

Article on Dwelling and Habitation

To retreat, in order to receive. Levinas' take on dwelling, the separated self and welcoming the other

By Maja Berseneva, MA Philosophy

Chez soi - at home with oneself

What is a self, what is a home for someone? Moreover, who is the other outside my home? These are some questions Emmanuel Levinas must have been asking himself while working on his texts, which, we could broadly summarize, were dedicated to the ethical encounter between individuals. Inasmuch as Levinas' thought proceeds from phenomenological self-reflection towards an original account of ethics, his mission develops into a profound analysis of otherness. In fact, the driving force in Levinas' *oeuvre* can be summed up in the words the other¹ and alterity. These are accounts by no means easy to access. In his project, Levinas speaks about how alterity needs to be approached and why the relationship with the individual being is the true structure of ethics. Levinas locates his philosophical project in opposition to the idea of the all-encompassing Being as it was central to Heidegger. A special attention was dedicated to the latter's philosophy of existence, in which the participation in being counts for everything, while deviation from the norm and alterity do not have a place. Levinas critically regarded Heidegger's Being as a 'general utterance of the meaning of being [...] a notion without content about which nothing is said'.² The reduction of the 'human adventure'³ and thus reduction of individual meaning to the 'intrigue of being as being'⁴ was an anathema to the French Jewish thinker, as he points out in one of his last lectures on the Sorbonne in 1976, as well as from the onset of his *oeuvre*.

¹ In French, there are at least two different meanings of the other. I will provide two that are central for Levinas' work and appear in the original version. The first, *autrui* – refers to a human other. The second, *l'autre*, can refer to any sort of other, thing or human. In Levinas' *oeuvre*, both words are used and both are alternately written sometimes in small letters and sometimes capitalized. The discussion which system stands behind the changes still goes on among scholars. I cautiously assume that Levinas capitalized the 'Other' when he wanted to emphasize the absoluteness of the other, as the passage in *Totality and Infinity* an *Essay on Exteriority* (henceforth referred to as *TI*) 197 suggests: 'But the other absolutely other – the Other – does not limit the freedom of the same [...]'. I will refer to the other in small letters - for the reason of consistency and in order to avoid mistakes since it is not up to me to decide when to use a capital letter.

² See *Being in the Principle of War*, video interview by Catherine Chalier, section one of the series titled *Penser Aujourd'hui: Emmanuel Levinas*, 1991.

³ Levinas mentions 'human adventure of the approach of the other' in *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, 148 (in the following referred to as *OB*).

⁴ Levinas, *God, Death and Time*, 63.

On several occasions, the author accentuates that alterity is something which remains outside.⁵ What he means is that the relationship established with the other escapes classification and the order of being. He refers to it also as to the relationship with infinity, or with divinity. Levinas denounced ‘Greek’ philosophy for having Being as its subject in an all-inclusive sense. He accused it of striving for a unity of values and thought, and blamed it for a disregard of all that was otherwise. Consequently, Levinas’ critique ranges up to the Greek metaphysics. According to his review, metaphysics universally claims to know what it means, to be, as much as what it means to possess knowledge. Every notion that points towards totality, unity and inclusiveness, is a *bête noire* for the philosopher, and he reflects upon it as the primacy of the same.⁶ For instance, we find a reference to such primacy of the same in the Greek philosophical tradition where Levinas points out that Socrates’ teaching would not receive anything from the other.⁷ For Socrates, the subject is in full possession of what come to it from the outside. No foreign influence can truly shake it. Levinas observes that for the Greeks, freedom is fundamentally translated as reason – a reason that resides exclusively within the subject, which is characterized by ‘permanence in the same’.⁸ According to his protest against the claim to totality in the ‘traditional’ western philosophy, individuals - or as he occasionally refers to them, existents – are losing their unique value, because they end up being reduced to the same. Put another way, the other, or otherness is not visible, due to being annexed by an anonymous totality. Thus, Levinas founds his philosophy on the opposition to ontology and calls *ethics* what is now often referred to as ‘ethics as first philosophy’. The term ‘first philosophy’ was traditionally applied to metaphysics or theology, since these addressed the most basic human questions and were dedicated to the study of fundamentality of being. However, in Levinas’ sense, ethics is something that is not derivable from any metaphysics, nor from ontology. Ethics for him is summed up in the claim of the other upon the same, a claim that, as he defends, ultimately forms the fundament of all philosophy.

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas struggles to find an adequate description of the relation of the same with the other, which could satisfy two requirements. Firstly, the same and the other should not be united into a whole. Secondly, a relation between something limited (the same) and something unlimited (the other) should resemble a bond that is maintained and not cut. A paradox - a ‘non-binding bond’ - is required. Levinas finds that this type of ambiguous relationship - simultaneously together and apart, united and separated - is ‘[...] fixed in the situation described by Descartes in which the ‘I think’ maintains with the infinite it can nowise contain and from which it is separated a relation called ‘idea of infinity’.⁹ Bernasconi remarks the following: transcendence in Levinasian

⁵ See Bernasconi, Wood, *The Paradox of Morality*, 170 f. Scholars also emphasize that alterity is *not* difference. We read in this Levinas’ analysis: ‘There are these elements in all knowledge [savoir], all familiarity [connaissance], all comprehension; there is always the fact of making something one’s own. But there is something which remains outside, and that is alterity. Alterity is not at all the fact that there is a difference [...]’.

⁶ In the preface of *Totality and Infinity*, 26, Levinas opens the two categories of the other (l’autre) and the same (le même). Whereas the other stands for alterity as the basic category opposed to subjectivity in Levinasian ethics, the words the same (Fr., le même – translated into Engl. as same, identical), identity and the I signify a subject, a being that does not care (yet) about exteriority.

⁷ See TI 43.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid 48.

understanding is indeed meant to be total, but it does not imply that the subject is lost.¹⁰ On the contrary, the I is maintained in the transcendence. The self is open towards the world, but remains in touch with itself, or in Bernasconi's words, '[...] the I must remain at the point of departure and not follow the path of ecstasy'.¹¹ Ecstasy here is a reference to Levinas' earlier work *On Escape* [De l'évasion, 1935], where the self, repulsed by itself, seeks an existential way out and follows the need to look outside, to transcend.¹² Thus, Bernasconi refers to a self that does not need to melt into the other, to lose itself, but wants to remain intact. Remaining oneself is a requirement in the absolute sense. Only a self that is at least minimally maintained, is fit to enter the relation with the other, and only then alterity itself is a thinkable concept. We find this thought confirmed again in *Totality and Infinity*: 'The alterity [...] is possible only if the other is other with respect to a term whose essence is to remain at the point of departure [...] to be the same not relatively but absolutely.'¹³ We received here the first important clue to the position of the self in Levinas' thinking: the self is able to remain oneself and simultaneously, has a relationship with alterity.

But what is this point of departure and who is the self, viewed outside the relation to the other? Can the self even be viewed outside this relation? Can the self be detached from the other fully or partly, and if only partly - to which extent? Levinas' account of subjectivity is constructed as first coming into existence through alterity. Levinas says: 'Subjectivity realizes [...] impossible exigencies – the astonishing feat of containing more than it is possible to contain.'¹⁴ But in order to accomplish his project on alterity, he seeks to delimit the self that is *not* the other. We have mentioned previously what he means by this, namely that the subject holds the idea of infinity. Remarkably, infinity according to Levinas, does not first exist somewhere and then reveal itself to the subject, but it is produced 'as a positing of its idea in *me*'.¹⁵ But if the infinite reveals itself in me, it implies that to some extent I am detached, in my own right. I remain in one or more ways demarcated from the infinite – in this mode, I do not care about the other. Apparently, the subject here is someone sufficiently self-contained, but fitted with a paradoxical possibility to hold more than it can contain. How is this self-contained subject thinkable? Perhaps, it is conceivable as the negative of the other? No, since this would mean that it cannot claim its own ground, because something 'negative from' or 'opposite of' can be reduced to the entity it diverts from. On closer examination, Levinas realizes that separation cannot be based on a simple opposition to the other because this would make the other 'purely antithetical' in regard to the subject¹⁶ - while the other needs to remain other at all costs. Levinas' objection is that a pure negative is still integrateable into the total, and totality is

¹⁰ See Bernasconi, *No Exit*, 114.

¹¹ Bernasconi, *No Exit*, 110. The term ecstasy here should not be confused to Heidegger's notion of Ex-tase (from the Greek ekstasis). Ex-tase is a notion that addresses a Being, whose mode is a basic openness towards the world. More precisely, the Heideggerian notion is a description of how Dasein 'stands out' in the temporality of care (Sorge), and how it is being 'thrown' out of a past and 'projecting' itself toward a future.

¹² See Levinas, *On Escape*, 53 f.

¹³ TI 36.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁶ Cf. TI 53.

precisely what needs to be avoided in his whole project. Thus, he postulates that the ‘[...] separation ‘of the I in regard to the other must result from a positive movement.’¹⁷

Developing the idea from here, Levinas says that the positive movement of subjectivity is expressed in the state of at home with itself (*chez soi*).¹⁸ Being at home with itself demarcates a self from everything external and provides identification. In seeking to relate to oneself, identity splits into two parts, since the point of relation or the counterpart of the I is supposed to be something else than the I itself. Here, we may be reminded of the Aristotelian *A is A* formalism for identity. However, Levinas distances his position from such formalism and its implication that implies an ‘abstract representation of self by self’.¹⁹ Neither does the self for him face its own mental representation. Rather, in the sense of phenomenological tradition, the self faces the world. The author admits that the world is ‘from the first other’,²⁰ but the I within this world is nevertheless autochthonous or ‘home-grown’.²¹ On the first pages of *Totality and Infinity*, we read about a self as someone who exists, as it were, for herself. In a paradox to the constitution of the self as pure response, as answer, and absolute responsibility for the stranger, Levinas envisions a primary relation of the duo self and world, where the world is not an enemy but offers the subject the comfort of a safe place, ‘a site (*lieu*) and a home (*maison*)’.²² By writing *home* without quotation marks, Levinas apparently imagines an original peaceful scenario. He insists that the disturbance-free union of subject and world is the initial cell, from which the cycle of the self arises. He supports this image by saying that: ‘[...] the union of the terms maintains separation in an eminent sense. The being that is in relation absolves itself from the relation, is absolute within relationship [...] this interiority will appear as a presence at home with oneself, which means inhabitation [...].’²³ Levinas regards the being as standing in a ‘true and primordial relation’,²⁴ in a sojourn with the world, as he expresses it. Importantly, a sojourn for him is not a symbiosis where two organisms would melt, but a peaceful, joyful co-existence. In this situation, he imagines the self as yet undisturbed by the other. By picturing this interiority along with him, we arrive at a sort of thinkable independency, where the self maintains itself stand-alone. The positive movement of the self is put straight in the following passage: ‘[the self – M.B.] is accomplished by holding *oneself* up [*se tenant*], it is implanted in itself as a body and it keeps itself [*se tient*] in its interiority, in its

¹⁷ Ibid., 53.

¹⁸ Ibid., 33. The translator Alphonso Lingis adds a foot note about the English translation of *chez soi* that for Levinas apparently corresponds with the Hegelian *bei sich*. Lingis admits that with the English translation ‘at home with oneself’ he is forced to make a ‘rather clumsy choice’, since Levinas wants to express ‘the original and concrete form in which an existent comes to exist ‘for itself’.

¹⁹ TI 37.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Here, we come across the Levinasian twist from the hostile world which is from the beginning ‘other’ toward the subject, but still the subject finds quietness, joy and the safety (the metaphor of the home suggests all these things) of its origin inside it. Perhaps Levinas was thinking about a parents’ home, where a child experiences original belonging, finds its first joys and can count on nourishment, however the same home is of course, other than the child, other people inhabit it, her parents who have a life on their own inaccessible to her. Their foreignness will sooner or later disturb the child, but nevertheless the home where it was nourished and raised remains the native home. I will not go deeper into the paradox and instead, try to make as clear as possible how I think Levinas was imagining this stage of the self – the state of *chez soi*.

²² TI 37.

²³ Ibid 110.

²⁴ Ibid 37.

home. It thus accomplishes separation positively, without being reducible to a negation of the being from which it separates.’²⁵ In this passage, Levinas regards the self as someone who recognizes itself as embedded in the world, as undisturbed, perhaps as ‘arrived’. It is autonomous because it is holding *oneself up*.

Enjoyment and solitude

There is another important aspect to ‘being at home with oneself’ - enjoyment. Unlike an existentialist would claim, in Levinas’ view, I do not originally and initially find myself thrown in the world, in a situation of struggle from where I am immediately required to start creating meaning for my life. In his philosophy, I am ‘allowed’ to enjoy, to be nourished by the world, and to dwell.²⁶ To dwell means to live, to reside, to linger, to recollect, remain, perhaps to stop for a moment to reflect. Dwelling on the other hand, signifies being within home, within refuge. Levinas uses the verb to dwell frequently when he wants to point out the process where he self is enabled to effect a retreat. Loughnan points out that Levinas moves between using the term both as space and process, and act and thought.²⁷ She rightly says that as space, dwelling offers someone shelter from the elements, and a refuge from the horror of the ‘there is’, ‘the horror of an interminable existence’²⁸ It is as process, as to ‘continue for a time in a place’, to ‘reside’ or, to ponder, consider and dwelling as both the action to dwell, as well as ‘habitation, a place of residence’ where dwelling as a notion unfolds its power.²⁹

However, we also need to ask ourselves what role has the body³⁰ in the Levinasian account of self. In a recorded interview, Levinas remarks that he cannot comment on angels (implying that angels are not embodied but pure spirits), because he does not see how they could give anything to one another or how they could help one another.³¹ Here, the author has probably practical help and the simple, worldly services in mind, such as providing shelter, and providing food. Only incarnated creatures, not spirits, are initially in need of these things. One indicator for body being central for Levinas is that he chooses the human face as one of his decisive notions. This choice indicates that the body has a pivotal status

²⁵ Ibid 299.

²⁶ See TI 112.

²⁷ See Loughnan, 3.

²⁸ See Ibid.

²⁹ See Ibid.

³⁰ Levinas refers to the body as flesh, as does Merleau-Ponty, e.g. in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1964), transl. by Colin Smith, Routledge, London, New York, 2005. Addressing the body in the phenomenological context means to recognize the difference between the physical body and the lived body. In the German language, this difference can be made with *Körper*, which is the organic body, regarded in its functionality and physicality and ultimately, viewed as an object, versus *Leib* on the other hand – the flesh or lived body. Flesh is intentionally directed towards the things of the external world and moreover, distinguishes itself through its double-nature: it is simultaneously subject and object.

³¹ Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 195.

in his ethical account, and consequently in his understanding of subjectivity and selfhood. It is the body that ‘transports’ the face (*visage*) of the other to me. In an interview, he emphasizes the materiality, the expressiveness of the flesh of the other as the ethical partner: ‘the face, the expressive in the Other ordains me’.³² As Bernhard Waldenfels correctly realizes, the face notion in Levinas’ ethics involves bodily expression as a whole: ‘ [the face] constitutes the central zone of the body where our eyes and our mouth are located and the play of features takes place [...] the face is understood not simply as something present, but as the other’s corporeal self-presence [...]’.³³ ‘It is the other as such and not some aspect of him or her that is condensed in the face. So the whole body expresses, our hands and shoulders do it as well as our face taken in its narrow sense.’³⁴ Waldenfels’ observation makes clear how for Levinas, the materiality of the body is a wholesome lively expression. The body is not a medium that would reveal a person beneath it, but is personhood itself. We can say that every body part ‘talks’ about and ‘presents’ someone as a wholesome somebody.

For Levinas, the body is the means through which we assist the other, receive the other, and encounter the other. The incarnation of human subjectivity has strongly occupied Levinas’ thoughts as he insisted that thinking of subjectivity as a logical formalism is wrong. His image of the incarnated self that has a relation to and a stand point in the world is sharply distinct from any idealistic representation of a self. He stresses that because a body is mine and located *here*, I can be sure that I am myself, and that I am ‘immanence in the world’.³⁵ Already elemental things such as my position and the fact of ‘standing’ or ‘raising myself from the ground’ are considered by him as ‘patterns of the primary relation with myself, of my coincidence with myself [...]’.³⁶ Hence, we could begin to contemplate on the body by imagining ‘standing’ individuals. In order to be extended in the world, standing individuals necessarily are demarcated one from another by incarnation; by being flesh that is individually ‘held together’ by skin. It is exclusively one individual in this skin, not to be replaced by someone else.

Now, by *dwelling* in my body, in constant contact with it, I maintain myself, I enjoy food, play, movement. Very plausibly, Levinas explains how the initially foreign elements of the world transform when I internalize them: he says that I ‘live from’ [*vivre de* – this expression is literally taken, closer to *living on*]³⁷ the many material things that are not me, that serve me and my well-being and are objects of enjoyment. He also refers to them broadly as to energy: ‘[...] energy, that is other, becomes in enjoyment my own energy, my strength, *me*.’³⁸ The needs articulate me as me, since I relate to material goods in the world

³² Ibid.

³³ Waldenfels, Levinas and the face of the other, 65.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ See TI 138.

³⁶ See *ibid*.

³⁷ TI 110.

³⁸ *Ibid*. 111.

that are not me. The notion of enjoyment makes sense precisely when we recall, for instance, how food can satisfy, how walking alone exposed to strong wind and rain can stimulate. It is true that often the world, in a perceived sense, ‘offers itself to me’ so I can walk, act, eat, enjoy, and change what I consider changeable. Levinas is convinced that the self can settle joyfully anywhere. This happens in moments of holding on, in flashes of happiness, when I am overcome by the sense that the world ‘belongs to me’.³⁹

Indeed, the enjoyment of worldly things is often an exclusively personal affair and it separates me from anyone else, since I do not share my sensations with others in an immediate sense. I am defined by this exclusively mine enjoyment; I am me when I carelessly feast on my own aliveness while walking in the rain. The movement of the self is, as it were, turned inwards, as the author illustrates: ‘Enjoyment is a withdrawal into oneself, an involution [...]’ and ‘It is precisely as ‘coiling’, as a movement towards oneself, that enjoyment comes into play.’⁴⁰ Environment and circumstances are serving me: ‘everything is at my disposal, even the stars, if I but reckon them, calculate the intermediaries and the means.’⁴¹ We do not (as is logical) experience the world’s opposition towards us, as the image of the foreign, external, unknown world would suggest. Rather, we ‘naturally’ (meaning, in the initial sojourn with the world) find numerous ways to being joyfully alive, to claim this and that ours. Consequently, the personally experienced enjoyment separates every one of us and enforces independence. This is precisely the way to think how ‘the being absolves itself’ from the relation, how it remains itself while bonded to someone else.

In an insightful passage, Levinas adds that solitude is also something that I can claim as mine only.⁴² The critical presence of the other will not take my solitude away. Perhaps, the author considers here how people often feel lonely despite the presence of others, and how solitude amplifies in the middle of a crowd. In this context however, it is not rated as an unwanted life experience. On the contrary, even solitude is enjoyed. I enjoy it because I broke with totality radically. I am able to feel myself, being split off from the mass of totality. The joyful, self-content, separated state of the self in Levinas’ analysis characterizes a self-related individual, who is characterized by self-sufficiency, happiness, enjoyment and yes - egoism. However, we do well to regard ignorance and egoism not as a disturbance of Levinas’ ethics of never-ending responsibility for everyone. Instead, Levinas tells us that happiness (among enjoyment and egoism) is something like a necessary mode because the desire for the other is embedded into it, and depends on it as source: ‘In separation – which is produced in the psychism of enjoyment, in egoism, in happiness, where the I identifies itself – the I is ignorant of the Other. But the Desire for

³⁹ Ibid. 37. Perhaps Levinas developed the notion of enjoyment out of a felt relief in society, when years of suppression, war and genocide were finally over (*Totality and Infinity* was published 1961).

⁴⁰ TI 118.

⁴¹ Ibid 37.

⁴² See *ibid* 119.

the other, above, happiness, requires this happiness, this autonomy of the sensible in the world [...].⁴³

A crucial insight is provided by Dorothée Legrand, who rightly remarks on the Levinasian notion of separation that it is not a disrupted relation, but a resource that provides the base of connecting with the other as other.⁴⁴ What I referred to as a basic self, figures as a resource, or source from where I seek to connect. The resource functions as a quasi 'before'⁴⁵ of the encounter that later causes rupture in the 'fabric' of the self-satisfied being, and results into its shouldering responsibility for the one who caused the turbulence. The 'before' is the state of separation, where the self inhabits, dwells and is in the situation of *chez soi*. As separated I experience joy, as separated I get in contact with myself, I go through sadness, solitude, happiness - all exclusively for myself. These experiences rooted in solitude form a platform, a pre-requisite for recognizing and receiving the other. Inwardness, enjoyment are my possession. Crucially, I do not keep these possessions, but invest them. The construction of a separated self serves the other and it allows paying true attention to the other. Only as a separated being I am able to remain myself while *creating space* for someone who is not me. After having insisted that the subject is positively separated, Levinas immediately concludes 'But thus precisely it can welcome that being [the being from whom the subject is separated, the other – M.B.]. The subject is a host.'⁴⁶ I paraphrase in accordance with this section: separatedness is an asset that enables me to react to the neighbour *as other*. From the mode of separatedness the subject is enabled to welcome the other being.

Separation and self-possession

We said that the separated subject, 'at home with herself', is characterized by self-referentiality as the ability to be inwards, to be with itself in a way that is private and intimate, without a witness. This would be the case for instance in the moment of falling asleep, or in the moment of tasting, appreciating a taste. For Levinas, in essence, the self as separated is characterized by the ability to enjoy. In order to enjoy for-itself, the ego 'switches' into a mode of independence of its environment. The figure of the separated self must be once again sharply distinguished from Heidegger's anonymous being, the Heideggerian totality, the *there is*. Levinas discredits these concepts in his take on subjectivity. In a totalizing concept, the *there is [il y a]* forbids a coinciding with oneself. Not only the other disappears within the total, but also the I vanishes, because any I is particular. In totality, there is 'horror, trembling and vertigo',⁴⁷ but nobody who would be

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ See interview lead by L. S. Gleissner with Dorothée Legrand, ENS Paris, 25.09.2019, et.al.

⁴⁵ The word choice 'before' is not an ideal one, since the subject is never really alone, nowhere before otherness. In order to remain within the Levinasian understanding of the ethical encounter, it remains valid that a specific other does not need to appear in front of me in order to 'activate' my response. Rather I am rather already living in some kind of alertness; my existence is a waiting for the 'ethical partner' to occur.

⁴⁶ TI 299.

⁴⁷ Ibid 143.

able to remain in a friendly, peaceful relation with herself, nor with another. In totality, there is no reflection about anything particular, but only one homogenous mass, whereas enjoyment and dwelling represent reflection of a subject upon itself.

In a way, the lonely subject raises itself above its surroundings. Levinas regards the body in its needy state as what makes us particular, what disentangles us from the ‘whole’ of the world. This detachment is accomplished by means of the needs a particular being starts having from the start of its existence as an infant. We said that the particular being *lives from* things that are not herself. This means that she emancipates, separates herself from the mass of the *given*, whilst she seeks shelter, food, clothes. Further on, Levinas ‘trusts’ that the subject will take care of herself in a self-referential way. She detaches from the world and utilizes herself as a source of reference. At this point, Levinas constructs the self through reference to material things that serve the satisfaction of corporeal needs: ‘To be cold, hungry, thirsty, naked, to seek shelter – all these dependencies with regard to the world, having become needs [...] constitute a being independent of the world, a veritable subject capable of ensuring the satisfaction of its needs which are recognized as material [...]. Needs are in my power; they constitute me as the same and not as dependent on the other. My body is not only a way for the subject to be reduced to slavery, to depend on what is not itself, but is also a way of possessing and of working, of having time, of overcoming the very alterity of what I have to live from. The body is the very self-possession [...].⁴⁸ Levinas concludes here that the body equals self-possession and his analysis of satisfying needs, enjoyment and *chez soi* set us *en route* for the understanding of the body’s importance for selfhood.⁴⁹ I consider the cited passage central for the topic of embodiment in Levinas’ work because here he explains how despite, or rather due to its needy nature, by overcoming the otherness around it, by ‘ejecting’ itself out of it, the body has a mode of being an autonomous self. On the one hand, the body is regarded as a prerequisite for heteronomy (see in the quote above - ‘a way for the subject to be reduced to slavery’). Due to dependence, and therefore to the heteronymous character of the body, it gets to experience hunger, cold etc. But at the same time, the body’s dependency is source of self-reliance, since it is the subject’s ‘task’ to find a way to satisfy its needs, to take care of itself (see in the quote above - ‘needs are in my power’). The subject will ‘fulfil its job’ brilliantly: it will possess, be busy with work, and have time for things other than work. Elsewhere, Levinas elaborates on labour as bodily self-possession,⁵⁰ and ‘having time’ is

⁴⁸ TI 117.

⁴⁹ I want to add here that the account of separation supports the view of life as non-dialectical. In this understanding, life is considered as coming out of itself. The tension between the subject as heteronymous and the enjoying, not-dependent self makes separation, enjoyment and body, challenging aspects of Levinas’ subjectivity approach. For further research, see to the notion of hypostasis (as a self reflexively related to itself) in Bettina Bergo’s lecture Levinas’s “Hypostasis”: Some Remarks on Its Meaning and Origins, held at Haverford College, Pennsylvania (printed version not citable, available only as draft).

⁵⁰ See TI 38, 41, 111 f. The notion of labour is suggestive for the notion of self-possession, if we imagine how fulfilling and satisfying especially physical work can be and how it provides a deeper relation with one’s own body.

doubtlessly meant as a pause from chores, relief from work, rest and contemplation of a self by itself.

This analysis has revealed that the reality of the body, where a being is able to exist for itself, it is the mode of separation⁵¹ while the body is quintessentially expressing self-possession. Levinas, with his emphasis on enjoyment and *chez soi* as modes of the for-itself, arrives at this conclusion. But can the satisfied self be considered in a temporal dimension, as the start of the 'self'? I claim that it is more complicated than that. Egoism should be seen as part of a *process*, as one of the stages through which the circuit of the self passes. To be sure, the difficulty persists: how to avoid thinking the positively separated subjectivity that has an inaccessible 'life on one's own', as a finalized concept? The Levinasian self does not rest in itself despite its positive beginning. Rather, it always searches for something that is foreign to it. Any foreign element that it finds does not let it rest. The self so shaped is by no means autonomous, as for example in the Fichtean sense of the I freely positing itself⁵² in a place *from* where the I refers to something else that is located outside its autonomous complexions. The piece that does not let the I rest, is the idea of infinity - produced inside the I - we addressed previously. Inasmuch as infinity is entailed in the self, the self is always exposed, suspended and in a precarious situation. It relates first and foremost to alterity instead of claiming a firm ground as its own. This is why, in order to alleviate its striking uncertainty, the self is in its core a desiring self, someone who reaches and walks towards something other than itself. The 'walk' towards the other is an unalterable *modus existendi* of the self. Approached from this angle, egoism is a context, even a requirement for the development of the desire for the other [*le Desir d'autrui*].⁵³ In a minimal sense, there needs to be *someone* who actually walks towards the other.

Thus, in its temporary dimension, the separated self is someone who expects, the state of waiting expressed as longing, as desire. It is a waiting of someone who expects to be 'called into question'⁵⁴ and to 'receive beyond its own capacity'.⁵⁵ The waiting, which determines the subject, is the opening we referred to previously when speaking about the idea of the infinite. The subject does not know who or what it is waiting for, but the 'door' is kept ajar, at all times. It is perhaps fitting to use the image that the self considers itself settled, whereas it is not. The subject is waiting to be stirred up and troubled by someone else. It is not complete and settled because the full sense of subjectivity is accomplished only after the entering into conjunction with someone who affects, who causes an upheaval. Subjectivity is regarded by Levinas as an 'anarchic being affected'⁵⁶ as Basterrea remarks.

⁵¹ See TI 168.

⁵² For Fichte's idea of the self that posits itself, and reflects upon itself, see for example in: *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre - Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre*, Johann Gottlieb Fichtes sämtliche Werke. Band 1, Berlin 1845/1846.

⁵³ See TI 43

⁵⁴ See *ibid.*

⁵⁵ See *ibid.* 51.

⁵⁶ Basterrea, *The subject of Freedom*, 112.

It is simultaneously original, native, anarchic *and* affected by otherness. The anarchic being is essentially in the state of an impersonal waiting. I am expecting someone I do not know, but who *will* have a face. An early self, wrapped into the world as its native origin, is happily dwelling with itself, undisturbed. In this state of exclusive existence for itself, the I pulsates and experiences life as love of life,⁵⁷ and Levinas hurries to specify that the state of separation is not to be mistaken for a psychological state among others. Rather, separation has the form of psychism, in the sense of some kind of inner life.

Steven Crowell identifies the separated being in *Totality and Infinity* as dwelling in an ‘elemental’ world [...], one that possesses a ‘mythical format’.⁵⁸ He remarks that by beginning with separation, Levinas seeks to identify an experience in which the other breaks in upon a certain self-sufficiency or autarchy. I agree at this point, that the breaking in, the unexpected arrival is precisely what Levinas has in mind when he speaks about the disturbance, the rupture that the other causes. The sudden arrival as unexpected advent is a feature that fundamentally characterizes the other. Crowell derives from this, that alterity is established as that which radically transcends autarchy.⁵⁹ He explicates rightly that phenomenological exteriority possessed by the other can only be characterized if there is a separated being to perceive, or encounter this exteriority. Considering how dubious the construct of a separated self might seem to the Levinas reader, Crowell decides that separatedness does not come under abstraction, but has the dimension of all experience.⁶⁰ This seems plausible, taking into the account what I said before about the positive movement, and the self in waiting: separatedness as much as dwelling can be regarded as a sort of a permanent mode of ‘preparation’ for the other to ‘arrive’. The intimacy of the subject’s inner life will act as a pre-requirement for the transcendent encounter with the ethical partner – with the concrete other.

Welcoming the other

In Levinas’ world, alterity has a face. The philosopher struggles to express himself as concretely and exclusively as possible when speaks of the welcoming of the other’s face,⁶¹ of welcoming of the other by the same⁶² and of my welcoming of the other.⁶³ The other is depicted as the widow, the orphan, the stranger,⁶⁴ in a word, a concrete person.

⁵⁷ See TI 54 and 113.

⁵⁸ Crowell, *Why is Ethics First Philosophy*, 570.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ See e. g. TI 28.

⁶² See e.g. *ibid.* 43.

⁶³ See e.g. *ibid.* 77.

⁶⁴ See *ibid.* 215.

This person is helpless, dependent and defenceless,⁶⁵ all of which is becoming obvious through her face. We read elsewhere that the other is extremely frail, poor,⁶⁶ and weak: ‘He is so weak that he demands’.⁶⁷ But there is another descriptive feature of the one who is met, and welcomed – it is her originality. The other is characterized by unrepeatability, unpredictability and foreignness. As Levinas positions her in his ethical relation, it follows that the self welcomes the unknown, new, and the unrepeated. O’Connor supports this aspect in her analysis of the Levinasian face notion. She finds: ‘In her otherness the other is not just a particular case, a species of alterity, but original exception. This is not to say that the other is a new, unsaid *quiddity*. Rather, novelty comes from the other [...]’.⁶⁸ To encounter, to meet, to ‘receive’, or to ‘welcome’ the other in Levinasian understanding is a challenge that does not imply ‘getting to know’ or understanding the other. We all have people in our lives who we claim to ‘know well’, but still are sometimes surprised by them. Butler confirms that for Levinas, the other is always escaping and cannot be grasped through the representation of her face. Levinas continues to remind us: ‘The face *enters* our world from an absolutely foreign sphere.’⁶⁹ By saying this, he emphasizes that the other must be received as other.⁷⁰ To be sure, this shows precisely Levinas’ innovation and his major contribution to philosophy, and to the ethical discourse: the insistence on the other as absolutely other.

In *Humanism of the Other* (1972), the other is depicted as someone coming to me, entering my sphere. She is someone who is visiting, and who is revealed rather suddenly: ‘The presence of the other consists in coming to us, *making an entry* [...] the epiphany of the face is visitation.’⁷¹ Remarkably, by referring to the appearance of the other as ‘an epiphany’, the philosopher adds that the epiphany carries ‘its own significance’.⁷² Not that I grant the other’s presence a meaning, but she herself is this meaning that I cannot create nor comprehend. To be sure, Levinas does not mean that the fellow human being enters my life without any context. Obviously, she or he will already have a function, or a place in my life, or be in one way or another, announced or acquainted as someone. However, the context in no way determines who the other is because she does not need any mediation. The author repeats his claim that the other is ‘non-integrated’.⁷³ He intends to emphasize

⁶⁵ See *ibid.* 199. In this passage, Levinas speaks about the ‘total nudity of the defenceless eyes’ of the other who asks to not murder him.

⁶⁶ See TI 21.

⁶⁷ Bernasconi, *The Paradox of Morality*, 170.

⁶⁸ O’Connor, *The Personal is Political*, 63.

⁶⁹ Levinas, *Humanism of the Other*, 32.

⁷⁰ See more relevant work on the gap between the self and the other in Dorothée Legrand’s research in psychopathology, where she for instance states: ‘The other, completely other, as other, always overcomes me.’ Legrand, *The violence of the ethical encounter*, *ContPhilos Rev* (2018) 51: 43. As Legrand’s work shows, at times there is nobody to communicate with. In cases where no touch with the ‘common world’ is left, the other outruns me, remaining a pure alterity.

⁷¹ Levinas, *Humanism of the Other*, 31.

⁷² *Ibid* 31.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

that she is someone in her own right, not part of anything familiar to me. This makes it impossible for me to absorb her, for there is no possibility to blend her into anything known, for example into a past experience. The answer to the question - who do I welcome? - is thereby provided: I welcome not a potentially familiar entity, but the unknown. This implies that the other will remain foreign and out of reach, and that 'knowing someone' is virtually an illusion and that meeting the other surpasses the realm of knowledge. In an exaggerated wording, this means that if the other was fully known at any point of the contact, I would acquire a commodity, instead of meeting *someone*.

Finally, what can we deduce from Levinas' concept of the self as he refers to it in the notion of dwelling and 'being at home with oneself'? Loughnan, in her Levinas analysis applied to the discussion of migration tells us that there is a '[...] 'space', in which we are able both to seek refuge in the dwelling, and 'to dwell'.⁷⁴ She emphasizes that dwelling '[...] is a crucial condition for the exercise of our humanity, for the pause in life which it allows is what enables the welcome of the other. Indeed, the welcome relies on this pause [...] it is the happy self, says Levinas, who desires the other.'⁷⁵ As a conclusion it remains to emphasize one more time that if we want to understand who the self is in Levinas' work, we will ultimately need to analyse the effect of the other upon subjectivity. For him, the self is ultimately the one who responds and serves. The self is wholly at my neighbour's disposal and in charge of the other, responsible for the other. However, the self cannot expect a reaction *vice versa*. The response the ethical Levinasian self is giving in this moment, to this stranger (to this widow, this orphan, to remain with the author's concretization), already defines the self as who she is. It defines her because in each of these situations, she is the answer to the other and she is the one step more that always needs to be taken in the approach toward the other. Levinas makes clear that 'the very knot of subjectivity' depends on a declared one-sided movement, on the decisive 'one step more toward him'.⁷⁶ While we can now say that there is a kind of secluded self that is equipped with an opening, 'prior' to the encounter with the other (however, already expecting the other) we must admit that it is not a self in its full sense. It is possible to imagine an individual living without touch to other individuals. But Levinas would not be interested in analyzing an experiment on isolation. He cares about the subject as ethical. For him, subjectivity is knotted within the ethical encounter and nowhere else outside it. Relationality as relatedness to others turns out to be central for the subject to arise and exist. This is the paradox of the separated, and the dwelling self. Despite all its auto-sufficiency, it did not appear 'first'. Rather, the dwelling self is a mode of existence, available to a singular self that is already unavoidably, fundamentally dependent.

⁷⁴ Loughnan, 8.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ See OB, 84.

Bibliography

Cited works by Emmanuel Levinas

- Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo, Richard A. Cohen (trans.), Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 1985.
- God, Death and Time, transl. by Bettina Bergo, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2000.
- Humanism of the Other, transl. by Nidra Poller, introduction by Richard A. Cohen, Urbana, IL: Illinois University Press, 2003.
- On Escape - De l'évasion, Bettina Bergo (trans.), Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003.
- Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence, transl. by Alphonso Lingis, sixth printing, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 1998.
- Totality and Infinity, an Essay on Exteriority, transl. by Alphonso Lingis, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 1961.

Secondary literature

- Basterra, G., The subject of Freedom, *Kant, Levinas*. Fordham University Press, 2015.
- Bernasconi, R., No Exit: Levinas' Aporetic Account Of Transcendence, in: Research in Phenomenology, 35, 101 / 117, © Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, The Netherlands 2005.
- Bernasconi, R., Wood, D., The Paradox of Morality: an Interview with Emmanuel Levinas by Wright, Hughes, and Ainley, 168-181 in: The Provocation of Levinas, Rethinking the Other, Routledge, London, New York, 2003.
- Crowell, S.**, Why is Ethics First Philosophy? Levinas in Phenomenological Context, 2012, John Wiley & Sons Ltd.
- Legrand, D. interview by L. S. Gleissner with Dorothee Legrand, ENS Paris, 25.09.2019, <http://et.al.open.org/post-569>.
- Loughnan, C.**, Detention and the Dwelling: Levinas and the Refuge of the Asylum Seeker, 2007 Law Text Culture, online source LexisNexis.
- O'Connor, N., The Personal is Political, Discursive Practice of the Face to Face, in: The provocation of Levinas, Rethinking the Other, ed. Robert Bernasconi, David Wood, Routledge, London, New York, 2003.
- Waldenfels, B., Levinas and the face of the other, in the *Cambridge Companion on Levinas*, ed. By Simon Critchley, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Video and Sound documents

- Being in the Principle of War, section one of Penser Aujourd'hui: Emmanuel Levinas (1991). Interviewed by C. Chalier. Audio and Video footage <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-1MtMzXNGbs>, accessed on 10.08.2020.