

Reversal of terms:
the
phenomenological
impact of levinas



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A stated purpose of Levinas for his book *Totality and Infinity* (henceforth “TI”) was to establish ethics as first philosophy. However, the goal appears moot as Levinas, as with many terms within the text, does not explicitly explain what the phrase “first philosophy” means; nor does the term ‘ethics’ seem to maintain much—or indeed, any at all—of its typical usage, such as the cultivation of virtue (as in virtue ethics), rational self-policing (as in deontology), or rational calculation of utility or happiness (as in utilitarianism). In what sense then are we able to call Levinas’s ‘ethics’, ethics? Indeed, Levinas does not aim to offer moral directive, what Derrida acutely calls “an Ethics of Ethics,” the purity of which maintains itself—does not “negate and forget”—only prior to being “determined as concepts and laws,” laws that aim to establish “a morality”.[1] Indeed, in the sense of being prior to determination as ‘laws and concepts’ indicates that ethics for Levinas are prior to the historicity of these other forms of ethics.

If Levinas’s first philosophy is an ethics, it would follow that it is likely logical or metaphysical, however it is neither in a traditional sense. Rather, metaphysics for Levinas is an interpretive phenomenological account of the repetitive encounter of the face-to-face, which is precognitive. Due to the precognitive nature of this encounter, Levinas uses phenomenological descriptions to get at what is the very heart of human experience. As a professor once quipped about continental philosophers in the vein of Levinas, “They talk about life, man”. In this essay I would like to explore what it means for Levinas, for ethics to be first philosophy, in phenomenological language. True, this topic sounds more like an explication,

however, as the meaning is not much expounded upon, some of the liberties taken herein fall under the rubric of 'research' rather explication.

Phenomenology

To talk about ethics as first philosophy is truly a big idea. Interesting that in their 'incorruptibility', certain continental philosophers were able to approach such grandiose ideas, think about them, and remain pure and without grand narrative. There is hardly an idea larger than the one present at hand. Indeed, if Levinas is correct in his thinking of ethics as first philosophy, then the idea that "ethics is an optics," which I take to mean that the ethical response to the Other is the prime perspective for all philosophy, has been entirely missing Western philosophy.[2] If this idea has been so elusive, it is perhaps not incorrect to be diligent in questioning the topic, especially considering the speculation involved. Levinas's claims rest on phenomenological grounds, and thus, in our questioning, the answer we should seek is *how* Levinas's account is proven phenomenologically.[3]

For Levinas, phenomenology is describing the "horizons" in which "naïve thought" and experience are found, and these horizons "endow them with meaning;" Indeed, these horizons are "interpreted as thoughts aiming at objects," where what matters for Levinas is "the overflowing of objectifying thought by a forgotten experience from which it lives." [4] This 'forgotten experience' is essential as it is a horizon that conditions all intentional content and demands that "the terms must be reversed;" the predisposition in philosophy where ontology is primary to ethics, must be reversed.[5] So then, our goal is before us. If Husserlian phenomenology is the motor that

makes possible the “ passage from ethics to metaphysical exteriority,” we must tend toward finding a horizon to unpack that allows us to make this explicit.[6]For this, we shall look at the claim that the face of the Other is an ethical experience—that the face is not a perspective, but “ opens” other “ perspectives” ;[7]thus it has a “ meaning prior to *Sinngebung*” and signifies the “ philosophical priority of existent over Being” .[8]

Not all examples in Levinas lend themselves to phenomenological analysis; his treatments of Plato and Descartes, and even Hegel, would resist this. Rather, it is our “ relations with men... that give to theological concepts the sole significance they admit of.”[9]Thus, beginning to speak of the Other comes not from its philosophical tradition, but with the form it takes in phenomenology; so, we begin with Husserl.

An extensive treatment of Husserl is beyond the scope of this paper, and very much beyond the scope of this author, so we will continue, as always, in acknowledged naivety. Husserl reformulated the question of the other from an epistemological one—do others have ‘ minds’? —to a step removed from such questions. Phenomenology instead looked at the evidential structure that these questions depend upon. It rather attempts to describe how our experience these ‘ other minds’ as intentional content is established. The import way this differs from traditional philosophy is that transposing questions of fact into phenomenological descriptions, changes them into questions of meaning-constitution [*Sinngebung*], further, this is precisely “ transcendental idealism” .[10]Though, this is not psychological, nor Kantian. Rather it is universe of constituted unities whose sense depends on “ transcendental subjectivity”; and if “ transcendental subjectivity is the <https://assignbuster.com/reversal-of-terms-the-phenomenological-impact-of-levinas/>

universe of possible sense, then an outside is precisely—nonsense.”[11]This suggests that what can be meaningfully referred to, can be understood in its meaning solely in the terms in which its “ being and validity” is evidentially established. Thus, idealism is concerned with the inability to describe what it always entails, “ transcendental intersubjectivity.”[12]

Intersubjectivity is entailed because my conscious experiences involve a transcendent “ common world for ‘ all of us’ ”.[13]These are not others in the sole sense of inhabiting a space, but they co-constitute the sense of the world. We must see now, then, whether the Other can be constituted from my experience. Because Husserl says phenomenology will present the possibility of “ the being for me of others... and the more precise nature of their being for me,”[14]however, not yet questioning whether they are for me in a Levinasian sense, but the rather their *givenness* of the Other as other. Importantly, however, it *appears* that Levinas objects to Husserl’s assertion that there is nothing outside transcendental subjectivity when he calls the transcendence of the other as “ metaphysics. Further so when he calls the Other “ exteriority” and “ meaning prior to *Sinngebung* ”.[15]However, Levinas does not truly reject this as he appropriates the term “ metaphysics” and couches it in phenomenological language.[16]Further, Levinas does not agree with Husserl’s transcendental constitution as it tries to reduce the “ metaphysical relation” to the Same, because transcendental constitution is interpreted as “ representation.”[17]But, we will say that the ethical ‘ height’ from which the Other calls me, is determined in my consciousness, that is, we only have *evidence* from the first-person, as it were, of the “ separated

being". So, then what does Husserl say is *evidence* that the Other is constituted for me?

Husserl makes a strange leap in this point from the " universal transcendental sphere", to a " sphere of peculiar ownness" where we " disregard all constitutional effects of intentionality relating immediately or mediately to other subjectivity." [18] This second reduction retains a " unitarily coherent stratum of the phenomenon world" as the " correlate of continuously harmonious, continuing world-experience." [19] Here, at this abstracted level, we can find the evidence of my consciousness of the Other. At this level we have what Levinas refers to as the " nudity" of the face. [20] For Husserl we are at a level abstracted from descriptive features, where we have at our disposal the " other subject" unburdened by things like social relations, etc. Indeed, Levinas reflects on this when suggesting separated beings are in a world of " existence without existent" that is " mythical." [21] Indeed, it is still a realm of full experience, but as Levinas says " the idea of infinity, which requires separation... so profoundly that the idea of infinity could be forgotten." [22] In fact, this is a requirement for exteriority of the Other. Therefore, ipseity is always informed by the Other, but it is not necessary, and I live with the possibility of refusing the Other. Husserl and Levinas both, then, begin with a separation, so the Other enters to an already there body.

This must be a body, because as Husserl says, within the sphere of ownness, I am no longer " I, this man," but I am " embodied" and " find my animate organism as uniquely singled out" as that which " I ' rule and govern' immediately." [23] From this, all others become accessible. These others are <https://assignbuster.com/reversal-of-terms-the-phenomenological-impact-of-levinas/>

different from each other, and from my 'animate organism', but not 'other than me' as radical alterity. Anything experienced here is "nothing more than a synthetic unity inseparable from this life and its potentialities." [24] The problem here for Husserl is that this "reduced ego" should have "intentionalities with an existence-sense whereby he wholly transcends his own being" but how can "something actually existent for me—and... be anything else than, so to speak, a point of intersection belonging to my constitutive synthesis?" [25] Here, we finally get to an answer that makes things clearer [26] when Husserl says that "the intrinsically first other (the first 'non-Ego') is the Other ego." [27] Only after this, can the things in my sphere become actually other, objective things: "the appearance 'of' a determinate 'Objective' world, as the identical world for everyone, myself included." [28]

Now that we have the problem of the phenomenological Other for Husserl, we can see how he attempts to address it. Husserl says that we experience the Other's subjectivity as an "apperception" where we recognize the Other's body as similar, but under the sway of another ego. [29] To establish that this other body is not my own, Husserl asserts that we determine this through "appresentation" where "each of these contents excludes the other; they cannot both exist at the same time," and thus, "an ego is appresented as other than mine. That which is primordially incompatible, in simultaneous coexistence, becomes compatible because my primordial ego constitutes the ego who is other for it by an appresentative apperception, which, according to its intrinsic nature, never demands and never is open to fulfillment by presentation." [30] Therefore, the *radical* alterity (as Levinas

proclaims) of the Other consists in my consciousness, of something that can “ never become actualized in my primordial sphere.”[31]That is to say, a separate consciousness. However, in Husserl’s attempt to differ between difference and alterity, this case does not seem to stand up to the task.

The Other here is radically other because what I experience in the second body is something that can never be *given* to me in person. If the Other’s appearance-systems are not mine because they present a thing from ‘ there’ which mine present from ‘ here’, the Other’s radical absence is not different from the absence of a *physical* thing, which remains a part of my essence. The absence of the dark side of the moon is just as absent if I were to see it from *there* rather than *here* and is just as out of reach as the Other’s consciousness. So, for Husserl, he establishes the Other’s subjectivity through apperception, but it cannot be said that it transcends my essence—or overflows; contains more than is possible to contain.[32]This is where Levinas comes in.

In his ‘ reversal of the terms’, Levinas instead of considering consciousness as that which is radically separated, he considers it to rather be the Other’s responsibility for his own life. This is what I take Derrida to mean by suggesting Levinas’s philosophy is pure and undetermined by concepts and laws. Rather than having a concept at its heart, it is instead a performance that is responsive to norms. Levinas recognizes, however, that my responsibility to the Other is not the first stage of the encounter. This is because my responsibility to the Other is recognized through an analogy of self-responsibility; and being responsible suggests that I have already recognized being called into question by the Other. Thus, in contrast to <https://assignbuster.com/reversal-of-terms-the-phenomenological-impact-of-levinas/>

Husserl, Levinas's Other has difference, not in consciousness, but by its ability to call me into question.[33]Therefore, before I can conceive of the Other as responsible, from analogizing my own responsibility, I must receive the sense of myself from the Other.

Thus, we have explored the phenomenological background of Levinas's ethics as first philosophy, and it has (hopefully) become clear why the abstracted experience where the Other is given to me is not perceivable. The face can neither be " seen nor touched,"[34]but must be " welcomed", because all perception relies on it. Further, the face commands—expresses—that " thou shall not kill," but this expression is prior to language, thus it is not spoken. In fact, all signs and meaning become possible through this command.

I have undertaken this long-form (though still a tad short) explication of what it truly means for Levinas to " reverse the terms" because, I admit, reading *Totality and Infinity* in class I was not able to absorb much of the book beyond perhaps a secondary naïve reading. Thus, in undertaking this task, which I felt would address one of the very central concerns of Levinas, I have gleaned some important information that I perhaps would have missed if I did not explicate deeply as a research project. Second, this helped in another way which played back into Levinas: I had not previously been introduced to Husserl's thought, except by third party. This has given me an interest in reading some of his work and then moving onto other difficult phenomenological piece, such as *Being and Time* . Last, this was an extremely important exercise in reading and writing phenomenological

language. There is most certainly a steep learning curve, so it was quite informative.

References:

- Derrida, Jacques 1980. “ Violence and Metaphysics,” in *Writing and Difference* , Trans., Allan Bass, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. p. 79-153
- Husserl, Edmund, 1969, *Cartesian Meditations* , Trans., Dorion Cairns. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Levinas, Emmanuel 1969. *Totality and Infinity : An Essay on Exteriority* , Trans., Alphonso Lingis, Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press

[1]Jacques Derrida 1980. “ Violence and Metaphysics,” in *Writing and Difference* , Trans., Allan Bass, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. p. 111

Full quote as follows: “ It is true that Ethics in Levinas’s sense is an Ethics without law and without concept, which maintains its non-violent purity only before being determined as concepts and laws. This is not an objection: let us not forget that Levinas does not seek to propose...moral rules, does not seek to determine a morality, but rather the essence of the ethical relation in general...in question, then, is an Ethics of Ethics [which]...can occasion neither a determined ethics nor determined laws without negating and forgetting itself”.

[2]Emmanuel Levinas, 1969, *Totality and infinity : An Essay on Exteriority* , Trans., Alphonso Lingis, Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press. p. 23

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[3]Ibid., p. 28. Quote as follows: “ the presentation and development of the notions employed owes everything to the phenomenological method.”

[4]Ibid., p. 28

[5]Ibid., p. 47

[6]Ibid., p. 29

[7]Ibid., p. 51

[8]Ibid., p. 51

[9]Ibid., p. 79

[10]Edmund Husserl, 1969 *Cartesian Meditations* , Trans., Dorion Cairns. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff. p. 86 Here forward, CM

[11]Ibid., 84

[12]Ibid., p. 84

[13]Ibid., p. 87

[14]Ibid., p. 87

[15]Ibid., p. 24, 51

[16]TI., p. 47, 23. Levinas says exteriority “ does not do violence to the I, is not imposed upon it brutally from the outside” (47), rather that it is “ reflected within the totality and history, within experience” (23)

[17]Ibid., p. 38

[18]CM., p. 93 Regarding this section of his text, I did not totally understand what he was doing. It seems like a strange cop-out, but according to an explanation of some other sources, it is not, and still important to establish Levinas's position.

[19]Ibid., p. 96 This adds some sense to the previous quote (because I see what he is doing), though I am skeptical of his argument. This is for another paper, however.

[20]TI, p. 199

[21]Ibid., p. 45-46, 52

[22]Ibid., p. 181

[23]CM., p. 97

[24]Ibid., p. 103

[25]Ibid., p. 105

[26]This is sarcasm.

[27]Ibid., p. 107

[28]Ibid., p. 107

[29]Ibid., p. 112, 113

[30]Ibid., p. 119

[31]Ibid., p. 113

[32]TI, p. 27

[33]Ibid., p. 99, 101

[34]Ibid., p. 194