other through consciousness or intentionality, he or she can directly sense the suffering of the other and build up an ethical relationship with the other. Furthermore, such an ethical embodied subject, who is totally passive and vulnerable in his or her response to the ethical demand of the other, can also “deconstruct” the manipulative rational subject.

In other words, the subject, for Levinas, is not ethical in itself. The subject cannot become ethical either through reasoning or exercise; rather the intervention of the other makes the subject ethical. Neither universal law nor deliberation motivates any ethical actions; rather it is the infinite other that motivates the subject to take an ethical action. But Levinas’ ethics is not simply about the other’s ethical demand/command; rather it is also about an intersubjective embodied relationship where the subject and other’s bodies are unconditionally exposed for each other. And it is this risky exposure of bodily life that makes possible an ethical embodied subject and diverts the subject from a self-centered life to an other-centered life. In the saying, a bodily exposure, Levinas further shows that the body per se, which does not need the aid of any external linguistic systems, also has

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<sup>169</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 155.

ethical meaning. In other words, the body is not a culturally textual body; rather its vitality can generate meaning by itself. Thus, for Levinas, the other, the physical body and bodily sensation are the essential conditions for building up a truly ethical life and ethical subjectivity.

For Levinas, care of the self cannot lead to care of the other. The subject neither becomes ethical by oneself nor becomes righteous through handling different techniques of the self. In contrast, it is the intervention of the other that makes the subject ethical and righteous. It is the care of the other that ultimately generates a new subject's life. This makes Levinas' ethics differ from Foucault's ethics.

Although Foucault and Levinas have different directions and understandings of being ethical, both of them assert the importance of the body as the essential condition to rebuild an ethical life and ethical subjectivity after the critique of rationalism and modernity. Both of them rediscover the ethical potentiality of the body, which they think is repressed by Western rationalism. Furthermore, both Foucault and Levinas agree that ethics is not about rule-making or rule-obedience; rather it is about a fundamental relationship between the subject and the other. While both of them criticize the legalistic and rational nature of morality, their critiques do not deny ethics, nor do they give up looking for an alternative model of being ethical. In the next chapter, I will examine the

distinctions and commonalities between Foucault and Levinas' embodied ethics and embodied subjectivity, in order to see how they can enrich each other.