The I's Relationship to the other as Transcendent, Foundational, and Ethical in Levinas' *Totality and Infinity*

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ABSTRACT:

An interpretation and application of the key insights about the I and the other from Emmanuel Levinas' book: *Totality and Infinity*. The first chapter interprets Levinas' terminology, specifically his notions of the I and the other, and shows how he describes human experience. The second chapter explores how the other is transcendent to the I as a site of ongoing possibility for the significance of experience, how the other founds the I during human development in the person of the caregiver, and how the I's basic relationship to the other has an ethical character. The third chapter applies these insights to show how they can lead to a more authentic living out of interpersonal relationships and to better ways of thinking about human living in social and political contexts.

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Introduction

In his philosophy, Emmanuel Levinas provides an explanatory account of some of those special qualities that differentiate the human being from other kinds of beings. Consider the qualities that make human beings unique: human beings are more than mere objects, they perceive the world around them and construe the world and their experience of it as meaningful, and they also have a unique status as ethically valuable. Thinkers in the Western philosophical tradition have offered many kinds of accounts identifying and explaining these special qualities, many of them proceeding through a process of introspection, examining the human person in isolation from others. Levinas examines how these special qualities are developed in and through the human person's relationship to other persons, not in isolation. I will discuss the importance of the basic human relationship from which these qualities emerge in three chapters, which will focus first on interpreting and then on applying the insights of Levinas' *Totality and Infinity.* The general aim of this thesis is to interpret and apply Levinas' insight that the I's relationship to the other as transcendent and ethical is foundational to the I and to human living.

The first chapter will focus on interpreting Levinas' idea of the relationship between the I and the other and their significance with regard to the important distinction he makes between totality and infinity. I will focus solely on these ideas as they are expressed in Levinas' *Totality and Infinity*, without significant reference to his other works, in order to enter into the text with sufficient depth. I will interpret and explain Levinas' terms and how they aptly describe our human experience. After addressing the question of who or what the I and the other are, I will move on to explain how the other founds the I.

The second chapter will explain how the I's relationship to the other is transcendent,

foundational, and ethical. Levinas examines human living by focusing on how it presupposes relationships with others. I will both interpret these insights and apply them to human development. I will show that, as infants, we really do develop in and through relationships with others as meaningful, ethically valuable perspective-holders.

Chapter Three will focus on the application of Levinas' insights. I will examine whether and how Levinas' insights work in our practical, everyday experience. The most powerful argument for the truth of Levinas' claims is that they can be fruitfully applied to real-life situations in order to truthfully describe and usefully ameliorate human relationships. I will apply Levinas' insights to two kinds of relationship: the interpersonal and the social/political. In both cases I will use real-life examples to show how Levinas' philosophy can be successfully applied so as to help us more authentically live out our reality as persons in relationship.

I wish to engage in an active interpretation of Levinas, not merely explicating his ideas but taking up those ideas in a way that reveals their power to generate insights about human living. Seriously appropriating and applying Levinas' philosophy allows us to aptly describe our human situation and can provide a critique of our unreflected assumptions about who we are and the way we live. In so doing, his philosophy gives us tools for living out our situation with greater authenticity. Levinas' insights help us to overcome our notion of ourselves as isolated agents seeking only the satisfaction of our own desires. Levinas' philosophy orients us towards the reality of our situation as differing perspectives in discourse. I invite the reader to play with these ideas, as I have, and look to generate new perspectives about our situation as human persons in relationship.

Chapter One:

The I and the other, Totality and Infinity

We can begin by discussing the relationship between the I and the other and this relationship's connection to Levinas' distinction between totality and infinity. This chapter will focus on interpreting insights from Levinas' book, *Totality and Infinity.* My first step will be to explain how Levinas' descriptions and terms function as evidence for his arguments. Then I will explain Levinas' ideas of the I and the other. Through the use of examples, I will verify the aptness of Levinas' descriptions by examining how they correspond to and give insight into real human experience. Focusing on the relationship between the I and the other, I will then examine Levinas' notions of totality and infinity. This discussion will enable me, at the end of this chapter, to begin to show how the special human qualities of being more than mere object, having a perspective, and having ethical value are explained in a powerful way by the I's relationship to the other.

How Levinas' descriptions function as evidence

Before I begin to describe Levinas' understanding of the I and the other, it is important to clarify how Levinas offers evidence through his philosophical writing. At first blush, Levinas seems to offer little evidence for his claims. Levinas' discussion is more descriptive than it is argumentative. Rather than argue *that* a certain description is true, Levinas will more often offer a description *as* true. The important thing to note about Levinas' writing is that the persuasiveness of a given description lies in its *aptness*. In other words, the proof is in the pudding. Levinas invites us to examine our own experience and reflect upon human experience

in general so as to determine whether or not Levinas' descriptions usefully and truthfully apply to that experience. This is how I will examine Levinas' descriptions. I will offer my interpretation of Levinas' terms, such as the I and the other, and show how these terms truthfully describe our human experience. I will also make use of examples from everyday life to demonstrate how Levinas' descriptions give us new insight into our experience. The evidence for the truth of Levinas' arguments is that they help us to understand the reality of our situation as human persons in new ways.

Levinas begins describing our reality as human persons by describing two points of human experience: the I and the other. I will describe each of these points of experience in turn and then describe their relationship to one another.

The I

Levinas does not wish to define the I in isolation but rather by its relationships: its relation to its experiences, its relation to objects in the world, and its relationship with other persons (Levinas 109)[1]. I will briefly introduce these aspects of the I here before clarifying them below. For Levinas, there is no "I" separate from its life of activities (Levinas 109). Levinas uses the word "enjoyment" to describe how the I is crystallized in the activities of human life (Levinas 144). By engaging in activities, however, the I does come to see itself as a separated being (Levinas 80): separate from its environment and from the objects and others it encounters. From this vantage point, the I construes its experiences as meaningful and finds objects and others meaningful. Levinas uses the term "grasp" to refer to the capacity for understanding and assigning meaning to experiences, objects, and others (Levinas 157). Levinas uses the word

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[1] When discussing the I, I will use the pronoun "it" to avoid confusion. The term "the I" can apply equally to any gender.

“dwelling” to describe living in an understandable, meaningful world about which the I has a perspective and about which the I is concerned (Levinas 143). These ideas—enjoyment, grasp, and dwelling— help show how the I is in a relationship with other people that is unlike its relationship with its own experiences and with objects in the world.

The notion of enjoyment captures how the I is inseparable from its activities and perceptions. Levinas calls this the “love of life” (Levinas 112). A person does not derive satisfaction merely from existing, from life as such. Rather, persons “live from” their experiences (Levinas 112). Living is reducible to no particular activity; rather, living is only manifest *in* particular activities. Levinas calls such activities “good soup” (Levinas 110). The I is that which engages in activities, such as eating soup, reading a book, or going for a walk, and experiences the associated sensations in a meaningful way. The I is an I in its very eating, reading, or walking. The experience of enjoyment separates particular objects and sensations from the background of the I's perceptions and brings them into the foreground. We may perceive that a painting is hung upon the wall but dismiss it as part of the background of our perceptions, walking past it every day. If we turn to enjoy the painting, to derive experiences from looking at it and to look at it as part of our living out of life, then we enjoy the painting in the Levinasian sense.

The grasp allows the I not merely to experience the world but to understand it (Levinas 161). The I grasps what it discovers in the elemental; the elemental is the undifferentiated set of things beyond the foreground activity of enjoyment, our background of perceptions about the world (Levinas 147). The I interacts with the elemental through enjoyment and through the grasp. Enjoyment brings the object to the foreground of perception as an experience. The grasp makes use of the object and assigns it a certain significance: either a significance in terms of relationship to the I or a significance in terms of theoretical understanding. Significance in terms

of the objects' relationship to the I is how the I the I can understand objects in the way that they offer enjoyable experiences. For example, through the grasp, berries are separated from the background elemental and enjoyed as food. But the grasp can also be theoretical. The I can come to an understanding of an object's significance separate not only from the background but separate also from the I's enjoyment. For example, the I understands rocks as objects to which physical laws apply. The I understands that the rock would move according to intelligible physical principles even if the I were not around to witness this. The I's activity of grasping and understanding the world positions the I in a world in which things have significance with or without the I. Understanding the way the I lives in a world of significance helps us to begin to understand Levinas' notion of dwelling.

Dwelling is living within a set of meaningful associations (Levinas 153). If a person takes a rock from the ground and makes it into a tool, then that person's future activities using the tool are part of her dwelling. The rock takes on a significance to the I, a significance that easily and fluidly becomes part of the I's normal habits. In practice, our everyday life is full of meaningful associations. Navigating a city, people obey signs and signals, read the names of streets, and practice a culturally prescribed etiquette. The significance of objects flows naturally from peoples' perceptions. The things we encounter are not only objects but sites of meaning which have become so habitual that we do not even notice the object separate from the meaning. This raises a further important point about dwelling. For the most part, we do not invent the significance of things in isolation. We learn the meaningfulness that other people have given things. Dwelling is not like knowing (Levinas 153): the meaningfulness is not a fact we discover but a relationship we enter into through our interactions with others. When one interacts with a foreign culture, one can be confused because one does not have habitual common associations to fall back on, whereas interacting in a familiar place and culture may allow one to feel at home

because the others around oneself construe the meaning of things in a similar way. Even if we end up isolated in the middle of untamed nature, we carry those meaningful associations with us. The I's dwelling in the world, its understanding of the meaningfulness of things, is born out of relationship with others.

Levinas' descriptions of the I is a truthful and useful portrayal of human experience. When we think of the self, we tend to think of a human person in isolation. However, Levinas' incisive description shows that there is no such thing as a self in isolation. The I is always manifest in something else: in experience and in relationship to objects and to others. One could never understand the self by cutting away all the things that are not the self, for nothing would remain. The I is an ongoing relationship with experience, objects, and others. The I's relationships are meaningful as well as material. The I enjoys its experiences, it grasps and considers the significance of objects, it dwells with others in a set of meaningful associations. All of these meaningful activities of the I are also connected to the meaningfulness that others make possible.

The other

The I is inextricable from its experience of the other. “The other” is a general term that indicates other human persons in relation to the I. In the following section, I will discuss how Levinas makes use of the idea of “the other” using three of Levinas' themes: the other's likeness and unlikeness to the I, the face to face encounter, and discourse between the I and the other. Once again, I will briefly introduce these themes before explaining them in greater detail below. The other is both like and unlike the I in that the other is a person with a perspective just like the I and yet the other is also a stranger whose perspective is not known to the I. The experience of looking to another person and seeing that she, unlike an object, looks back is what Levinas calls

the face to face. In this face to face situation, the I and the other enter into discourse, expressing their respective experiences (Bergo 19). Understanding this will give us a clue as to what Levinas means by his use of the terms "totality" and "infinity", which I will address immediately after this section.

The other is both like and unlike the I. The other is like the I in that the other enjoys her experiences, grasps the world, and dwells in shared associations[2]. However, the other is unlike the I in that the I cannot access the other's experience the way the I accesses its own. The I cannot simply identify its own ideas and then refer to the same idea in the mind of the other using language (Levinas 72). Language expresses experience but is not identical to experience. Expressing experience is making some aspect of experience accessible to others. A facial expression can convey the other's experience of happiness or sorrow. The other's words and actions can further clarify and convey her experience. But the I cannot grasp the other's experience, as its hand might grasp a rock, and make the other's experience into an object. The very act of removing the other's experience from the other and making it mine would render it no longer the other's experience. This is one of the reasons Levinas argues that the other has a dimension of height (Levinas 75). To the I, the other's experiences are a site of possibility[3] for perspectives about the meaningfulness of the world that the I could not generate on its own. The way that the other is like and unlike the I characterizes the I's encounter with the other.

Levinas calls the I's encounter with the other the "face to face" (Levinas 183). This is not the same as one person perceiving another's body. In the face to face, the I experiences the other

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[2] While I will use he term "it" to refer to the I, I will use the term "she" to refer to the other. I use different pronouns to avoid confusion and to highlight the difference between the I and the other.

[3] When I use the phrase "site of possibility" I am interpreting Levinas' ideas about the other partially through the lens employed by Jacques Derrida in his article, "Différance". I do not wish to make a comparative study between Levinas and Derrida but I will make use of Derrida's idea of a site of possibility: a point of experience within which the revelation of new significance is possible.

Derrida, Jaques. "Différance" Alan Bass, Trans. In *Margins of Philosophy*. University of Chicago Press, 1982.

as a person, like and unlike the I itself. The other is, like the I, someone who has experiences. To face the other is to acknowledge that the other is someone who gives the situation a different meaning than it had while the I was alone (Murray 22). Consider how the presence of another person in the room changes the atmosphere. In the face to face, the I feels moved to turn and face the other, to adapt its plans around the other because she too is a person who sees the world as meaningful (Levinas 183). The I is also moved to ask, “who are you? What do you want?” The I experiences the other as unlike itself in the face to face as well. The I does not know and can only guess at the other's motivations and interests. The other has a dimension of height (Levinas 41), which means that her experiences are above and beyond the expressions she uses to indicate them. Her experience cannot be reduced to her words or her actions.

Levinas indicates that a proper, authentic response to the face to face situation is an ethical response. The first ethical obligation of the face to face is for the I to try and do the experience of the other justice despite the limitations of language. This is why Levinas reminds us that in French the stranger is addressed with respect, as though she were of an elevated station; she is addressed with the word “vous” (Levinas 75). The experience of the face to face is an experience of the other calling the I to accountability. The I ought not to receive the other's words merely as objective data but as the testimony of a person reporting her experience and its significance. The ethical character of the I's relationship to the other will be further discussed in Chapter Two. For now, we should clarify how Levinas uses the idea of the face to face.

The face to face relation is different from the physical situation of one person seeing another's face. The French word “face” in “le face à face” (Levinas 78) does not refer directly to the facial expression but rather refers to the direction in which one is facing (Robbins 137). The face to face is less about the intimacy of getting to know someone personally and more about the way the I turns to orient itself to the unknown other. This character of not knowing is important,

as I will demonstrate with a practical example.

In the year 2000, Princeton did a study exploring why women were under-represented as musicians in orchestras (Marks 1). The study tested musical judges who heard various auditions and were asked to select the best musicians. The control group could see each musician. But the test group heard auditions from behind a screen which concealed the appearance and gender of each musician. The judges who heard auditions from behind the screen hired a significantly greater number of female musicians than the experts who could see the players.

The example of the musical auditions shows that the face to face requires an openness to the other as a site of unknown possibility. If we view the face to face merely as seeing the facial expression of the other then the example seems to contradict Levinas' claim that, through the face to face, the I is moved to do justice to the other and respect her position as a source of experience and possibility. The experts who heard auditions while seeing the others' faces were biased against those others because of the judges' deeply ingrained suppositions about the significance of gender and therefore were not open to the other in a Levinasian face to face. However, this example shows a key facet of Levinas' argument. Levinas shows that it is precisely *not* knowing the other that creates the I's orientation of openness toward the other. When the I understands that the other has a perspective, but does not know what that perspective is, the I is open to engagement with the other, an engagement that is rendered difficult when the I assumes that it knows who and what the other is. The screen prevented the judges from developing preconceptions about the musicians they heard and forced the judges to orient themselves towards the musicians as to strangers. Not knowing who the others were but knowing that they were persons and therefore sites of possibility, the judges were more open to what the others expressed. This openness to what the other expresses is what characterizes Levinas' idea of the face to face.

The need for openness in the face to face is also present in relationships with persons who are not strangers. We often do injustice to those persons we know very well because we assume we understand their experience. The face to face is the moment of turning toward the other in the mode of not knowing what the other will bring to the conversation, as when our dear friends surprise us by revealing hidden aspects of their personalities. The face to face requires a willingness to be surprised, to receive something from the other that the I could not generate on its own. Levinas uses the word "discourse" to describe this process of receiving the expression of the other (Levinas 70).

Discourse is the offering and the welcoming of expression. Expression is one person's articulation of her experience to another. This expression can take many forms. It can mean the facial expression, words and tone of voice, or action taken in the world. An expression does not isolate a piece of one's experience and offer it as a theme (Levinas 72). Themes may be offered in discourse but a theme alone is not an expression in discourse. What makes something an expression is that the one offering it offers *himself* through the expression. If I offer an expression in discourse, the *thing* I offer is incomplete without the fact that *I* offer it. In face to face discourse, one "offers oneself" as more than the content of one's expression (Levinas 72). In discourse I am testifying as to my experience, not merely reporting facts about myself or about the world. A practical example may clarify what it means to offer an expression in genuine discourse.

Consider the example of a student simply parroting data from his lessons as opposed to a student genuinely receiving a new perspective from his lessons. Memorizing and manipulating data *are* receptions of others' perspectives but what truly marks discourse is that the student receives and interprets the perspective posited by the lessons. To receive in discourse is to see one's own experiences in light of the new significance they may gain from others' perspectives.

Learning what Plato said is different from understanding what Plato means for living one's life. In a genuinely Levinasian discourse, the student would express not only his understanding of the relevant data, which is a necessary first step, but his reception of the data as representing a significant perspective. Discourse is openness to being changed by the experience expressed by others and testifying as to the significance of one's own experience.

Discourse is not only expressing one's self but being open to being *taught* by the expression of the other (Levinas 204). Being taught means being surprised, as discussed above, and being open to receiving what one could not have thought of on one's own. But this teaching is not only about the significance of new perspectives. The other's teaching "overflows" what he teaches (Levinas 204). The other, as expressing and testifying, gives the I a notion that there is something greater than the expression, something the I cannot fully thematize. The other gives the I the idea of infinity (Levinas 204).

Discourse has the quality of infinity in that it is a site of open possibility for creating new meaning in the offering and interpreting expressions. Discourse is not merely reporting what one has already finalized and understood to one's interlocutor. The act of offering one's expression and the other's act of interpreting it and welcoming it create the possibility for new meaning (Perpich 4). The possibilities for how one might express one's experience and for how the other might interpret that expression are open and not known in advance. This experience of openness to possibility can be as simple as the process of generating new insights by discussing an idea in a back and forth between two people. In offering their experiences as expressions, the persons give their experiences a new character and open those experiences up to new possibilities for meaning. And the way the interlocutor receives and interprets the expressions may reveal a new way of understanding the experience that the one who offers it could not have arrived at on his own. Discourse is not merely the manifestation of what was already present in potential.

Discourse is the site of creation of new possibilities for significance that were not present before the discourse.

These discussions of the I's likeness and unlikeness to the other, the face to face, and discourse are beginning to clarify the I's relationship with the other; by understanding this relationship we gain a context for interpreting totality and infinity, Levinas' central themes. By discussing totality and infinity I will provide the context for Chapter Two's articulation of the central idea of this thesis: that the I's relationship with the other as transcendent and ethical helps to found the I and enables the I's capacities.

Totality and Infinity

Understanding the ideas of totality and infinity will help me articulate my overall thesis. I will begin by describing Levinas' view of totality and then of infinity, whereupon I will show how these notions reveal important aspects of the I's relationship to the other.

To construe objects and people as parts of a systematic whole whose possibilities are knowable and finite is to construe them as parts of a totality. Levinas uses the idea of totality to refer to a mode of human thinking and encountering the world, a mode in which things have a fixed and objective meaning and can be exhaustively described. Levinas argues that Western philosophy has been dominated by the mode of totality (Levinas 21). On the one hand, understanding objects as finite parts of a systematic whole can be extremely useful. For example, understanding all matter to be arrangements of microscopic particles accounts for matter's properties and allows for the description and prediction of matter's behavior. Levinas does not critique this aspect of totality. On the other hand, Levinas does critique the inadequacy and inauthenticity of approaching human persons in terms of totality. People are sites of possibility for meaning rather than parts of a whole system which exhaustively accounts for their

meaningfulness.

A mode of totality accounts for humans as objects, not as sites of possibility for meaning, and so is reductive, even violent, when used to describe human persons. In the mode of totality, the unique meaning of individual persons is “sacrificed” in the name of uncovering the objective meaning of people in general (Levinas 22). According to Levinas, given a generalized model of a human person's objective meaning, difference comes to be seen as defect. What does not fit into the model is either abolished or changed so that it does fit (Kunz 7). Rejecting phenomena that do not fit our model of reality can be good, as when we cease to believe in ghosts because positing ghosts posits phenomena that do not conform to our models of how physical reality works. But the abolition of difference can be violence when exercised against people.

When I use the term “violence” I use the term as Levinas does, to refer to the treatment of a person as an object. In one sense, persons are objects: they have bodies and take up space. But violence is the treating of a person *merely* as an object without acknowledging that the person is an other, someone who has a perspective about the significance of the world. This violence may be small and commonplace, as when one pushes others aside to get to a subway car, treating others as nothing more than obstacles. But the violence may also by gross and systemic, as when a state defines persons from certain ethnic groups as sub-human. In either case, the small or the great, the violence springs from thinking of persons as objects. And totality is a mode of thinking that only construes persons as objects.

The problem with thinking in the mode of totality is deeper than the violent material consequences that may result. The mode of totality provides an inauthentic and inadequate description of our reality as human persons. It is inauthentic because a static, complete picture of the world renders human persons as static and complete, which they are not. The mode of totality can never completely describe our true situation as human persons because human

persons are sites of ongoing possibility for new meaning. The interpretation and expression of human experience is not an objective part of a definite system. Another term is needed in order to express the reality of human persons that the mode of totality cannot account for: that term is "infinity" (Levinas 22-23).

Levinas uses the term "infinity" to indicate a mode of thinking which posits the human person as a site of ongoing possibility for the expression and interpretation of experience and its significance. Levinas uses the idea of infinity to express that the other is transcendent with relation to totality. Infinity refers to the aspects of our human situation that cannot be captured fully in terms of "objective totality" (Levinas 22-23). While there certainly are objective facts about persons, these objective facts do not exhaust the possibility for meaning that characterizes a human person. In the mode of infinity, the I relates to what it cannot grasp as an object: the other (Levinas 22). For the I to think and relate to others in the mode of infinity is for the I to acknowledge the others' capacity to exceed the confines of the I's picture of the world. As the mathematical symbol for infinity refers to what we cannot count yet include in our calculations, the Levinasian idea of infinity refers to what we cannot account for and yet relate to.

The mode of infinity does not replace the mode of totality as a way of understanding the world but rather situates the possibilities of human meaningfulness above and beyond the limitations of a picture of the world as a complete and finite system. The mode of totality remains useful as it generates understandings of finite objects. Such understandings help us to navigate and manipulate objects in the world. Relating to other persons in the mode of infinity simply characterizes the world as open to the new possibilities for significance that may come from the other. Our systematic understandings are much more useful when they are capable of adapting and changing to reflect the new possibilities and meaningfulness that arise from human experiences.

To relate to the world in both modes, totality and infinity, leads to a much more accurate picture of how our world actually is. Our systems of objective understanding really are incomplete and ought to be subject to change: we will not someday exhaust and completely describe the world's meaningfulness. Our relationships with others really are sites of ongoing possibility for new meaning.

Understanding Levinas' notions of totality and infinity provides the context for articulating this project's central thesis, which will be further explored in Chapter Two. The idea of infinity clarifies the relationship between the I and the other: infinity is transcendent to totality and, understanding this, we can see how the I relates to the other as towards what is transcendent. To relate to the other as transcendent means to remain open to the other's expressions of significance. The significance the other offers transcends what is knowable in a finite system.

In the next chapter, we will see how discourse with others, as sites of possibility for meaning, is foundational to the I. In offering his insight that others are sites of possibility Levinas is describing the very context in which the I's relationship with others develops. To be an I is already to relate to the other as a site of possibility. This relation to the other as a site of possibility is foundational to the I's capacities for thinking about and interaction with the world. Levinas does not propose that we adopt an ethical view in order to perfect this relationship. Rather, Levinas posits that our foundational experiences of the other already have an ethical character. Levinas calls us to adapt our theoretical understanding and our behaviour so that they are authentic to the already present reality of the I's ethical relationship to the other.

The special qualities that make us human are not derived from the human person in isolation. As we will see, these qualities arise in and through the I's relationship with the other. This relationship is towards the other as transcendent, founds the development of the I's capacities, and has a primordially ethical character.

Chapter Two:

The other as Transcendent, Foundational, and Ethical

As we have seen in Chapter One, Levinas begins to explain human experience by giving an account of the I and the other. The I is crystallized in experiences through enjoyment, it reflects upon the meaning of its experiences through dwelling, and it expresses its experiences to the other in discourse. Chapter One has laid the groundwork for this chapter's discussion of Levinas' key insight that the I develops in and through its relationship with others. Our cultural and philosophical assumptions tend to lead us to think about the individual human person in isolation. But the fact that we are in relationship with others is as foundational to the human person as the fact that we have minds and bodies. Levinas breaks apart our typical self-understanding by exposing the reality that the development of our human capacities is inextricable from our experiences of others as bearers of meaning. A human person does not first develop as an independent self and then afterwards enter into relationship. Our relationships with others are what help us develop into independent selves.

This chapter will be both an interpretation and an application of Levinas' philosophy. I will interpret and explain Levinas' view of the other as transcendent, foundational, and ethical and I will apply these insights to human development. In order to explain Levinas' insight that the capacities of the I flow from the I's experiences of the other, I will divide Chapter Two into three sections, each of which corresponds to one aspect of Levinas' account of the I's experience of the other. First, Levinas argues that the I experiences the other as transcendent. Second, Levinas makes the case that the I experiences the other is foundational to the I. Third, Levinas shows how the I experiences the other as calling the I to ethical responsibility. These three

aspects of the I's experience of the other are inseparable. I wish to explain how these ideas of Levinas' accurately describe our experience and give us insight into human development and into authentic human relationship.

Levinas' insight is not merely that we ought to treat others as bearers of meaning who, like us, have their own perspective. Rather, Levinas shows that others really *are* bearers of meaning and that the I cannot help but experience others as ethically valuable. To relate to others is to relate to their transcendence, to have one's capacities nurtured by the other, and to be called to ethical responsibility by the other.

The other as transcendent

What does Levinas mean when he uses the term “transcendent”? This section will make several points that will clarify and explore the implications of this term. I will introduce these points here and clarify them in greater detail below. First, Levinas does not deny the reality that human persons are physical, material creatures; transcendent does not mean immaterial. However, while all other material objects are completely subject to the I's interpretation of their meaning and can be grasped, the other resists the I's grasp. By “resist” I do not mean a contest of wills. Rather, the other is beyond the grasp of the I because the other has her own perspective from which things are meaningful and the I cannot directly access or control the other's perspective. The I can only guess at the other's perspective by interpreting the other's expression. Language has the capacity to allow the I to relate to the other *as* transcendent, to invite the other to give the I an expression of her experience. Language does not only express the I's perspective; it expresses the I's relationship to the other's transcendence..

A human person is, in a sense, an object, but the I relates to other human persons in a way unlike the way it relates to any other kind of object in the world. People are made up of matter

and the human body obeys definite physical laws. Yet to account for a human person by adding up the elements that make up its body is surely inadequate. Levinas uses the word "transcendent" (Levinas 39) to identify how the human individual, the I, relates to people, to others, differently than to objects. In order to explain exactly what it means to call the other "transcendent", I will first clarify how the I relates to objects in a non-transcendent way.

Non-human objects or matter in the world, such as trees, minerals, toys or tools, are non-transcendent in that they are subject to the "grasp" of the I (Levinas 158) while other persons are not subject to that grasp. To be able to "grasp" means that the I can take objects and manipulate them and so give them a certain significance (158). For instance, I might put a stick and a sharp stone together and make them into a spear. On Levinas' account, the I's labour takes parts of the elemental, such as a rock and a stick, and gives them significance. This significance may be simple, as with the example of the spear, or quite complex, as with the use of scientific experiments to determine the chemical properties of different elements. In both cases, the I grasps the object and gives it significance. Grasp creates meaning: grasp can make what was part of the world "mine" (Levinas 158) and define it according to "my" terms. The grasp extends what the I can understand and accomplish. While other human persons are, in a physical sense, subject to the grasp of the I, other human persons are unlike objects in that they *resist* this grasp.

The human person, the other, cannot be grasped and made "mine", passive to the significance the I gives it, in the way that an object can. The other resists being assigned a definite meaning (Levinas 124). The I certainly may *try* to assign an other human person meaning as though to an object. For example, a sufficiently strong I can make a slave of the other by exercising power over that other's body. But the resistance of an other person to the grasp of the I is not that of one physical power against another. The resistance is not manifested

in terms of power at all (Levinas 160). Rather, it is a basic part of human life that even a slave whom the I *treats* as an object is unlike the spear that *is* an object. The resistance of the other is "absolute" (Levinas 160) in the sense that the other human person has *a perspective* which the I cannot grasp. The other contests the meaning the I assigns to her by merit of the very situation of her having her own perspective and experiencing things as meaningful from that perspective. The meaningfulness the other experiences cannot be controlled or even known by the I, but only guessed at. The other's perspective is not knowable or graspable by the I; the I cannot make it "mine". The other's perspective is always beyond, coming from outside the I's experience[4]. In this way, Levinas accurately describes the I's relationship to the other as a relationship oriented towards what is transcendent.

The fact that the other's perspective is not directly accessible to the I does not mean that the other is ghostly or immaterial. The human person is transcendent and beyond the grasp, yet still material and objective (Levinas 196). A human person *is* an object, a pile of matter, so to speak. One could ask what it is which makes that pile of matter capable of finding itself and its experiences meaningful. Does the human person have a special, immaterial soul, whose unique property is having a perspective?[5] Levinas does *not* posit the existence of a metaphysical object, a soul, to explain human transcendence. A ghostly soul could never be seen or heard; yet our relationship with other human persons is sensible and material. For Levinas, the transcendence of the other human person is not an object in the world. Rather, transcendence is in the relationship between the I and the other, already present in concrete material terms but never

[4] It is also important to note that the beyond-ness of the other does not imply absence, it is a powerful presence that interrupts the I's flow of thinking and perceiving. For more on this, see Kris Sealey's article on the topic.
Sealey, Kris. "The Primacy of Disruption in Levinas' Account of Transcendence." *Research in Phenomenology.* Vol. 40, Is. 3, 2010: p. 363

[5] When Levinas investigates the possibility of a soul, he is engaging with Descartes' Second Meditation, wherein Descartes posits that the mind is immaterial. Levinas does not wholly reject Descartes' insights but Levinas limits himself to discussing the phenomena of how other minds appear to the I rather than make any objective claim about the kind of object a mind is.

Descartes, Réné. *Meditations on First Philosophy.* Hackett Publishing Co., 1993.

reducible or complete in those terms. That the other's perspective is not accessible to the I in the same way that the I can access its own perspective is a material state of affairs. This material state of affairs is what causes the I to *relate* to the other as transcendent, as beyond the grasp.

The I relates to the other as transcendent through language. Language is the way in which the I relates to the other's perspective in concrete, material terms without reducing the other to those terms. Language does not and cannot *prove* the basic reality that other people are unlike objects; language presupposes this reality and gives expression to this relationship between the I and the other. Language involves speaking about the world, but language's aim is not the world. Language is always addressed *to* someone.

It is easy to think that to use language is primarily to speak *about* the world but, according to Levinas, language begins primarily as the communication of experience *to* the interlocutor. Levinas argues that our usual notion of how language functions is connected to our notion of theory (Levinas 168). As Levinas uses the term, "theory" is a way of speaking generally that makes reference to no single person's perspective. Theory is about facts that do not depend on people to observe them. The most important aspect of theory, for our purposes, is that what one tries to posit through theory ought to be, in principle, accessible to anyone. For example, the theory of a triangle defines it as being an arrangement of three lines whose interior angles add up to 180 degrees; such an idea does not depend on any single person's perspective. The idea makes reference to fixed and definite properties (Levinas 168). For Levinas, it is a mistake to think of the non-perspectival, theoretical mode as the most basic way of using language. On the one hand, we can think of human language development as the development of theoretical thinking and speaking: we see trees, then use the word "tree" to gesture towards that object's fixed and definite properties. On the other hand, language has a basic feature that does not make reference to fixed and definite properties in the way theory does. Language is not just

talk about the world; language is the communication of the I's experience and perspective to the other. Language is also not merely about receiving theoretical data from the other, it is also about relating to the other's perspective and receiving the other's expression of her experience[6]. Language is founded upon an understanding of ourselves and others as perspective-holders (Levinas 168). Language is a way of relating to the other as transcendent, as to one who has a perspective and finds things significant, even if language accomplishes this relation through the discussion of non-transcendent things. As evidence for the truth of Levinas' interpretation of language, we should consider Levinas' notion of representation.

Language makes use of representation; it is the expression of experience by the I to the other and by the other to the I and as such it is a relationship between persons who find things significant. To use language is to speak *to* someone. To call a triangle a figure of three sides with angles of 180 degrees *is* a representation. To represent is to take an experience and express it, either to one's self or to others (Levinas 168). Representation assumes two people for whom the thing represented is *meaningful.*[7] The representation is meaningful to the one who offers it *and* to the one who receives it (Levinas 97). To speak about an object is not merely to convey information about the object but to express the perspective of the speaker and invite the perspective of the listener. To use language is to assume that the addressee is also a perspective-holder to whom the I's experience will be intelligible. To express in language is "to enter into relation" (Levinas 181). Because the other's perspective is not accessible to the I and vice versa, each one expresses her perspective in language (Levinas 101). To speak about the world is to

[6] George Kunz offers an interpretation of Levinas that emphasizes how the other's testimony breaks the flow of perceptions in the I, causing the I to look beyond itself and attend to the unknown yet expressed perspective of the other.
Kunz, George. "Interruptions: Levinas." *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, Vol. 37, Is. 2, 2006: p. 241

[7] It does not matter if the representation is to one's self alone. Such an act presumes at least the possibility of representing to someone not one's self. It also does not matter if the representation fails to convey the intended meaning. The attempt still assumes that the other has a perspective and the capacity to interpret the meaning of the expression.

relate to the other as transcendent, as to someone for whom things are meaningful. To speak is to acknowledge that the meaning of things is not mine alone to judge, that the meaning of things lies also with others who have differing points of view.

Relating to the other as transcendent is a back-and-forth movement, an ongoing process with no determinate end. The I not only expresses itself but also receives the expression of the other. The other speaks *to* the I. And while she may speak about things in fixed and definite terms, the I understands that the experience and the perspective of the other is neither fixed nor definite but ongoing. As was mentioned in Chapter One, the other has a dimension of "height" (Levinas 117). The I cannot know the experience of the other directly. Instead, the I receives it and interpret it through the other's expression in language. The presence of the other holds the I accountable. The I cannot finalize the meaning of the other's expression as identical with the other's experience. The other can always speak further, testifying as to the meaningfulness of her own experience. Using language well involves the I relating to the other's experience as above and beyond the words used to express it.

Levinas argues that the I's relationship with the other gives the I the idea of infinity (Levinas 178-179). To relate to the other as transcendent is to look to the non-finitiude of possibilities for how the other might express her experience in language and the way the I might interpret the other's expression. Conversation is indeed an effort to finally come to a mutually useful and acceptable expression of what the other means, one that does justice to the other's experience. However, to arrive at such an expression is not to end the transcendence of the other. To find the right words is not to experience as finally revealed what the other truly is. Rather, the life and experience of the other remain open to possible new determinations, new expressions that can give old ones new meaning. Life is a flow of experiences whose significance is not knowable in advance. So the possibilities for interpreting and expressing those experiences is

likewise ongoing. The I relates to the other *as if* to something infinite because the other's experience, knowable to the I only through finite expressions, is a site of open possibility. Because the other's experiences are beyond the I's knowledge and grasp, the I relates to them as ongoing and non-determined.

To relate to the other as if to something infinite is a normal part of healthy, everyday relationships. The more one gets to know another person, even to the point of being able to give useful expression in language to what that person is thinking and feeling, the more that person may surprise one. People break out of the categories and assumptions we build up around them and reveal our ideas about them to be finite and inadequate to express the depth and complexity of what they are experiencing. While we desire to empathize and understand, we also know it to be important to leave room for the other to express new possibilities. Even after someone's death, we do not collect all the facts about her and declare that we have finally discovered what she is. We know that in some ways, her experiences will remain a mystery. The other remains transcendent to us[8]. For Levinas, the I lives and operates in a relation to others as transcendent. In the everyday, we often see people as more than objects: others resist the grasp of the I and express their own experience of the meaningfulness of things.

Even before a word is uttered, language shows the I's relationship to the other already to be towards the other as transcendent. Speaking gives expression to a relationship that begins the instant we meet a stranger. We speak to the stranger not because we know who he is but because we do not know and invite his expression. We relate to the other as one who can teach us. Levinas helpfully points out that this relation to others as teachers begins early in human development.

To explore how the I's experience of relating to the other as transcendence deeply

[8] For a deeper exploration of the way others remain transcendent in death, see Damien Casey'a article. Casey, Damien. “Transcendence and Society: Levinas and Buber.” *Sophia.* Vol. 38, Is. 2, 1999: p. 69

influences the I's development, I will explore how an infant develops into an I, a perspective-holder, in and through relationships with others as perspective-holders. The experience of the other as transcendent is not solely a *result* of the I's development but a foundational aspect of that development. The experience of the other as transcendent is an integral part of the development of the I's capacities for thinking, speaking, and acting.

The other as foundational to the I

The I's capacities are founded upon the I's experiences of the other as a perspective-holder. Relationship does not occur only after the I develops a theoretical understanding of the other; rather, the I develops in and through relationship with the other. This section will explain this idea and offer evidence for it as a useful and true description of reality. I will here outline the basic components of my argument, which I will elaborate and clarify below. First, I will examine infant development, which involves the infant I's relation to objects and to its caregiver. I will show how the I's capacities for enjoyment, labour, and possession develop in and through the I's relationship with the other as a perspective-holder. The other helps the I develop when the other takes up the I's experiences and expressions as meaningful and significant. As development goes on, the caregiver helps the I express its experiences by offering language to describe situations and their meaningfulness. As the infant I develops language, it desires discourse. Discourse, from a developmental standpoint, is the satisfaction of the I's desires that its perspective be welcomed as meaningful and that it would also welcome the perspective of others as meaningful. Lastly, I will show how discourse can be distorted such that the I either does not express its own perspective or does not welcome the perspective of others. This failure to engage in discourse is a distortion of reality because it is a reality that others have meaningful perspectives and that the meaningfulness of the I's own perspective is dependent upon others. To

deny the other is to deny one's own foundational experience.

Primordial experiences are those that a human person has before becoming aware of itself as an I. For the infant, objects, things not part of the infant's body, are indifferent to the infant's needs and desires. However, infants also encounter objects unlike any others in the world, namely, people. People are not indifferent to the infant's needs and desires. Levinas uses the term "the feminine face" (Levinas 150) to describe the other who takes up the needs of the infant I as significant. Typically the caregiver not only takes up the infant's needs as significant but also acts towards the infant as towards a perspective-holder whose *experiences* are significant. This is what Levinas calls the "primordial phenomenon of gentleness" (Levinas 150). By understanding this phenomenon, we can begin to understand how a human person becomes an I in and through relationship with the others.

A human person develops as an I in and through its experience of the other**.** The infant's connection to the face of the caregiver is a primordial experience of relationship with another human person. The caregiver treats the infant as if the infant were a point of perspective whose experiences are meaningful, even if the infant does not yet have the capacity to find its experiences meaningful. Gradually, throughout the infant's development, the infant gains awareness of itself in its experiences. In other words, the infant develops into a "separated being" (Levinas 151). The infant I becomes more than what it feels at the moment; the I enjoys its feelings, in the Levinasian sense of enjoyment. The I notes itself experiencing this or that: the taste of food, the grasp of a toy. The I sees *itself* as separate from the environment that constitutes its experience. This separation is foundational for navigating the world as meaningful and significant. Such separation is dependent on how the caregiver treats the infant. Parents interact with their infants, showing them objects, responding to their actions and sounds, encouraging the infant to move and explore. The caregiver's treatment of the infant as separate,

as not an object but a person capable of experience, helps create the infant's perception of itself as separate and later to interpret its experiences as meaningful.[9]

A caregiver creates the context of “dwelling” that allows the I to develop as a separated being (Levinas 154). As discussed in Chapter One, in dwelling the I reflects upon its experience as meaningful (Levinas 168). This is not an abstract process but one lived out in the concrete. For example, when a baby cries and the mother feeds it, the mother lends meaning to the baby's experiences of hunger, crying, and eating beyond their being a flow of sensations. The mother understands the crying to indicate hunger. She thinks of both crying and hunger as meaningful experiences of the baby's to which she ought to respond. Through the mother's responses, the infant can grow to understand its own hunger and crying as significant. In early development, dwelling, especially in the parent, is a context for the development of sensations, like hunger, into experiences, such as the experience “*I* am hungry”. The caregiver helps the infant to have an experience of itself as a locus of significance: an I *to whom* sensations are significant. This is what Levinas means when he argues that the first dwelling a human person experiences is that involved in being welcomed by the feminine face, the caregiver. This welcome helps the infant person to recollect itself as a separated being, an I (Levinas 150-151). The infant I is founded in its experience of the caregiver as an other, a source of possibility and meaning.

In the I's relationship with the other during development, the I learns not only to see itself and its experiences as significant but also learns to interact with the world as significant through enjoyment, labour, and possession. Levinas describes the I's engagement in its experiences as enjoyment (Levinas 122). As stated above, the caregiver's welcome helps the infant to understand itself to be an I having significant experiences. In encouraging the infant to crawl,

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[9] Infants who are not treated as persons, for instance infants who are neglected, experience significant problems in their development.

Simms, Eva-Maria. “Milk and Flesh: A Phenomenological Reflection on Infancy and Coexistence.” *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology.* Vol. 32, Is. 1, 2001: p. 22.

eat, play with toys, etc., the caregiver helps the I to take up and enjoy these activities. Labour and possession can follow from enjoyment and can be as simple as finding and eating food or stacking blocks atop one another. The caregiver helps the infant to understand objects as manipulable and separable from the background of the world (Levinas 161). Just as the infant comes to see itself as significant in the way the caregiver sees the infant, so too does the infant come to see objects in the world as significant based partially upon the significance with which the caregiver invests them.

The I develops its capacities in relationship with others and so the I grows up with a sense that others are more than objects, that they are indeed perspective-holders who have their own experiences. The caregiver is not indifferent to the infant I's enjoyment. She reacts to the infant's activities, approving or disapproving. The I's experience of its capacities is inseparable from its experience of the caregiver, the other, as a bearer of significance. The I does not develop a relationship last, after it can theoretically understand the other as a perspective-holder to whom things are significant. The experience of the other as someone to whom things are significant is primordial and foundational to the I's development. After the infant has developed into an I, the I retains a pre-reflective understanding of others as persons to whom experiences are significant.

Language is another of the I's capacities that develops in and through a primordial relationship with the other as a bearer of significance. Caregivers take up the perspective of the infant as valuable by giving that perspective language and encouraging the infant to use language to express itself. Caregivers give names to the infant's experiences: “are you hungry?”, “this is Mommy, can you say 'Mommy'?”, “it's time to sleep”, etc. The caregiver teaches the infant that experience, whether the caregiver's or the infant's, can be *expressed*. The relationship with the caregiver founds the experience, “I am hungry”. But within this context, the infant is taught that

its perspective, its experience, can be expressed with the words, “I am hungry”. The experience takes on a more definite meaning. The I can reflect upon its own experience using language. At the same time, the use of language shows that the I's own perspective is one of many (Levinas 171). Things in the world are not just what they are to the I. Things in the world appear differently and have a different meaning to the other. Language is the expression of these different perspectives. Language gives voice to an already present relationship between the different, yet similar, experiences of the I and the other. The expression of one perspective-holder addressed to another who has a different perspective is discourse (Levinas 178).

Discourse is the I's primordial experience of having its perspective welcomed by the other and the I's being moved to welcome the other's perspective; and this is an ethical experience.[10] Levinas uses the words “welcome” and “gentleness” to describe the satisfaction of the I's desire to have the other take up the I's perspective as meaningful (Levinas 150). Being welcomed, the I's expressions are considered by the other to be important above and beyond the content of the information the I's expression conveys. The other considers the words to be important not only because they refer to the world but because the words come from the I, whose experiences are important in their own right. Even as the I's perspective is welcomed, the I further develops its capacities by welcoming the other's perspective. The I cannot ignore that others have a point of view from which things are personally meaningful to the other. The I's desire that its expressions be welcomed is inextricable from the I's desire to welcome the expressions of others. Put another way, one's very desire to have someone else validate one's own opinion indicates that one thinks that the other's opinions are valuable, too. To desire welcome is to relate to the other

[10] For more on how daily concrete acts of giving and care have an primordially ethical character to the infant, see Brian Vanderberg's article.

Vanderberg, Brian. “Levinas and the Ethical Context of Human Development.” *Human Development.* Vol. 42, Is. 1, 1999: p. 31

as someone who can in turn be welcomed. This responsiveness between the I and the other is the context in which the I begins to take up ethical responsibility, to treat the other as ethically valuable.

The primordial experience of relationship with the other founds the I's capacities but this does not mean the I will always welcome the other and vice versa. Having a desire is not the same as being compelled. A person can still choose not to offer his expression or not to welcome the expression of others, against his primordial experience of relationship. Rejection of discourse can take any form, from a two-year-old's tantrum to the systematic, political dehumanization of a group. Both examples are distortions of discourse; they deny the reality of the perspective of others. Yet to deny the perspective of others is still a way of relating to it meaningfully. Levinas does not suggest that denying the other is impossible; denying the other is simply inauthentic. Other people really do have a perspective and to deny it is distortive. Levinas devotes some time to describing how these distortions can arise. I will discuss three general kinds of distortion here, to be developed further in Chapter Three.

The human person, given its desire for others to take up its perspective and its desire to take up the perspective of others, can become implicated in three distortions: distortions that I will call egoism, overdependence, and indifference. Egoism can arise when a human person asserts his own understanding of the world as primary, refusing to allow the perspective of others to influence his decisions—for example, Gyges in Plato's *Republic*. Overdependence can develop when the I fails to express its own perspective in discourse and only voices the perspective of others. An example of overdependence would be a slave who denies her own personhood, deferring all judgments about the significance of things to her master. What I am calling “indifference” can arise when the I asserts that its own or others' perspectives are meaningless except as contributing data for a theoretical understanding of the world. For

example, given a purely materialist theory of life, a person might understand her identity not as a person who finds things meaningful but as a possessor whose importance is measured by her wealth. These three distortions can only arise after the fact of the I's developing in relationship with others. In order to deny the transcendence of others one needs to have had a primordial experience of others as transcendent during one's development. These distortions are inauthentic to the reality that both the I and the other have meaningful perspectives. Authenticity to reality requires the welcome of others' perspectives as well as the honest expression of one's own perspective. Levinas' descriptive account is therefore deeply normative.

It is a reality, not merely a sentiment, that my personhood is founded upon an ethical responsibility toward the personhood of others. The human person develops as a perspective-holder because of its foundational experience of others as perspective-holders. All of our thoughts and actions have an ethical character because we take them up in response to the perspectives of others. To call another human person an object is always a lie because the I's relation to the other as a person is primordially ethical, above and beyond the scope of mere objects. Levinas does not propose that there is an essential human ethics, a set of inherent rules that determine human behaviour. However, Levinas does remark that it is impossible for a human person to develop normally without experiencing the desire for discourse: the desire that others take up my perspective and that I take up theirs. Levinas argues that human persons do not first develop relationships and then invent ethics to cope with what arises. Rather, ethics is a primordial experience of the reality that the other is a person with a perspective. This experience suffuses the development of all human relationships. To deny others' transcendence or make others into objects is always to deny the truth of one's own foundational experiences. For this reason, Levinas argues that every human relationship contains within it the call to responsibility: the responsibility to remain open to the other as a perspective-holder who has a say about the

meaningfulness of the world. In the next section, I will clarify and explore what it means to be called to responsibility.

The other as a felt call to ethical responsibility

This section will focus on explaining what ethical responsibility means and discussing its implications both for individual relationships and for politics. For Levinas, taking up ethical responsibility means remaining open to the other as a site of possibility. Ethical responsibility is not about obeying universal ethical principles: it means not doing violence to the other and also engaging with the other in discourse, remaining open to being changed and moved by the other's perspective (Levinas 197). For Levinas, one's responsibility towards persons is ongoing and not reducible to particular duties. Further, just as personal ethical responsibility cannot be reduced to principles and duties, neither can political ethical responsibility be reduced to laws and structures (Caputo 51). Below, I will discuss and clarify Levinas' case regarding ethical responsibility before explaining how it translates into political responsibility.

On the personal, individual level, ethical responsibility means avoiding violence and remaining open to being moved by the other. Both of these ideas require significant explanation. To avoid doing violence is more than merely to avoid inflicting physical harm; it means avoiding the reduction of the other to an object. I will first discuss the ethical obligation not to do violence and after that explore the responsibility to remain open to being moved by the other.

First, personal ethical responsibility means avoiding violence. Violence is not necessarily physical. Levinas understands violence to be any denial of the other's transcendence as a perspective-holder. We can understand Levinas' views about violence by examining his take on the first and primary way in which the I can reduce an other to a non-transcendent object: that is, murder. By discussing murder, Levinas sheds light on the fundamental assumptions behind all

attitudes that move the I to treat the other as fixed rather than open to possibility. As it says in 1 John 3:15, “anyone who hates a brother or sister has committed murder in his heart”. By examining murder as the natural conclusion of certain interior thoughts and attitudes, we can gain a deeper understanding of those thoughts and attitudes even when they do not result in murder.

Levinas calls murder an “ethical impossibility” (Levinas 171). To understand how murder can be an ethical impossibility we must recall that according to Levinas' ethical view of the world, others are always transcendent. The I cannot access the perspective of the other except through her expressions: her appearance, speech, and actions (Levinas 194). The temptation of murder is to rob the other of that inaccessible perspective and cause her to be forever fixed in terms that the I defines. On the one hand, murder accomplishes the reduction of the other to something determinate. When murdered, the other person ceases to express a perspective and ceases also to resist the I's determination of her meaning. On the other hand, however, murder fails at its goal because it places the perspective of the other forever beyond the grasp. The other's resistance to the I's imposed meaning becomes absolute and non-negotiable. Murdered, the other no longer expresses her private experience of meaningfulness, but for this reason the other's perspective remains forever outside of what the I can determine on its own. This is why Levinas calls murder impossible. Violence is an inauthentic response to the reality that the other is beyond the grasp. An authentic response to the other's transcendence is to relate to it in discourse, receiving the other's expression and offering interpretations of it that the other is free to accept or reject.

Violence is the rejection of discourse with the other. Rejecting discourse means failing to listen, failing to treat the other as a site of possibility. Any words or actions could constitute such a failure: to refuse to speak to another person because they belong to an opposing political party,

to declare that employees who generate more revenue are more valuable than employees who generate less, or to drive in traffic without considering the safety of others[11]. These examples are of words and deeds that reduce an other person to an object or reject the other's expression. Through violence, the I calls the other's possibility less important than the I's determinations. Responsibility entails avoiding this violence.

While the first aspect of personal ethical responsibility is avoiding violence, the second aspect of taking up responsibility is openness to being moved by the other in discourse. Through discourse the I remains open to the other's possibility as beyond the I's grasp. If the I truly *sees* the other as other, the I takes up responsibility: the I opens itself to being changed, to interpreting the meaning of the situation in new ways (Levinas 182). In discourse, the I is changed, it learns things it did not know, it sees meaning from different perspectives. It is always possible for the other to express meaning in new ways. The determinate speech and action of discourse is always subject to new input from the other's experience. The other's experience is not determinate because it is beyond the I's grasp, ongoing. Concretely, this means that an individual's ethical responsibility towards others is likewise ongoing.

Being moved means not only being changed and taught by the other but also being commanded by the other (Levinas 201). The other, simply by being a person, will call upon the I to act for the sake of the other's good. When the I deliberates about whether to help an other in need, it is because the I has already been moved by the expression of the other. The I feels the other's need with the force of a command, even if the other does not ask for help. The I feels the other's need to be important because the I has a pre-reflective understanding of the other as a

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[11] See Altez for an exploration of the relation between commonplace violence and more extreme violence.
Altez, Fleurdeliz R. "Banal and Implied Forms of Violence in Levinas' Phenomenological Ethics." *Kritike.* Vol. 1, Is. 1, 2008.

perspective-holder, a site of experience. The other in need is not merely in a physical situation of need which the I can observe, but is also *experiencing* need, which the I cannot observe but feels commanded by. Responding to this command is practical, and may involve things as simple as social conventions, such as greeting a stranger politely. Or the action may be more intentional, such as helping a friend financially. The possibilities for how the I might respond to being moved by the other are limitless; responsibility is indeed an ongoing process and not an end-state. The extent of possible responsibility to be taken up is not finite.

Levinas' discussion is not only relevant to personal responsibility, it extends to the issue of responsibility in politics. The obligation to avoid violence and to be moved by others calls people together to organize. On the political level, discourse broadens as many voices debate the meaning of things and attempt to move one another to action. Politics is a powerful tool by which people can take up responsibility for one another collectively in ways they could not accomplish singly. Levinas warns, however, that only people are responsible. Political systems are ambivalent, as we will see below. Politics has the capacity to do violence to persons by categorizing them in fixed terms, but also has the power to promote discourse and to create a context of openness towards people as sites of possibility.

Ethical responsibility on the political scale is still, like ethical responsibility on the personal scale, oriented towards the avoidance of violence and openness to being moved by others in discourse. Just as in discourse on the personal level, political discourse must be open to the expressions of meaning offered by individuals (Levinas 117). However, politics cannot function if it relies on consulting every individual it affects. Politics functions through generalized principles that do not depend on any individual perspective. In other words, politics is like theory. Theory can posit non-perspectival, universal truths not dependent on any person's particular situation (Levinas 206). The development of theory can be a useful practice in

discourse, just as politics is an important way of establishing the possibility for ethical interaction. However, theory can also finalize a perspective, ending discourse, just as politics can end discourse through the exercise of power. Finalizing is useful in many cases, such as designing a building or writing an instruction manual. In such situations, a final product must be fixed and determinate. However, theory also has the potential to describe the *meaningfulness* of things, and of people, in a finalized, non-perspectival way. Similarly, political systems and structures cannot be transcendent, in the Levinasian sense, because they must be fixed in order to be generally accessible to all. Political systems are always potentially violent because of their non-transcendent character (Levinas 217).

Law is a good example of how groups of people negotiate a relatively universal, non-perspectival view of the meaningfulness and value of things. Laws have the potential both to uphold the value of individuals as perspective-holders and to negate that value. For example, a community may outlaw theft because theft violates an individual's perspective: the individual's view of himself as in charge of his possessions. Under the law, the thief is punished and the possession returned to its rightful owner. This is how universal structures like laws uphold the individual as a perspective-holder. However, in doing their work, structures like laws can also negate individuals' perspectives. In order to make a law about theft, we cannot define possessions merely as what the individual believes himself to own. The individual's possession must be established in a way that is accessible to any perspective, not just to one. A law might require the individual to have documents proving his ownership in order to prosecute one who has stolen from that individual. In so doing, a law would make the property owner's perspective of himself as an owner subordinate and accountable to the legal proof of his ownership. If the owner lacked the requisite proof, the law would deny the owner's perspective rather than uphold it. Laws, even as they are upheld to protect peoples' perspectives, also undermine those

perspectives by reducing them to fixed and determinate terms. Laws, as non-perspectival, tend not to be open to the transcendence of the human person as the site of possibility for the meaningfulness of experience. Laws fix and limit possibilities. This is not how laws fail but how they succeed at their task. This is also why healthy systems employ judges to interpret and adapt laws for particular situations. Laws are deaf to the testimony of witnesses while human judges are open to being changed by the expressions of others. And so, people are needed for laws to work properly. In the same way, people are needed for politics to work properly.

Political structures must always be accountable to the expressions of people. Levinas warns that political theories that aim at pristine and perfect sets of rules, rules requiring no interpretation, are a recipe for disaster. A theory that aims to articulate the importance of persons in fixed terms reduces people to those terms. Such a theoretical perspective promotes the construal of difference as defect. Theoretical structures require conformity, absorbing, negating, or destroying difference (Levinas 181).

People grow, adapt, and change because they are sites of ongoing possibility, and politics must also be a site of ongoing possibility in which systems grow, adapt, and change. Systems which lack adaptability tend to fix the value of the human person, to associate the value of the human person with some determinate end. We often see this in our culture: people are valuated based upon their contribution to society, their achievement of personal happiness, their intelligence or power. These valuations unjustly limit the orientation of human life towards certain ends (Perpich 14). A human is not valuable *in potencia,* only realizing that potential in producing concrete results like happiness or power. Politics ought to enable people to be happy but politics ought not to uphold happiness as the defining human goal. Nor ought politics to uphold any goal as the final value that orients human life. Humans are valuable in their very openness to possibility, independent of particular expressions of that possibility. When we really

look at the human person, we see a multiplicity of values and possibilities at work (Levinas 181). Making laws and engaging in political discourse must always be a difficult negotiation balancing the need to define human value in broad, open, and unfixed terms with the need to uphold particular, fixed expressions of human value. To engage in politics responsibly. we must be keenly aware of politics' potential for violence. Responsibility on the political level is openness and accountability to discourse, a discourse that construes what is other as a source of possibility for new significance and not one that defines the goal of the human project a priori. A responsible political system is one that can be changed by the participation of people.

The key to responsible politics is the responsible participation of individuals in political systems. In the previous example of laws against theft, one person's individual ownership of property could be ignored because that person lacked documents. Responsible participation would involve the wronged party appealing to other persons, to judges who interpret the law or to political representatives who create the law, so that the wronged party might make the case for the meaningfulness of his perspective. In other words, law and politics must be open to discourse. This discourse must have the possibility of changing the system. Discourse need not *always* change things, but to welcome the expression of the other is to leave one's self open to being changed by the other's expression (Levinas 204).

Whether on the personal level or in politics, the answer to the call to responsibility is discourse between human persons, each relating to the other as transcendent. This what Levinas means when he argues that we ought to live in a plurality (Levinas 306). Levinas cautions us to abandon the quest for a final determination of human rights and freedoms. Rather, he proposes a continued discourse, within which the value of the human person is always open to further possibility. Every expression in fixed terms is accountable to further possibility beyond those terms. Levinas does not propose a system of ethics. Rather, he proposes an authentic

understanding of ourselves as each rooted in relationship with others. Our responsibilities towards those others are ongoing. Ongoing responsibility may seem like a heavy burden but its ongoing nature springs from the fact that our responsibilities are not separate from our healthy human interactions and relationships. We always have a say in interpreting what our responsibilities are.

Levinas' discussion of ethics and responsibility gives us the tools we need to live out our relationship with other persons who are transcendent, foundational, and ethically valuable to us. Each human person is in relationship. Violence denies the reality of relationship while openness to being moved by the other makes for an authentic response to our reality as in relationship. That this is true has deep implications for how we live our day-to-day lives and how we understand the social structures we navigate and create. Chapter Three will explore these implications.

Chapter Three:

Application of Levinas' Insights to Interpersonal and Social/Political Relationships

This chapter will conclude my discussion of Levinas with an application of his insights to interpersonal relationships and to social and political relationships. By interpersonal relationships I mean our daily encounters with other people mediated through the face to face, while by social or political relationships I mean those encounters with other people that are mediated through social and political structures. I wish to demonstrate the validity of Levinas' arguments by showing how they apply to real human situations. I also wish to take up Levinas' insights and use them to generate new perspectives about how we as human persons relate to one another and to the structures around us.

This chapter will have four sections: examining Levinas' writing as itself a discourse, examining it as a critique of our preconceptions about the way the desire for autonomy orients life, examining its practical implications for interpersonal relationships, and its practical implications into social and political relationships. I will begin by analyzing the content of Levinas' writing as a discourse rather than as a prescribed set of ethical duties. In offering his philosophy as an expression in discourse, Levinas invites us to respond from the perspective of our real-life experiences. Levinas' perspective helps generate a useful critique of contemporary assumptions about the way the desire for autonomy orients human life. I will explain this critique by making use of the writing of psychologist George Kunz, who shows how Levinas rightly points out that discourse is more fundamental to the human person than egoism. Equipped with a clearer understanding of how our contemporary culture operates based on a misguided view of the self, I will show how our interpersonal relationships can be more aptly

described and more authentically taken up through Levinas' more correct view of the self as called to discourse. After addressing interpersonal relationships, I will move on to an application of Levinas' philosophy to social and political structures. I will show how egoistic assumptions about the self lead to institutional abuses by using Levinas to analyze a failed social institution. Once we have seen the importance of discourse at the level of a particular social institution, I will move on to discuss how Levinas' emphasis on discourse applies more broadly to political participation in general.

This chapter will be about the interesting implications of the truth that the I's relationship to the other is transcendent, foundational, and ethical. These are not abstract categories, disconnected from real relationships. I have found that taking Levinas' philosophy to heart can change the way one speaks and acts with others, the conclusions one comes to about who and what others are, and the goals that orient one's living. I wish to go beyond the text and show how it illuminates and informs our lived experience, guiding us to a more authentically human way of relating to others.

Form is content: how Levinas generates insight

The form of Levinas' argument is also its content. Levinas does not prescribe a set of particular ethical obligations. Rather, Levinas' whole case is more like an expression in discourse inviting a response. If the reader welcomed and received Levinas' expression, she would not copy Levinas' ideas and abandon her own. Rather, the discourse would generate insights and inclinations toward ethical action that came from within the reader herself, her particular site of possibility for new significance[12]. This does not mean that Levinas' ideas lack

[12] The way Levinas uses language in his own philosophical writing is rather like the way in which a poet offers up writing not as a definitive statement of truth but more as an expression which requires the participation and interpretation of the one who receives it.
Edelglass, William. "Levinas' Language." *Enigma of Good and Evil: The Moral Sentiment in Literature*. Ed. A.T.

concrete application; rather it means that the concrete application of Levinas' ideas requires the particular experiences of real human individuals. So, in presenting my articulation of how Levinas' philosophy applies to interpersonal relationships and to participation in social and political structures, I am not presenting a definitive interpretation of Levinas. Rather, I am taking up Levinas' discourse and continuing it. In so doing, I hope to provide a model for how others might also take up and apply Levinas' insights.

My application of Levinas' insights will also serve, to some degree, as a critical evaluation. Real-life examples connect the usefulness to the truthfulness of Levinas' account. Levinas' account is truthful because it aptly describes our human experience. We can test the aptitude of Levinas' descriptions by showing how they correctly interpret our experience of relationship and usefully suggest behaviours and attitudes that promote a more authentic living out of our human reality: the reality that each one of us is an I founded in an ethical relationship toward others as transcendent. What follow are the implications of this reality.

Kunz employs Levinas' philosophy to critique an egoist model of the self

In 1998, psychologist George Kunz published an analysis of Levinas that uses Levinas' work to criticize what he calls "*egology"* (Kunz 12) or "egoism". In either case, the terms refer to unreflected assumptions about the nature of the self that, according to Kunz, are widespread in our contemporary culture. Egoist assumptions lead to a view of the self as in isolation and as oriented toward the pursuit of its own autonomy. With the term "egoism" Kunz refers to no particular theory or thinker; egoism is a general category through which he hopes to explore and describe those errors in our thinking about ourselves that Levinas' philosophy can correct. I will begin by describing the main error of the egoist view, before explaining how Levinas' philosophy

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Tymieniecka. Dordrecht, NLD, Springer, 2005: p. 53

functions as a corrective for this error.

According to Kunz, the main error of the egoist view is that it presumes human living to be oriented toward the exercise of power and the pursuit of autonomy, while the voluntary limitation of one's own power is understood to be anomalous (Kunz 14). In psychology and in other areas health is typically connected to power and autonomy. Such a view begins with the idea that a person's first and basic needs are food and shelter, which require resources. Hence a person must build up her resources in order to sustain her own flourishing. She only looks to the needs of others once she is sufficiently powerful to sustain herself and can safely supply others with whatever resources are superfluous to her. On the egoist view, a person's activities are oriented towards the attainment of more and greater autonomy, and this motivation explains a person's behaviour. On the egoist view one may still sacrifice one's own advantage for the sake of others, but this sacrifice is anomalous: the egoist model generates no explanation for why a person would act contrary to her basic instincts in sacrificing her own good for the sake of others.

Let us further examine the error of the egoist model by applying its assumptions to an example of human interaction: a person's response to encountering another person in need. According to the egoist mode, the person first perceives the material situation that the other is in need. The perception of another's need is the perception of facts about objects in the world (Kunz 14). The person takes in the information that the other is homeless and hungry. The person then calculates how her own motives and projects are influenced by the other's need. The person may feel sorry for the other or not, depending on the person's own motivations and experiences (Kunz 17). If the person feels sufficiently sorry, she will give of what superfluous resources she can to help the other. If the person is not so motivated, she will ignore the other. In an extreme case, say if the person is moved to sell all she has to help the poor, the calculation

is still present. On the egoist model, even extreme altruism is oriented towards the satisfaction of one's own desires.

A significant feature of the egoist model is that it explains all decisions taken by a person as expressions of that person's autonomy. If charity is exercised, it is an exercise of power: the one with greater resources helping the one with fewer. The charitable giver is moved by her internal desire to help others and her perception that others are in objective states of need. On the egoist model, the help offered through charity is oriented towards the rectification of objective states of need. If the other is hungry, feeding the other will fix it. I emphasize this point to show that the exercise of power is not necessarily a bad thing. Feeding others and addressing their objective needs is important and useful. However, it can lead to problems because it is an inauthentic description of our actual human experience. The egoist model is inadequate. It calls anomalous what is in fact commonplace: that a person would consider the perspectives of others as sources of motivation. Human persons are as much oriented towards the meaningfulness of others' perspectives as they are towards the expression of their own perspectives. I will show the egoist model's inadequacy by describing how Kunz employs the philosophy of Levinas to critique the idea that the basic nature of the human person is an ego.

On the Levinasian view, human living is seen as a site of possibility and discourse, and both the exercise of power and the voluntary limitation of one's own power are equally possible responses to this discourse. It is correct that food and shelter are basic to sustaining the body, but the I is not merely a body; it is a site of experience. The I construes its experiences as meaningful. It is the meaningfulness of experience, not the sustenance of material being, that orients a person's living. This meaningfulness which orients a person's living is not that of the self alone, but is founded in discourse with the perspectives of others. The exercise of autonomy is one aspect of this complex and ongoing relationship with human others as sites of perspective

and possibility. Autonomy develops within this discourse between perspectives. The I's sacrifice of goods for the sake of others can be a non-anomalous, authentic response to the I's situation of relationship to others. The Levinasian account of the human person is better suited to describing our real, human situation than is the egoist model.

Levinas' model of understanding human motivation more accurately describes a human person's response to encountering an other in need. First, the I's perception of an other's need is not exclusively a perception of material, objective facts. It is an experience of being called to responsibility by the other (Kunz 16-17). If the I were authentic to its situation as being in a relationship towards the other as Levinas describes, its responses would be oriented toward discourse with the other's perspective. The I would be oriented towards what it does *not* perceive about the other: the other's experiences and desires. The I would feel responsibility towards the other as a site of possibility whose needs exceed what the I is capable of grasping. This feeling of being called to responsibility would *not* be dependent on the I's plans and projects and would be quite distinct from feeling sorry for another's material situation. Rather than either being moved to pity or not, the I would be moved to responsibility and then faced with the decision of whether to accept that responsibility or not. Accepting responsibility could include responding charitably, but accepting responsibility could involve no external material action. The I's response itself would be a site of possibility. The I's response would not be oriented toward the satisfaction of the I's desires; rather, the response would be oriented toward welcoming the expression of the other in discourse.

The important feature of Kunz's critique of the egoist model is the distinction he makes between exercising power for the sake of responsibility and exercising power simply as an expression of one's autonomy. For Levinas, the taking up of responsibility is properly oriented towards others while the egoist model tends to construe power as primarily an expression of the

self. An egoist exercise of power would be towards others as objects; the egoist model is about what the I can grasp. Those aspects of the other's situation which are graspable are the other's bodily situation, her hunger or thirst, and her material options given her situation. As we have seen through Chapter Two, the I most authentically relates to others not as graspable objects but as persons beyond the grasp. Power is neither good nor bad in and of itself; what makes the exercise of power responsible is whether or not it is exercised towards the other as an interlocutor in discourse rather than as an object of the grasp. Responsibility involves welcoming the other and being moved by that other's perspective. If the self construes its situation according to the egoist model, it will tend to act irresponsibly as it seeks the most easily graspable methods of responding to the needs of others: the self soon begins to seek escape from the demands others place upon it. Rectifying situations of material need can be a way not of satisfying but of escaping the demands of responsibility. And *ignoring* rather than rectifying the situations of others in need is an equally effective way to avoid the limitations responsibility places on autonomy. If we think of the goal of life as exercising autonomy, without regard to responsibility, we will avoid responsibility because it limits autonomy. The egoist model pushes us to avoid answerability to our very reality as human persons, our reality as persons in relationship called to responsibility.

The I's taking up of responsibility in response to the other is not only a more truthful response to our human situation; it is also more useful in terms of real-life situations. For instance, Kunz points out that, in his experience as a psychologist, he has found that bright, well-balanced people are more in touch with responsibility and make it a part of their lives. On the other hand, he has found that clinging to autonomy is a sign of fear or insecurity that is often best overcome by the therapist guiding the person towards self-giving roles. The Levinasian understanding makes for a more authentic living out of interpersonal relationships and a more

fruitful participation in larger social structures.

Having shown that Levinas' model of human relationships provides a useful theoretical critique of the egoist model, I will move on to show how Levinas' model is also more effective in practical situations of human relationship. I will show how the common, unconscious adoption of an egoist understanding undermines human living and flourishing, while a conscious adoption of Levinas' understanding creates opportunities for human flourishing. I will make this argument first for interpersonal relationships in the section below, before turning to social and political relationships in the section that follows.

Levinas' model of responsible interpersonal relationship

Levinas' description of reality equips us with patterns of thinking, perception, and understanding that let us enter into relationships with greater authenticity. Making use of Levinas' insights, we can articulate the deficiencies of an egoist account of the human person and describe what attitudes and responses would better orient our real life relationships with others. I will offer three such insights and make use of practical examples to show how Levinas' philosophy can improve the way we approach interpersonal relationships in everyday life.

1) Accommodation of the others we encounter, taken up in responsible discourse, is better understood as a liberation than as a burden.

We tend to think of ourselves as autonomous agents who choose our interactions. This can lead to the attitude that the pursuit of autonomy orients human life. On the basis of this attitude, one evaluates others on the basis of whether they support or impede one's autonomy. Given an egoist attitude, that the pursuit of autonomy orients life, interaction appears as an occasion for competition. Things like crowding into the subway, working with colleagues, or

even romantic relations can become adversarial when the self measures each encounter as a potential threat to its autonomy and to its plans. Levinas, however, flips this attitude on its head, exposing our experience of others as foundational to our autonomy, not adversarial to it.

The Levinasian model helps us to understand that the other's presence increases, rather than diminishes, the set of the I's possibilities. The experience of discourse with others enables the I to discover new meaning about the world and about the I's own experiences. Discourse with the other as a site of possibility enables the I to think, say, and do what the I could not think, say, or do on its own. The presence of the other does call the I to accommodate the other; responsibility means that the I cannot do whatever it wants. But this call to be responsible towards others need not be felt as a burden. The way the other calls the I to responsibility presumes and validates the I's freedom (Levinas 303). The other invites the I to respond to the other's presence and perspective in a welcoming way; this very invitation from the other reinforces that the I has a valuable perspective and has a say about the meaningfulness of things, even about the other's meaningfulness. The other validates the I's perspective in a way the I could not do for itself. The best response to the other's invitation is to accept it, but the other does not burden the I by compelling it to accommodate the other. The I's taking up of responsibility, its accommodation of the other, is always free and uncompelled. The other calls and invites the I to welcome her perspective and in calling the I to affirm the her humanity, the other also affirms the I's humanity. This kind of discourse is not simply an ideal. It is an authentic response to our actual human situation as perspective-holders in relationship.

As a practical example of how accommodation is liberating rather than burdensome, notice how a small gesture which acknowledges the humanity of the other can completely change the character of a situation. I have a visual disability that requires me to carry a white cane. While this situation reduces my autonomy, it also calls upon others to accommodate my

need. Strangers have stopped their activity to move objects out of my way so that I do not stumble; and rather than be annoyed at the inconvenience, they always seem happier to have been able to offer some meaningful service to me. On other occasions, strangers have walked me to where I needed to go. During those walks, the strangers inquire as to my story, who I am and where I am going, and I ask after their stories as well. My benefactors thank me for these humanizing moments in their day. Such situations of accommodation are enjoyable and liberating because they clarify our reality as people rather than objects. The strangers' happiness is not the enjoyment of having power or fulfilling a duty. Theirs is a happiness that seems to come from fulfilling their desire to be meaningful to someone else. My perspective, my calling them to responsibility, gives their capacities a new meaning and significance. Their discourse with me opens up possibilities.

Levinas' understanding helps us overcome our egoistic tendency to think of others as threats to our autonomy and instead to authentically enjoy the experience of how we are called to accommodate others in responsibility. The evasion of responsibility is always an inauthentic response to our reality as human persons in relationship and therefore not ultimately fulfilling, whereas the positive, chosen taking up of responsibility expands the I's possibilities and helps the I participate in fruitful discourse.

2) If we relate to others as knowable objects we cut off our ability to perceive and receive their expressions, whereas if we treat others as sites of possibility we have a more authentic, and often more enjoyable, relationship with others.

We can sometimes relate to humans as knowable objects. An egoistic theoretical model construes the human person as a set of independent motivations in an autonomous self. We tend to believe that what we inspect when we examine our ideas is something that we ourselves

generated, that “I am an object knowable to myself”. This notion of the human person extends to others. While we cannot know all about others, we tend to jump to conclusions about their motives and categorize them based on what we perceive their motives to be. We think of others as knowable sets of ideas and motives subject to the grasp of theory.

When we operate with an unreflective attitude that both ourselves and others are finite objects of theoretical reflection, we close ourselves off from possibilities. We all know the cliché about not judging another person before you get to know them. But such a cliché is somewhat problematic in that it implies that once one has gathered sufficient information about the person, one is ready to judge them. In other words, one gains a theoretical grasp on who and what the other person is. Making use of Levinas, we can see how it is distortive and inaccurate to think of others' interior states as graspable. Forming judgments, we reduce people to facts about themselves: what they've said in the past, what we think their actions and expressions indicate. In reality, however, the other is irreducible to our theoretical picture of what the other is like. Our notions about the other ought to be ongoing and changeable. There is no final grasping of what the other is. Levinas teaches us to be taught by others, to view their testimony in discourse as an occasion for exploration rather than determination. If we treat the other as a knowable object we run the risk of doing violence to the other by failing to receive those expressions that do not match our picture of what the other is. And an inauthentic relationship with the other as an object is less truthful and useful than an authentic relationship with the other as a site of possibility.

As another practical example, consider the “fun” friend and the “tough” boss. If we hold to a finite, theoretical understanding of a friend as “fun”, we reduce our interaction with the friend to the terms of that understanding. We engage with the friend expecting fun, looking for jokes, looking to participate in fun activities. In that context, the person's normal responses may

seem dull. Attempts at normal conversation fall flat when they don't turn out to be as fun as expected. By limiting our reception of the other's expression to one finite aspect we decrease the possibility of actually enjoying the friend's company on other levels. If we had simply been open to whatever the other would bring to the interaction, we might have had more fun. On the other hand, consider the “tough boss”. If we form a theory of the boss as tough and confrontational, we shape the kinds of experience we are likely to have from interacting with the boss. We may enter into perfectly innocuous exchanges fearfully and defensively and so provoke the very confrontation we expected. Once again, treating the other as a knowable object creates an inauthentic relationship towards that person. We can't help having preconceptions and expectations, but if we see the other as a site of possibility who can exceed these expectations we pave the way for more authentic interactions with others.

In interpersonal relationships, openness to possibility often *creates* possibilities. The more one thinks about the other as a sum that will eventually be known, the less one will actually know the other. The examples above are not about waiting for better data with which to generate better theoretical understandings of others. Rather, Levinas helps us to develop the habit of treating our theoretical picture of the other as a placeholder for an ongoing relationship, open to possibility, accountable to real discourse which changes and develops meaning. As a result of treating the other as a site of possibility, our theories will likely be more accurate. But our theories will be so only when they respect the reality that the other is neither completely known nor completely knowable to us. In this light, theory itself is less important than the ongoing relationship. We are often delighted when our friends surprise us with hidden layers of complexity and new insights that challenge our old ways of thinking about them. Relationships are more enjoyable as sites of possibility.

3) Life is better oriented toward responsible discourse than it is toward the pursuit of autonomy for its own sake.

Levinas shows that responsibility and discourse better orient human life than does egoism. It is not merely Levinas' opinion that we ought to care for others. Rather, care for others constitutes the most authentic living out of our real human situation. We must question any egoist understanding that human life is the pursuit and exercise of autonomy. Human living is more primarily oriented towards responsibility taken up in discourse with others. It is this responsibility that orients autonomy and gives it meaning.

Consider the example of reasons that teachers give their students, especially in primary and secondary school, for working hard in class. The reasons can be categorized in two types: those oriented towards autonomy alone and those oriented toward a responsible discourse with others. Reasons for working hard in class that emphasize autonomy are quite familiar: hard work will lead to good grades, which will enable access to better post-secondary institutions, which will allow the student to pursue an elite career which will lead to wealth and success. These reasons presume that success is measured in terms of graspable objects like careers and wealth. Reasons oriented toward autonomy are somewhat valid but they can be misleading because they lack sufficient reference to relationships with things beyond the grasp: relationships with other people. It is well and good for the student to gain personal autonomy but that autonomy will be inauthentic in the way it is lived out if it is not balanced by responsibility. The second category of reasons for working hard in class include that vital element of responsibility. Working hard in class can be fulfilling because it enables the student to engage in discourse with new perspectives about the meaningfulness of the world. Teachers who are passionate about their subject matter do not describe it as a necessary evil endured on the way to a successful future. Rather, passionate teachers show their students how the material can lead them to new insights and

possibilities, that the material in some way gives a truthful and useful account of our human situation in the here and now. The second category of reasons for working hard invite the student to engage in discourse with the material, with the teacher, and with other students in a responsible way.[13]

In the example of reasons given to students for working hard in class, reasons oriented towards autonomy offer an incomplete picture of the project of human living, while those reasons oriented towards discourse better prepare students to live out a life of meaningful relationships with others as sites of possibility for significance. I would argue that the first set of reasons are, taken in isolation, limiting and inadequate as an orientation towards life. The second set of reasons, those oriented towards discourse, would equally enable the pursuit of material success but would also broaden the definition of success to include aspects of life which are not grasped but which are deeply important: authentic relationships with others. Education certainly enables autonomy and can contribute to material success. But education is much more primarily *teaching*, engaging in a back-and-forth movement that changes ourselves and others, opening us to possibilities we could not have come to individually.

A Levinasian model of interpersonal relationships shows that what the I wants and desires is always connected to what others want and desire. We do well to take up our plans and projects in discourse with others as opposed to fighting solely for our own particular vision. Kunz taking up these insights in the context of psychology, observes that the ability to engage in responsible discourse is a good indicator of psychological health (Kunz xv). Things like taking up a caring profession, living together with a family, and balancing work and play with time spent caring for the needs of others are in one sense limitations of power: they limit power in the sense that when

[13] Joy Hardy's article discusses how early education functions as a discourse in the Levinasian sense and how education serves as an important way for adults to model to children how a mutual discourse can be taken up.

Hardy, Joy. "Levinas and Environmental Education." *Educational Philosophy and Theory*. Vol. 34, Is. 4, 2002: p. 459

such activities are taken up as responsibilities, they limit the freedom of the I to pursue its own goals and agenda in favour of accommodating the needs of others. According to an egoistic model, these apparent limitations ought to be avoided. But according to Levinas' understanding we can see responsibilities as desirable responses to our situation as in relationship with other human persons. Responsibilities lead to instrumental goods, such as affective maturity, wisdom, and happiness. But this happiness is not the reason people take up responsibility. People take up responsibility because they really are in relationship with others. Those others really are sites of possibility, and relationships with others truly do orient human living. Levinas helps us to articulate this reality and pursue it authentically.

Taking up responsibility in discourse not only orients our interpersonal relationships but also orients our understanding of and our participation in social structures. I will now show how Kunz's insights into the inadequacy of the egoistic model and Levinas' insights as to the value of responsible discourse allow for a better understanding of social and political structures.

Responsible understanding of and participation in social and political structures

Levinas moves us to a better understanding of and participation in social structures. I will show how, on a large social scale, the taking up of responsibility in discourse is more truthful and useful than an egoist pursuit of autonomy. I will make this case in two ways. First, I will show how Levinas gives us a useful method for analyzing social structures and identifying how structures call for responsibility. To show this I will use a case study. The case study shall be the Mid Staffordshire report, which details the administration of a the Mid Staffordshire healthcare region in the U.K. My analysis of this case will show how an egoist understanding of institutions as expressions of autonomy leads to the failure of those institutions. An institution that promotes discourse will be more successful in the achievement of its aims while remaining

authentic to our reality as human persons in relationship. Second, I will remark upon how Levinas' philosophy gives us guidelines for our authentic participation in politics. I will show how a model of responsibility and discourse could apply to our participation in political structures. Through these two discussions, the particular case study of the hospital and the general analysis of politics, I will apply Levinas' philosophy to our larger-scale human interactions.

My chosen study of a social institution based upon a recently published report on the administrating body of the Mid Staffordshire healthcare region. I have chosen this particular institution because it strikingly demonstrates the importance of discourse. I do not wish to make any exhaustive study of administrative policy. I simply wish to use the report as an example of how Levinas correctly interprets and proposes solutions to problems that characterize social institutions. Levinas' philosophy explains the case and, through this process, the case illuminates Levinas' philosophy.

In the case of Mid Staffordshire, there were sufficient resources to care for the patients and yet those patients were neglected in an egregious fashion. The problem of neglect, I will argue, did not arise from any particular ill will but from an unchallenged notion of autonomy as the highest good. This notion was manifest in the activities and policies of the administration. I make use of this case study to show how Levinas provides an incisive and effective critique of autonomy valued over responsibility. Levinas helps us to understand how our underlying attitudes about the self and the other shape our social priorities.

The inquiry investigated the administration of the Mid Staffordshire region's NHS healthcare from 2005-2009 and published its report in the United Kingdom in 2013. The report drew attention for its exposure of scandalously substandard healthcare. The Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust was in charge of healthcare administration for about a quarter of a million

people. The Trust oversaw medical services like hospitals, clinics, and old-age homes. An independent, public inquiry was launched in 2010 to examine the way this Trust managed services and dealt with complaints. The inquiry gathered facts in the form of statistical data and eye-witness testimony. All of my factual information about Mid Staffordshire comes from this report.

The results of the inquiry indicated that hundreds of people suffered as the system failed to uphold even basic standards of care. Persons unable to feed themselves were not fed. Medications were prescribed but not received. Persons unable to leave their beds were not helped to bathrooms. Staffing was insufficient and conditions were unsanitary. Furthermore, complaints about the lack of care were ignored or minimized by the organizations whose role was to ensure that standards were maintained. Deep systemic problems were not identified and continued to interfere with care for years. This was not individual incompetence but a large-scale institutional failure.

Why would an organization with public oversight and sufficient resources fail at the most basic level? The chair of the inquiry argues that, as much as particular policies needed to be fixed, the over-arching problem was one of culture (Francis 3). The chairman uses the term "culture" to speak of a prevailing mentality within the institution: an attitude that we might, with Levinas and Kunz, call egoistic.

Levinas and Kunz provide an excellent descriptive apparatus for understanding and criticizing the problematic, egoistic attitude which pervaded the Mid Staffordshire administration. Egoism makes charity an exercise of power. The failures in the healthcare system were not the selfish egoism of the uncaring. Rather, the failure was produced by a mistaken mentality that prioritized autonomy and relativized helping others, construing helping others as one possible expression of that autonomy. The institutional failure manifested itself in

two ways. The first way the failure manifested itself was through the administrators' construal of themselves as custodians of the institution's power and effectiveness, making the institution's power primary and its care for patients a secondary priority. The second way the failure manifested itself was in the administration's avoidance of responsibility, a failure to engage in accountable discourse with those who complained about the lack of care.

First, I will address the institution's prioritization of its own autonomy. Given that the administration's culture was egoistic, persons involved construed the administration's top priority to be the effective exercise of power. This construal explains and underlies the Trust's more toxic patterns. The Trust tended to focus on "corporate governance and financial control without properly considering whether there were issues of patient safety and poor care" (Francis 3). On an egoistic model, power is the goal. The administration sought to maximize the resources at their command and minimize the extent to which those resources were used. In other words, it became a goal to ensure that patients received the minimum amount of care required, and no more. Nobody explicitly articulated things this way, but the cultural emphasis on autonomy and effectiveness led to this pattern of behaviour. While the effectiveness and the exercise of power are necessary to manage a large system, responsibility also requires that power be exercised in discourse with others. Responsibility in discourse may also call for a reduction and limitation of one's power. The caregiver's exercise of power ought to be accountable to the expression of the other, who has a say with regard to the extent and character of her needs. The Mid Staffordshire culture lacked the kind of discourse with the other that would orient the exercise of power and makes it responsible. To tell people what help they will get is egoistic; to ask what help they need is part of a discourse.

The second manifestation of the administration's failure was its active effort to avoid responsibility by minimizing and ignoring complaints. It began with the administration's

emphasis on generating a set of limited and quantifiable standards and duties. These standards and duties expressed the attitude, “this is what I am going to do for you,” and failed to raise the question, “what do you need?” The institution did not change because people were unmoved by the expressions, the words and deeds, of others. When complaints arose that the standards of care were insufficient, the administration ignored this testimony. The culture was one that “trumpeted successes and said little about failings" (Francis 3). Given an egoistic attitude, failure is an embarrassment and those who point out failure become threats to one's exercise of autonomy. The privatization of power shuts down discourse, as it did in the case of Mid Staffordshire to the great detriment of patients. The taking up of responsibility in discourse, on the contrary, seeks out and welcomes others' expressions, even if those expressions point out failures. Failures call for the one taking responsibility to change, to prioritize things besides autonomy, and perhaps even to give up power for the sake of the good of others rather than exercise it.

In a sense, persons in the Mid Staffordshire administration thought about autonomy in the same way that we ourselves and our culture tend to think about it. There was no villain twirling his mustache, callously planning to let patients suffer for the sake of his power and image. Everyone involved acted in a way extremely appropriate to the egoistic model of the human person. People did their jobs. They developed skills and competencies within their own domains. Persons prioritized the expression of their autonomy and employed their skills and competencies towards this end. While none of this was malicious, neither was it adequate. The egoist model was not even sufficient to ensure that people were fed.

The value of autonomy is deeply entrenched in our cultural mindset and yet the accountability of power to discourse with others is not foreign to us. Accountability to the other is a basic disposition that orients our thoughts and actions every day. Any time we listen, or stop

to consider how our actions effect others, or are moved by others' facial expressions and words, we are answering the call to responsibility. In the same way that our interpersonal relationships improve if they promote real discourse, so too do our social structures and institutions improve if they are made accountable to responsible discourse. Making use of some of the insights gained from the case study of a particular social institution, we can now turn to applying those insights to politics in general.

Politics involves the large-scale negotiation of the plans and projects of groups and individuals. Through politics, those with similar goals and ends come together and those with divergent goals find ways to accommodate one another. Politics is often thought of as unifying people on the basis of their similarity. People are unified as members of the same nation or race, as holders of a similar ideology, or as bearers of similar rights and privileges. These processes of unification are useful and result in the establishment of structures that express and satisfy the desires and needs of groups. Structures come into being to uphold the rights of individuals and accomplish tasks that individuals could not accomplish on their own. However, Levinas warns that such structures are liable to lead to the construal of difference as defect. The value of unity can imply that plurality is a hindrance.

Levinas argues that political structures tend to objectify people if they are not accountable and responsive to the perspective of others in discourse. Persons are objectified when they are voiceless, when structures of political power are not responsive to their perspectives. Structures are made accountable in discourse through the persons who participate in those structures, as in the example of a judge who exercises the power of the law over individuals but also makes his interpretation of the law accountable to the witness who is present to testify on her own behalf (Levinas 244). Political structures are most responsive to those who have power, but accountability in discourse demands accountability to those who are the most voiceless and the

least powerful: those whom Levinas calls the widow, the orphan, and the stranger (Levinas 245). Structures that do not adapt in response to the needs of their participants, especially their least powerful participants, cease to be systems of genuine discourse and become means of objectification and even violence. To treat others as objects, to disregard their testimonies, is to fail to respond authentically to our situation as human persons in relation to each other as transcendent. Levinas argues that we as participants in politics must make our political structures accountable to the testimony of those who are diverse and in need, not merely to those who are unified and strong, in order to make politics a genuine discourse.[14]

As an individual must prioritize responsibility over the pursuit of autonomy, so too should social and political structures. Contemporary politics emphasizes the autonomy of the individual as the highest good: we build up political structures as tools to protect our autonomy. Levinas' deep insight is that among the goods that autonomy enables, the taking up of responsibility in discourse is the good that best orients our human relationships. It is true that political systems should not *require* their citizens to take up responsibility for others in discourse; discourse can only be freely chosen, not compelled. But citizens should certainly require their political systems to be responsible and accountable to others in discourse, so that political structures adapt and change to accommodate the diverse perspectives of their participants. I interpret Levinas to argue that we ought to construe politics as a forum for discourse. The capacity of political systems to enact any good is founded upon and upheld by discourse between participants in those systems. Our political goal cannot be a homogeneous system with the enabling of autonomy as its end. Our goal must be a diverse discourse with responsibility as its end. The

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[14] It is important to note that I do not propose Levinas' philosophy as an instant corrective to social problems. Rather, it would require a careful application of Levinas' notion of responsibility to the development of social, political, and legal structures to seriously take up responsibility. However, the power of individuals to change structures through small acts of personal responsibility should not be underestimated. For more on the application of Levinas to particular political issues, see the book by Marinos Diamantides.

Diamantides, Marinos. *Levinas, Law, Politics.* Routledge Cavendish, 2007.

responsibility that properly orients politics is politics' constant accountability to the transcendent value of the persons who participate in it.[15]

Discourse keeps politics responsible. Levinas' philosophy provides an incisive condemnation of censorship and of mindless bureaucracy and usefully points out that politics is only as effective as the discourse that founds it. The more people voice and negotiate their perspectives with one another and the more they are open to being taught, the more adaptable and equitable politics will be (Atterton 59). The example of Mid Staffordshire shows that apathy about discourse can lead from bureaucratic dehumanization to shockingly material dehumanization. Power exercised for the sake of power is self-defeating. Responsibility orients both the exercise and the limitation of power according to the needs of others.

I hope that all of the practical examples in this chapter demonstrate that understanding Levinas should change the way in which we see the world and the way in which we make decisions. My interpretation of Levinas' philosophy applies to our cultural assumptions, to our interpersonal relationships, and to our social and political participation. Levinas' discussion is effective because the call to responsibility is already present in our human experiences, as we have seen in Chapter Two through the discussion of human development and in Chapter Three through the aptness with which Levinas can be applied to real-life situations. Levinas puts us back in touch with the reality that we are always already in discourse and invites us to embrace rather than deny that reality through the way we live, both in our interpersonal relationships and in our social and political participation.

[15] Of course, the notion of responsible participation is not new or unique to Levinas' philosophy. It is present in the ancient political philosophies of Plato, Aristotle, and even Confucius. But Levinas takes up these ideas in a new way to critique contemporary over-emphasis on structure and autonomy.
Xiangchen, S. "Emmanuel Lévinas and the Critique of Modern Political Philosophy." Lévinas: Chinese and Western Perspectives. Eds. N. Bunnin, D. Yang and L. Gu. Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford UK, 2009

Concluding Remarks

Levinas' insights in *Totality and Infinity* are productive and truthful articulations of the fact that human life is oriented by relationships. The fact that our human capacities have developed in and through relationship with others as transcendent and ethical sites of possibility shapes our everyday lives. By applying Levinas' insights we can overcome the egoistic assumption that living is a compromise among individual pursuers of autonomy and engage more genuinely with others in responsible discourse.

Making use of Levinas' ideas about the I and the other, we see that the persons whom we encounter are not properly understood as knowable objects, but as sites of possibility for significance. Our relationships are more genuine when we are open to others' possibilities, when we are willing to be surprised and changed by the unexpected perspective that the other may offer.

Making use of the insight that the other is foundational to the I, we see that our individual projects are not essentially isolated from the plans and perspectives of others. By adapting our actions to accommodate others, we actually increase the depth and breadth of our own possibility. As much as we may desire good for ourselves, we also desire genuine engagement with others who open us up to possibilities that we could not have generated on our own. To desire an other's good *is* to desire one's own good.

Making use of Levinas' understanding of society and politics enables us to aim not at a homogeneous system, one that accounts for all people as the same, but rather at a plurality of perspectives engaged in a discourse that respects all people as different. We should prioritize discourse and so orient social and political practices of power towards responsibility.

Levinas makes a persuasive case that ethical relationship with others is a deeply ingrained

aspect of our human experience. Typically, we agree that relationships with others should be accommodating, but we tend to believe that relationships take a back seat when the desire for autonomy starts to drive. Levinas condemns this perspective about autonomy as untrue. Relationship orients the human desire for autonomy through the call to responsibility. An I has a basic and primordial experience of relationship with the others who found the I's autonomy and make it possible. This primordial relationship with the other is ethical. We cannot help but feel that others are sites of perspective and as such we feel commanded to turn to face the other. We do not need to be saints to feel commanded to take up responsibility; we need only be human. Because discourse is an authentic living out of our real human situation as sites of possibility in relationship, our ordinary human life is more authentic and, I would argue, more enjoyable when we take up what responsibility we can.

In this thesis, I have endeavoured to articulate Levinas' descriptions of the I's relationship with the other and give evidence for the aptness with which they fit our human experience. I would argue that Levinas' highly theoretical language can sometimes obscure the deeply humble and practical aspects of his account of human living. I have shown that the truth of Levinas' insights applies as much to our contemporary context as it does to Levinas' own, and as much to our everyday living out of relationship as it does to our philosophical understanding of relationship. In making use of examples from real-life, everyday situations I wish to illuminate how the true understanding and appropriation of Levinas' philosophy can change our lives for the better. I have tried to engage in a genuine discourse with Levinas' text, to be changed by the perspectives it offers. In so doing, I hope to have generated new insights that Levinas did not generate on his own about human friendships, interaction in school and the workplace, and the analysis of social and political structures. To generate new insights in discourse is the best way to honour Levinas' philosophical project and I invite those who read this thesis to participate by

generating new insights of their own.

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Afterword:
God's Word of Consolation in Discourse

What follows is a brief discussion of my philosophy studies and my thesis writing with regard to those spiritual themes which have emerged from them as part of the program of first studies in the Society of Jesus. Jesuit formation is aimed at the integration of sound philosophical understandings of reality with with the pervasive reality of God in all things. I see our formation as a Levinasian discourse with God's Word of consolation: God's presence as transcendent Creator, incarnate Son, and relational Spirit. Philosophical studies are a way of hearing this Word, speaking it, and engaging with it in a transformative way.

Hearing God's Word of Consolation: First Studies in the Society of Jesus

"Studies in the Society were clearly directed towards an apostolic life. The way different programs of study are selected is governed by the needs of the apostolate in conformity with the task of the Society today, by its missionary options and …by the mission of the Society."
–Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J.

Saint Ignatius made study into a prayer. Prayer opens the heart of the one who prays to receive God's Word of consolation, nurtures conversion and development in the person's spiritual, affective, and intellectual life, and bears fruit in the way the one who prays takes up responsibility to manifest the Word to others through service. I have endeavoured to undertake all of my studies as a prayer in this way.

Studies has opened me through engagement with my professors and classmates and with philosophical thinkers throughout history. Philosophy at the Institute for Christian Studies emphasizes deep, contextual reading as well as discussion and interpretation. I was opened to perspectives about our world and the human role in that world, from Scotus' assertion that we are expressions of the uniqueness of each of God's creations to Derrida's argument that we are sites

where untold possibility can come into being. I have learned to see humans as the products of habitual patterns of perception, as points of struggle for power, and as unknown sources of revelation through discourse. In being opened to thinking about myself and my experience in these new ways, I was opened to conversion and development.

Studies changed and developed my spiritual, affective, and intellectual life. The spiritual life at ICS is rich and vibrant. ICS is a place of investigation of new perspectives in the firm hope of discovering truths that can help us live our lives with greater awareness and authenticity. I learned to participate in discussions with careful attention to whether and how my perpective usefully contributed to dialogue and to discern when to speak with confidence and not defensiveness in the free exchange of ideas. I have appropriated so many important skills modeled by my teachers, including thoroughness and attentiveness to research, reading with a post-critical and not merely critical eye for the useful insights in all thinkers, and even skills of teaching and leading others in intellectual investigations.

Studies helped me to take up responsibility in service. The foremost way this service has begun is through my MA Thesis itself. I could not have laboured so intensely for my own gain, though through the process I gained a great deal. It has been my sincerest desire to express the powerful insights the reading of Levinas and other thinkers has inspired in me in such a way as to help and console others with those insights. I do not wish, by my thesis, to impart advice to make others better at living. Rather, I wish to participate with others in a process of living better through discussing and developing these insights in a discourse.

Speaking God's Word of Consolation: Levinas and Right Relationship

As remarked above, first studies is oriented towards the apostolic mission of the society: to promote faith and serve justice by pursuing right relationship with God, between people, and

with creation. God's Word is living and active in human relationship and by encouraging us to pursue relationship authentically, Levinas provides us with a pathway to participating in God's saving activity. This greater authenticity requires conversion in the areas of our image of the human self, in interpersonal relationships, and in social and political structures.

Levinas correctly construes the pathway to right relationship among people as the abandonment of egoism. Contemporary culture may not be receptive to traditional Christian calls to self-negation and humility. Contemporary culture elevates the pursuit of autonomy as the summit of the human project. But even as these ideas pervade our culture, people are dissatisfied with this image and the impediments to authentic interaction it entails. Levinas provides a useful set of philosophical insights that allow us to articulate the key role self-giving in relationship plays in an authentic human life; Levinas uses language that culture will be more comfortable with appropriating. As Levinas points out, egoism simply does not result in the satisfaction of our innermost desires. Levinas helps us articulate that our innermost desires are not merely for ourselves but for the others whose perspectives contribute to the meaningfulness of life.

Our Jesuit apostolic ministry will certainly include formation of the human person for right relationship with those in close personal proximity: family, friends, colleagues, and those strangers we encounter along life's journey. Levinas' insights provide important tools for living out these relationships well. Jesuits are formed and missioned to form people to welcome others as more than objects, as persons whose perspective contributes to our understanding of the meaningfulness of our own experiences. In genuinely listening to others in a way that makes us open to being changed by them, we develop the habit of genuinely listening to and being changed by the Spirit. Levinas helps us, on the interpersonal level, not only to listen but to speak. Levinas' philosophy provides a methodology for speaking in a way that invites discourse

and interpretation. We are called to spark debate and discussion and develop pathways of communication between persons. Especially between persons who are not accustomed to hearing from one another, between people in conflict, and between the powerful and those who are marginalized.

The promotion of right relationship among people will also include participation in social and political discourse. Levinas takes pains to emphasize the need for the testimony of people, especially those most voiceless in society, in order for politics to promote justice. Levinas' insights provide us with unique resources for accessing and amplifying the testimony of political participants and to call for structures to change in response to this testimony. The Spirit promotes a dialogue of reconciliation between groups. Jesuits and collaborators are called to facilitate this dialogue. Making use of Levinas enables us to undertake this mission in a way that construes difference as a blessing, in a way that perceives the participants as sites of possibility rather than as objects of knowledge, and understanding that all the participants are already experiencing the call to ethical responsibility in their encounters with each other. Our mission will not be to form people against their nature but to nurture their truest and most authentic desires.

God's Word of Consolation in Discourse: Ongoing Formation

We ourselves are sites of possibility for welcoming and interpreting God's Word. The Jesuit mission can usefully and truthfully be described as a discourse of welcoming the expressions of the Spirit in all things and offering our own expressions in service to all. My philosophy studies have oriented me towards God, God's people, and God's creation with a listening ear, creating in me a willingness to be surprised and changed by what I receive. I hope to model this spiritual disposition in any apostolic role I may take on, but I think it will be

especially appropriate to mission in the intellectual apostolate. We are called to make use of the tools of analysis provided by formation in philosophy to promote depth in our understanding of culture, depth in our research into the helps and insights of the academic tradition, and depth in the spiritual vitality and authenticity of those with whom we dialogue. I am looking forward to engaging in dialogue with teachers and students, thinkers and researchers, and those who are voiceless and marginalized. In so doing, I hope to arrive at insights I could not have generated on my own. I hope to affirm the value of those I encounter as calling myself and all to ethical responsibility.

Our orientation as Jesuits is outward, towards the frontiers. We do not see the self in isolation as the model of the human person, nor do we see the church in isolation as the model of religious life. We turn to face the other. We are persons founded in relationship to Christ present in the face of the stranger and in the most vulnerable members of society. Our church is also founded in such a relationship. As church, we hear and respond to God's Word of consolation in a discourse that changes us and takes us out of ourselves, that opens us to the new possibilities engagement with God, with others, and with creation can provide.