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The Strange Face & Form of the Stranger in Levinas¹

Introduction

What does the notion of the ‘stranger’ signify in Emmanuel Levinas’s thought?

Elsewhere I have argued that one finds an opposition between the alterity of transcendence and the alterity of strangers in his thought.² The alterity of ‘strangers’ referred to in that context denotes the concrete worldly stranger that the self does not identify with – be it on account of race, gender, sexual orientation, religious or political conviction, and the like. However, in Levinas’s work one also finds that the ‘stranger’ signifies a conceptually complex and multi-dimensional construct that exceeds and supplements its signification as ‘not one of us’.

The opposition between the alterity of transcendence and the alterity of horizontality³ may be unpacked by recasting it in the mould of the antithetical couplet of the ‘face’ and the ‘form’ of the stranger in Levinas. In other words, the notion of the stranger appears in different guises in Levinas’s work, different guises that imply divergent obligations as well as rights. Paradoxically, as is well-known, for Levinas, the ‘face’

¹ I am enormously grateful to Avi Sagi for his extensive constructive engagement with an earlier version of this essay, which enabled me to fine-tune the analyses offered here.

² Benda Hofmeyr, “Levinas and the Possibility of Dialogue with Strangers”, *Journal of the British Society of Phenomenology* 47, no. 2 (2016): 185.

³ The ‘alterity of horizontality’ refers to the otherness of incarnated ‘strangers’ found in the world ,

of the stranger is faceless, without features, not flesh, but the absolute alterity of transcendence, that is, the Other. The form of the stranger, on the other hand, is precisely endowed with an incarnated recognizable face that belongs to the mundane historical world, revealed in being horizontally. This apparent opposition is further complicated by the fact that the face cannot be separated from its form. The Stranger as Other *is* the Stranger as another person that is ‘not one of us’. The absolute Other addresses us *through* the incarnated other person. As we shall see, on occasion Levinas himself gets caught in this double-bind, a snare that raises questions about the status of his ethical metaphysics. In the following contribution, I endeavour to excavate what exactly the notion of the stranger signifies in Levinas’s thought, first as face and then as form. In the fourth conclusive part of the essay, I critically reflect on the implications of the fact that the face and the form of the stranger are in fact inseparable. First, however, I want to take a step back from Levinas’s own analyses of the complex relationship between the stranger and the O/other⁴ and consider several models of this relationship that will enable us to situate Levinas’s own analyses more precisely.

I. Conceptual Models of the Relationship between Strangeness and Otherness

⁴ As Badiou is the first to recognize, we have Levinas’s philosophy to thank for the imposition of the imperious demands of difference — the difference of the altogether other as much as the irreducibly incommensurable demands of every particular other. Since the alterity of the other is simultaneously “the alterity of the human other [*Autrui*] and of the Most High [*Très Haut*]” (Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979), 34/4 [Original French page references follow the English translation page references]), I use both the other and the Other throughout this essay. A. Badiou. *Ethics. An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, translated by P. Hallward (London: Verso, 2001).

The best conceptual starting point might be Hegel's approach in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) – as perhaps the most salient of his texts dealing with this issue. For Hegel, the other is neither an object found “there” nor an alter ego but an object-subject without which there is no self. Crucial in this regard is his analysis in the “Lordship and Bondage” chapter.⁵ According to Levinas, the other is necessary for the self to become conscious of itself. Yet, the other is above all an object for the self and its liberation from being an object is dictated by the fact that it refuses to be an object because it is a subject. Sartre has also argued this point in his incisive analyses in *Being and Nothingness* (1943).⁶ Levinas, however, disregarded all of this and established an autonomous category of the Other. The tension in his perception of the O/other outlined in the following sections precisely derives from the dialectic Hegel pointed out.

A significant conceptualization of the stranger is introduced by Georg Simmel as a unique sociological category in 1908. For Simmel, the stranger is “the person who comes today and stays tomorrow”. The stranger is distinguished from the “wanderer” and is conceived rather as a “*potential* wanderer: although he has not moved on, he has not quite overcome the freedom of coming and going. He is fixed within a particular spatial group ... But his position in the group is determined, essentially, by the fact that he has not belonged to it from the beginning, that he imports qualities

⁵ See especially the section, “Self-consciousness,” in G. W. F. Hegel. *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, translated by A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 110–19.

⁶ See for example Julie van der Wielen, “The Magic of the Other on Our Relation with Others in Ontology and Experience”. *Sartre Studies International* 20, No. 2 (2014), 58: “[The look] is an experience in which the ‘object-other’ I normally see is replaced by a subject for whom I am now an object which it sees. Only through this experience am I really aware of another free subject who constitutes a world of objects. Because this reversal between subject-me and object-other is the necessary condition for the apprehension of another subject, and because it is impossible, for Sartre, for one to be a subject and an object at the same time, I never relate to a subject while being one too”.

into it, which do not and cannot stem from the group itself". For Simmel, "[t]he unity of nearness and closeness involved in every human relation is organized in the phenomenon of the stranger". More precisely, here "distance means that he, who is close by, is far, and strangeness means that he, who is also far is actually near".⁷ Although not an "outsider" but a member of the group in which he lives and participates, he remains distant from the other – "native" – members of the group. Hence, Simmel does not define who is a stranger, but outlines the dynamic movement of proximity-distance relationships, and what stands out in his approach is the formal aspect – strangeness is a mode of presence in society. As we shall see, Simmel's stranger is not Levinas's Other, even though, as we'll see, he does occasionally draw close to Simmel.

Like many of his contemporaries, Simmel did not relate to the category of the other, which only surfaced in the discourse at a later time. This development relates to the another instructive model of otherness, which Simone de Beauvoir developed in *The Second Sex* (1949). For Beauvoir, otherness is a characterization fashioned by the one who creates the other—men vis-à-vis women, whites vis-à-vis blacks, and so forth. Otherness is a feature of exclusion, an act more radical than defamiliarization. Beauvoir explains it as follows:

She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other.⁸

⁷ Georg Simmel, "The Stranger". Wolff, Kurt (trans.) *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*. (New York: Free Press, 1950), 402-408.

⁸ Beauvoir includes her critique of Levinas here in a footnote: E. Lévinas expresses this idea most explicitly in his essay *Temps et l'Autre*. 'Is there not a case in which otherness, alterity [*altérité*], unquestionably marks the nature of a being, as its

The category of the *Other* is as primordial as consciousness itself. In the most primitive societies, in the most ancient mythologies, one finds the expression of a duality – that of the Self and the Other.⁹

This model fundamentally relies on the Hegelian dialectic in “Lordship and Bondage” with an important turnabout. As pointed out above, for Hegel, the other is for the self – the self turns the other into an object because it is an object-sense. This mutual movement is realized in the joint “life and death” struggle, meaning objectification and liberation from it. Although Beauvoir was aware of this, she understood that the ethic derived from Hegel does not lead to a joint struggle for life, but to a unidirectional relationship from the self to the other.

Husserl also offers a noteworthy model of the stranger. According to his thinking, the other appears *a priori* as other, as refusing objectification. In all of his writings, Husserl grapples with the question of whether the subject can cross the bridge to the other. However, his starting point, as is well known, is the subject rather than the other. Levinas clearly draws from Husserl in this regard, while critically engaging with the impasse it creates between the self and the other. In Levinas’s 1963 *The*

essence, an instance of otherness not consisting purely and simply in the opposition of two species of the same genus? I think that the feminine represents the contrary in its absolute sense, this contrariness being in no wise affected by any relation between it and its correlative and thus remaining absolutely other. Sex is not a certain specific difference . . . no more is the sexual difference a mere contradiction . . . Nor does this difference lie in the duality of two complementary terms, for two complementary terms imply a pre-existing whole . . . Otherness reaches its full flowering in the feminine, a term of the same rank as consciousness but of opposite meaning.’

I suppose that Lévinas does not forget that woman, too, is aware of her own consciousness, or ego. But it is striking that he deliberately takes a man’s point of view, disregarding the reciprocity of subject and object. When he writes that woman is mystery, he implies that she is mystery for man. Thus, his description, which is intended to be objective, is in fact an assertion of masculine privilege.

⁹ Simone de Beauvoir, “Introduction”. *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), 13–25.

Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology, specifically in Chapter 7, he “wonders how Husserl’s phenomenology will finally resolve the as yet unclarified relation between the egological sphere [the sphere of the self, the ego] and the intersubjective sphere: “The reduction of an *ego*, the *egological reduction*, can be only a first step toward phenomenology. We must also discover others and the intersubjective world”, writes Levinas.¹⁰ Richard Cohen further explains that “in *Totality and Infinity* the significance of ethics and justice [...] introduces an alterity that reorients the nominative character of any strictly Husserlian description, introjecting into the ‘originary’¹¹ dimension of the constituting ego the higher *ethical* and prescriptive dimension of intersubjective obligations and responsibilities. A Husserlian return to the meaning to its origin in the constituting ego is insufficient from a Levinassian point of view, owing to an even deeper – or higher – ‘traumatization’, which produces meaning in an ethical sense”.¹² In *Otherwise than Being and Beyond Essence* (1974), Levinas develops the notion of the ego as ‘radical passivity’ awakened to his/her ethical responsibility by way of the traumatizing encounter with the Other, which denucleates the subject of its egoist orientation and thereby enables him/her to hear the call of the Other. Hence the possibility of ethical action.¹³ In this mature work, the Other is a foreign kernel lodged within the subject – an inner alterity that enables the subject to recognize and resonate pre-rationally –

¹⁰ Emmanuel Levinas. *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, trans. André Orianne. (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1973, xxi.

¹¹ Levinas, contra Husserl, contends that our susceptiveness to the other person is not ‘originary’ (‘originary’ may roughly be understood as that which is originally part of something and determines the conditions of possible ways of existing) but ‘pre-originary’ [*susception pré-originnaire*] Emmanuel Levinas. *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis. (Dordrecht/Boston/London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991, 120.

¹² Levinas. *The Theory of Intuition*, xxvi.

¹³ Levinas. *Otherwise than Being*.

affectively – with the appeal of the face. I would therefore venture to say that here the subject is not primary but co-extensive with the Other, a co-extension that inaugurates the possibility of ethical action.¹⁴ We shall return to this issue in the concluding section of this essay. Against this conceptual backdrop let us now venture a more systematic analysis of how the notion of the Stranger figures in Levinas's thought.

II. The Stranger as Face / The Alterity of Transcendence

The Stranger as the Other

Perhaps the most well-known signification of the Stranger in Levinas's thought is as *the Other* indicative of absolute alterity. Levinas contends that the events that break with the world, i.e. those that deviate from its characteristic self-serving violence, such as the encounter with the Other, can be found *in* the world. As a rule, however, egocentrism and other-reductive violence prevail. Others in the world are reduced to objects by virtue of the clothing he wears or the pains she takes concerning her appearance. An object can be grasped, known and is consequently stripped of its otherness. The Other *qua* Other, i.e. as absolute alterity, on the other hand, cannot be objectified or reduced to his/her features or dress code. The Other is devoid of all form, beyond every attribute.¹⁵ It is signification without context — it is meaning all by itself without reference to something else. The face is *kath'auto*.¹⁶ The way in

¹⁴ Benda Hofmeyr. Ed. *Radical Passivity. Rethinking Ethical Agency in Levinas* (Dordrecht/Boston/London: Springer, 2009). See especially my chapter, "Radical Passivity: Ethical Problem or Solution?", 15-30.

¹⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity* (Pittsburg, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 85.

¹⁶ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 75/47, 261/2. *Kath'auto* is a term used by Aristotle

which the Other presents himself or herself always overflows the plastic image I might form of him. As a result, the Other cannot become a content; it is uncontainable. The Other as face is what is most naked.¹⁷ This is why Levinas maintains that the relationship with nudity is the true experience of the otherness of the other.¹⁸ “The nakedness of the face”, according to Levinas, “is not what is presented to me because I disclose it”, rather “[t]he face has turned to me — and this is its very nudity. It *is* by itself and not by reference to any system”.¹⁹ All our “civilized” habits — our fancy-dress codes, our polite manners and manicured social conventions — are all ways to mediate our alterity, to become more similar and to become more “sociable”. “The transcendence of the face”, on the other hand, is “its absence from this world... the exiling [*dépaysement*] of a being, his condition of being stranger, destitute, or proletarian”.²⁰ Hence, the Other as face is by virtue of its absolute alterity a stranger.

According to Levinas, I nevertheless retain the power to reduce the face of the Other to its form — I can murder the Other, that is, I can ignore what is genuinely other about her Otherness. The Other is therefore vulnerable through form. And it is this possibility of murdering the Other that makes the “ethical resistance” of his face an *ethical* and not a real resistance.²¹

and means ‘in itself’ or ‘existing in itself’.

¹⁷ Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 86-87/90-91.

¹⁸ Emmanuel Levinas. *Ethics and Existents*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978), 40/61.

¹⁹ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 74-75/47.

²⁰ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 75/47.

²¹ Benda Hofmeyr, *Ethics and Aesthetics in Foucault and Levinas* (Rotterdam:

The face remains, in a certain sense, exposed to my powers. Levinas describes the face as upright *exposure without defence*. It is what stays most naked, exposed and destitute. The vulnerability of the face almost invites us to an act of violence. The dimension that opens in this sensibility modifies the very nature of power. Henceforth, power can no longer grasp or seize the face as an object or as a knowledge, but can kill. The possibility of murder finds itself in the face of a sensible datum, and yet it finds itself before something whose being cannot be suspended by appropriation. This datum is absolutely non-neutralizable. By grasping a thing as an object, by appropriating or using an object, its independent being is only partially negated. The thing is preserved for me. Murder alone lays claim to total negation. Negation by labour, usage, or representation effects a grasp or a comprehension — essentially an affirmation of my powers to be able. To kill, on the other hand, is not to dominate, but to annihilate. Murder exercises a power over what escapes power. I can wish to kill only an existent, an existing being that exists absolutely independent, which exceeds my powers infinitely, and therefore does not oppose them but paralyzes the very power of power. The Other is the sole being I can wish to kill.²² At the same time, the face is what forbids us to kill.²³

Thus, the Other's address consists in an order, as command.²⁴ There is a commandment in the appearance of the face, as if a master spoke to me from on high.

Printpartners Ipskamp, 2005), 196-197.

²² Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 198/173.

²³ Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 86/90.

²⁴ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 201/176.

At the same time, the face of the Other is the destitute stranger; it is the poor for whom I should do all (and never enough) and to whom I owe all.

To be sure, the Other *can* be killed by me. Prohibition against killing does not render murder impossible. He is “exposed to the point of the sword or the revolver’s bullet”. But he can also oppose me with a struggle, that is, pose to the force that strikes him not a counter-force, but the very *unforeseeableness* of his reaction. He thus opposes me not with a greater force, but with the very infinity of the transcendence of his being. This infinity, stronger than murder, already resists us in his face with the primordial expression, the first word: “you shall not commit murder” (TI, 199/173).²⁵ Here, there is a relation not with an immense opposition, but with something absolutely *other*: the *ethical resistance*.

Ethical *resistance* therefore suggests resistance against my attempt to ignore the Other’s appeal (which would amount to murder), while *ethical* resistance refers to the fact that the Other, who is also the Good, does not impose its rights. The ethical resistance, according to Levinas, is “the resistance of what has no resistance”.²⁶ This resistance is not real but ethical.²⁷ Hence, my encounter with the Other as Stranger coincides with an injunction: although you *can*, “you shalt not kill”. The Stranger is a force endowed with rights but does not enforce them. The Stranger is vulnerability incarnated although (literally) faceless. The Stranger is the Good and hence endowed with a fundamentally ethical signification.

²⁵ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 199/173.

²⁶ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 199/173.

²⁷ Hofmeyr, *Ethics and Aesthetics*, 247-248.

• **Levinas’s Reading of the (Biblical) Obligation to Welcome the Stranger to My Home**

In this section I am concerned with Levinas’s interpretation of the Biblical obligation to welcome the stranger to my home, which – it needs noting – is *his* reading, which is considered quite problematic from the perspective of the Scripture. Levinas contends that the transcendence of the Other, in his eminence, his height and lordship, includes, in its concrete meaning, his destitution, his exile [*dépaysement*], and his rights as a stranger. The Stranger is height and humility. The Stranger [*l’Etranger*] is the one who enters my dwelling and disturbs my being at home with myself [*le chez soi*]. While I am at home in the world, privileged in my own residence, the “autochthon of being”, the Other is the allochthon, the Stranger. I can recognize the gaze of the Stranger [also that of the widow and the orphan] only in giving or in refusing. I am free to give or to refuse, to be host or to show them away at the door.²⁸ In Levinas there is an absolute obligation to answer the appeal of the Other; no answer also constitutes a response and not an evasion of this obligation. The Stranger, in Levinas’s reading, therefore has rights and imposes inescapable obligations.

In “A Man-God?” (1968), Levinas refers to the “God ‘of the stranger, the widow, and the orphan’”.²⁹ Here he refers to the “trace” as “the proximity of God in the

²⁸ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 76/49.

²⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous* (London: The Athlone Press, 2000), 56. *Entre Nous* (Between Us) is the culmination of Levinas's philosophy. Published in France a few years before his death, it gathers his most important work and reveals the development of his thought over nearly forty years. Taken together, they constitute a key to Levinas's ideas on the ethical dimensions of otherness.

countenance of my fellowman”.³⁰ So the rights of and obligations imposed by the Stranger is determined by the Judeo-Christian imperative to show hospitality to, care for, and love one’s fellowman, since God is the God ‘of the stranger’.

In “A New Rationality: On Gabriel Marcel” (1968), Levinas explains that the ethical relation is “both relation and rupture, and this awakening of Me by the other, of Me by the Stranger, of Me by the stateless person, that is, by the fellow human being who is but a fellow human being”. Furthermore, this awakening signifies “a responsibility for the other who must be fed and clothed, my substitution for the other, my expiation for the suffering, and no doubt, for the wrongdoing of the other person”.³¹ The responsibility imposed by the Stranger therefore far exceeds mere hospitality; it requires my willingness to take her place and to take on her suffering and exile. Furthermore, it requires that *I* atone for her sins. The Stranger, then, awakens me to a responsibility that defies reason – a responsibility that is as such perhaps even utterly unreasonable.

- **Showing the Stranger the Door when H/She is ‘Wrong’(?)**

Elsewhere Levinas diverges from this contention that the self is no doubt also responsible for the wrongdoing of the other person. According to Levinas, the Other as Stranger relinquishes his/her right to hospitality and my generosity *when s/he is wrong*. Who or what determines when the Stranger is right or wrong? According to Levinas’s reading, this judgment is founded on the Torah, i.e. it is founded

³⁰ Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 56-57.

³¹ Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 63.

exclusively on the law of the Jewish God as revealed to Moses and recorded in the first five books of the Hebrew scriptures (the Pentateuch). In the broadest sense, then, it refers to the substance of divine revelation to Israel, the Jewish people: God's revealed teaching or guidance for humankind. The term Torah refers to both the Written and the Oral Law and is central to the Jewish tradition. Indeed, according to classic perceptions, including among non-observant Jews, the Oral Law is even more important than the Written Law as it represents the "covenant" with God and singles out the Jewish people. The term Oral Law relates to the post-biblical literature that began developing as an interpretation mechanism close to the destruction of the Second Temple and is still ongoing. This written corpus, gigantic in its scope, is the deep source of the positions endorsed by Derrida and by Jabès on the meaning of the Jewish text. Levinas contends that the rights of and responsibility imposed by the Stranger is subject to Thorahic law, which exempts me from my obligation to respect his/her rights and to take up my responsibility if the Stranger is judged to be in contravention of the law. However, Levinas was better acquainted with Husserl than with this literature and his determinations in this regard may not necessarily reflect Jewish tradition. Within the relatively large community of Levinas scholars active in Israel, including in Jewish fields, his views have often been considered to be quite controversial.³²

In a discussion on the occasion of a conflict between Israel and Palestine, Levinas responds as follows to an interlocutor wanting to know if the Palestinian is not the Israeli's "Other" above all:

³² With thanks to Avi Sagi, a distinguished Jewish Levinas scholar affiliated to the Department of Philosophy, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan, Israel, for this clarification.

My definition of the other is completely different. The other is the neighbour, who is not necessarily kin, but who can be. And in that sense, if you're for the other, you're for the neighbour. But if your neighbour attacks another neighbour or treats him unjustly, what can you do? Then alterity takes on another character, in alterity we can find an enemy, or at least then we are faced with the problem of knowing who is wrong, who is just and who is unjust. There are people who are wrong.³³

From this response it seems as if in the case of Israel Levinas subordinates ethics to what is deemed just from a particular political perspective, sanctioned by the "Sacred History". His response seems to underwrite Sikka's indictment that his stress on the radical alterity of the Stranger is not respectful of difference: "in fact Levinas leans towards a universalizing ethics that is not open to being informed by the dissimilar other, and that, moreover, privileges a particular culture in an insufficiently critical, and therefore, irresponsible, manner".³⁴ In fact, for him, the alterity of transcendence is sharply differentiated from the alterity of strangers – those strangers in need of "translation", the "exotic", those relegated to the seemingly frivolous realm of "dance", those from a "lunar or Martian past", and all "those underdeveloped Afro-

³³ Seán Hand, *The Levinas Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 294. On 14 September 1982, a bomb demolished a party headquarters building in East Beirut, in which Bashir Gemayel, the President of Lebanon, was speaking. He and twenty-six others were killed. In the aftermath of the massacre, Levinas and Alain Finkielkraut were invited by Shlomo Malka to discuss the theme of Israel and Jewish ethics on Radio Communauté, 28 September 1982. This text is part of the transcript of that interview, originally published in *Les Nouveaux Cahiers*, 18 (1982-3), no. 71, 1-8.

³⁴ Sonia Sikka, "How Not to Read the Other?" *Philosophy Today* 43, no. 2 (1999): 196.

Asiatic masses who are strangers to the Sacred History that forms the heart of the Judaic Christian world”.³⁵ In alterity, Levinas insists, “we can find an enemy” and it seems to be especially “strangers” that bear this threatening potential.³⁶ I shall return to this issue in the second part of this chapter.

Again here Levinas’s contention should be differentiated from the Jewish tradition. In the latter, obligations derive either from God’s command or from a moral-rational source acknowledged by the normative system. As such, the stranger and the o/Other do not impose obligations. According to the classic Jewish stance, the commanding subject faces the other, and incumbent on the other is the obligation to open his/her heart and soul. As we know from our lived experience, not every stranger imposes an obligation, and that unless we are committed *a priori* we may not see the stranger at all. In order to see the stranger’s pain and suffering, the subject must activate enabling mechanisms. In Jewish tradition, the self precedes the other and is therefore obliged to love the other. The obligation is “to love your neighbour as yourself”. Hence, unless you love yourself, you will not know how to love the other. In Jewish tradition, the obligation vis-à-vis the other is ethical and therefore also religious. Against this backdrop, Levinas’s discussion regarding the Palestinians strikes one as a bizarre, to say the least.

The Stranger as the Self

³⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, “Jewish Thought Today,” in *Difficult Freedom* (London: Athlone Press, 1990), 160.

³⁶ Hofmeyr, “Levinas and the Possibility”.

The Stranger, however, does not merely signify the Other for Levinas. In “Non-intentional Consciousness” (1983), Levinas identifies the self, the one addressed by the ethical command of the Other, the one subject to the law of the monotheistic God, as the “‘stranger in the earth’, in the words of the Psalmist, the stateless or homeless person, who dares not enter ... Not in the world, but in question”.³⁷ The exact same phrase is found in “From the One to the Other: Transcendence and Time” (1983), but augmented with the following: “The interiority of the mental is perhaps originally this, this lack of boldness to affirm oneself in being and in one’s own skin. Not being-in-the-world, but being-in-question” .³⁸ In other words, for Levinas, the I is a stranger in the world to which it does not belong, but more radically, the I is estranged from its own identity or egology by virtue of its guilt vis-à-vis the Other whose place it has usurped, alienated from itself on account of its “bad conscience”. If we cross-reference this with Psalms, we find the following verse: “I *am* a stranger in the earth: hide not thy commandments from me” (Psalm 119: 19, King James Bible) (also cf. Hebrews 11: 13; Leviticus 25:23). I Chronicles 29: 15 words it as follows: “For we are foreigners and sojourners in Your presence, as were all our forefathers. Our days on earth are like a shadow, without hope”. Psalm 39: 12 reads “For I am a foreigner dwelling with You, a sojourner like all my fathers”.³⁹ In the following section, I will critically consider the stranger as form in Levinas.

II. The Form of the Stranger / The Alterity of Horizontality

³⁷ Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 129.

³⁸ Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 143.

³⁹ Source: <https://biblehub.com/psalms/119-19.htm>

The Stranger as ‘Not One of Us’

Levinas’s attitude towards concrete strangers overdetermined by their physiognomy and their beliefs and/or allegiances that differ from the self’s diverges dramatically from his ethical metaphysics founded on the rights of and the obligations we bear towards the Stranger as Other. In my essay, “Levinas and the Possibility of Dialogue with Strangers” (2016), I have argued that Levinas and his thought are beset by prejudices that cast a disparaging shadow over his well-known exposure of the violence at the very heart of Western philosophy – the reductive tendency of the Self to reduce, subject or ‘colonize’ all forms of alterity that cross its path. The Other is not merely the one who appeals to me in the face of the beggar, the orphan or the widow, as the Levinas of *Totality and Infinity* (1961) famously contends. In his second magnum opus, *Otherwise Than Being and Beyond Essence* (1974), Levinas more radically insists that this Other is an alterity lodged *within* the self. As we shall see, Levinas’s conception of alterity as *the* Stranger is of a completely different order than the alterity of strangers conceived as ‘not one of us’, i.e. those others of non-Western cultures that belong to the mundane historical world, revealed in being horizontally (*horizontalement*). Levinas’s alterity is the alterity of transcendence – an epiphany of what Levinas calls “sense” that breaks through the horizontality of cultural meaning (cf. Levinas 1964). Let us take a closer look at the various instances in which Levinas’s attitude towards and views concerning concrete strangers became manifest.⁴⁰

First and foremost, Levinas has been guilty of a number of explicitly racist remarks.

⁴⁰ Hofmeyr, “Levinas and the Possibility”.

For example, in “The Russo-Chinese Debate and the Dialectic”⁴¹ on the Sino-Soviet tension, an article published in 1960 in *Esprit*, Levinas writes:

The exclusive community with the Asiatic world, itself a stranger to European history to which Russia, in spite of all its strategic and tactical denials, has belonged for almost a thousand years, would this not be disturbing even to a society without classes? ... In abandoning the West, does not Russia fear to drown itself in an Asiatic civilization which, it too, is likely to carry on existing behind the concrete appearance of dialectical resolution?⁴²

According to Caygill, “[t]he evocation of a national and then a European identity that must be protected against a culture that is a stranger to its history, the figuration of contact with the other in terms of drowning, would seem to invert all of the theses of Levinas’s thought”.⁴³ Levinas continues by describing the Chinese as “the yellow peril”, which he qualifies as not being “racial” but rather “spiritual”. “It does not involve inferior values”, he contends, “it involves a radical strangeness, a stranger to the weight of its past, from where there does not filter any familiar voice of inflection, a lunar or Martian past” (my emphasis).⁴⁴ Levinas’s disclaimer appears quite vacuous since it is virtually impossible to conceive of any circumstances in which such a designation would be considered anything other than blatantly racist, let alone this particular context in which Levinas “consigns a phantasm of Asia to the moon or

⁴¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Les imprévus de l’histoire* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1994).

⁴² Levinas, *Les imprévus*, 171, cited in Howard Caygill, *Levinas and the Political* (London: Routledge, 2002), 184.

⁴³ Caygill, *Levinas and the Political*, 184.

⁴⁴ Levinas, *Les imprévus*, 172.

another planet, thus figuratively stripping Asians of their humanity”, as Caygill observes.⁴⁵ Levinas’s insistence upon the “radical strangeness” of the Chinese resonates with his suggestion elsewhere that the Asiatic is a stranger to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.⁴⁶ In this essay, “Jewish Thought Today”, Levinas refers to “[t]he arrival on the historical scene of those underdeveloped Afro-Asiatic masses who are strangers to the Sacred History that forms the heart of the Judaic-Christian world” (my emphasis).⁴⁷ Levinas seems to suggest that the long history of the Asiatic tradition lacks genuine significance, because it is devoid of the dimension of transcendence. He further worries – a concern that smacks of xenophobia – that the demands of the “underdeveloped Afro-Asiatic masses” – the strangers – might endanger the authenticity of the State of Israel and marginalize Jews and Christians.⁴⁸ Levinas’s racist proclivities surfaced again in a 1991 interview in which he said: “I often say, though it’s a dangerous thing to say publicly, that humanity consists of the Bible and the Greeks. All the rest can be translated: all the rest – all the exotic – is dance.”⁴⁹

What, then, about all those outside the influence of the Bible and the Greeks? What about those people who accept submission to the law, but not the Judaic-Christian

⁴⁵ Caygill, *Levinas and the Political*, 184.

⁴⁶ Levinas, “Jewish Thought Today”.

⁴⁷ Levinas, “Jewish Thought Today”, 160.

⁴⁸ Lin Ma, “All the Rest Must be Translated: Levinas’s of Sense,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* (2008): 605.

⁴⁹ Raoul Mortley. *French Philosophers in Conversation* (London: Routledge, 1991), 18; Hofmeyr, “Levinas and the Possibility,” 174-5.

law, for does not Islam, as Critchley rightly points out, mean “submission”?⁵⁰ It could arguably be interpreted to mean that the ethical responsiveness that Levinas theorizes would, on the one hand, be a responsiveness to others, but not to others that are “too strange”, and, on the other hand, only be sanctioned by the Judaic-Christian law. Only those who subject themselves to this particular law, count among those able to realize their full human potential as ethical beings (ibid.).

Apart from these unpalatable racist remarks, which were imprudently uttered in interviews and in the odd commentary on political affairs rather than in his systematic philosophical writings, Levinas’s work is undeniably Eurocentric. In “The Philosophical Determination of the Idea of Culture” (1983), Levinas unequivocally interprets “culture” in terms of the “the privileged dimension of the Greco-Roman West (and its possibility of universalization)” (EN, 185). The Eurocentric bias persists even as his thought proposes to critique the totality underpinning the history of Western philosophy with the infinity of the ethical encounter. It should be noted that Levinas’s Eurocentrism is premised on a very narrow conception of Europe: for him it is clear, “Europe is the Bible and the Greeks”,⁵¹ which wants to foreground the generosity of the Hebraic tradition as well as the wisdom and rationality rooted in a Hellenic lineage, but excludes the constitutive violence of Europe the “empire”. Here Europe is theorized as split-identity – split between Hebraic ethical injunction to take up one’s responsibility towards the Stranger, and Hellenic rationality, which apart from wisdom also signals the other-reductive violence of knowledge that diminishes

⁵⁰ Simon Critchley, “Five Problems in Levinas’s View of Politics and the Sketch of a Solution to Them”, in *Radicalizing Levinas* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2010), 44.

⁵¹ Levinas, *In the Time of Nations*, 119–21.

the transcendent Stranger as face turning it into a knowable object, reducing it to its form. The (ethical) subject too is a split identity – split between its egocentric freedom and its inherent responsibility towards the Stranger. An identity in diastasis. Considered from this perspective, Levinas’s conceptualization of Europe, if properly analyzed, also includes the constitutive other-reductive violence of Europe the “empire”.⁵²

III. The Inseparability of the Stranger as Face and Form

The conundrum that arises in Levinas’s thought is that the Stranger as Other is precisely a concrete, incarnate stranger – the other *person* endowed with empirical features and convictions, features and convictions that might diverge, or necessarily diverge by virtue of being a stranger, from our own. The responsibility I bear is precisely towards those faceless strangers with whom I do not see eye to eye. Yet, in Levinas this responsibility bears on me only if it is sanctioned by the Biblical and Torahic law – a law that precisely relegates others to that of the realm of strangers. This stands in blinding contrast to Levinas’s contention in the “The Rights of Man and Good Will” (1985) that

“goodness”, “charity”, “mercy and responsibility for the other”, “sacrifice in which the humanity of man bursts forth” [as] “a *condition* in which the other comes before oneself. Dis-inter-estedness of goodness: the other in his demand which is an other, the other as face, the other who ‘regards me’ even when he doesn’t have anything to do with me, the other as fellow man and

⁵² Hofmeyr, “Levinas and the Possibility”, 176.

always stranger – goodness as transcendence; and I, the one who is held to respond, the irreplaceable, and thus, the chosen and truly unique. Goodness for the first one who happens to come along, a right of man. A right of the other man above all”.⁵³

Let us recapitulate the insights that we have gained regarding functioning of the notion of the ‘Stranger’ as the face in Levinas’s systematic philosophical writings, on the one hand, and his views expressed in interviews and in the odd commentary on political affairs regarding the form of the stranger.

Levinas contends that the absolute Other, i.e. the Other as face, is by virtue of its absolute alterity a stranger. The self’s encounter with the Other as Stranger coincides with a prohibition, a prohibition which is nevertheless not an impossibility: although you can, “you shalt not kill”. The Stranger is a force endowed with rights, rights which it does not enforce. As such, the Stranger is exposed to my power to kill, an incarnated vulnerability although the Stranger is (literally) faceless. For Levinas, the Stranger is the Good, which turns the prohibition into an ethical injunction. The Stranger signifies both height and humility; has rights and imposes obligations.

The rights of and obligations imposed by the Stranger are determined by the Judeo-Christian imperative to show hospitality to, care for, and love one’s fellowman – neighbours yet strangers par excellence – since the monotheistic God is the God ‘of the stranger’. However, the responsibility imposed by the Stranger goes beyond mere hospitality. It commands my willingness to substitute myself for the Stranger – to take

⁵³ Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 157-158.

the Stranger's place and to take on her suffering and exile. Furthermore, it requires that I atone for his sins. The Stranger, then, awakens me to a responsibility that defies reason – a responsibility that is perhaps even utterly unreasonable.

On the other hand, Levinas insists that the Other as Stranger relinquishes his/her right to hospitality when s/he is *wrong*. Such a judgment strips the Other of his/her alterity and reduces the Stranger to a specific stranger. This judgment is based on Levinas's reading of Thorahic law. If s/he acts in contravention of Thorahic law, I am exempt from my obligation to respect his rights and any responsibility vis-à-vis the Stranger.

In Levinas's thought one finds that the 'stranger' is not only the Other, but also refers to the positionality of the self. The self is the one addressed by the ethical command of the Other, the one subject to the law of the monotheistic God, and Levinas identifies this self as the 'stranger in the earth'. The I is a stranger in the world to which it does not belong, but more radically, the I is estranged from its own identity or egology by virtue of its guilt with regard to the Other whose place it has usurped, alienated from itself on account of its "bad conscience".

The stranger also appears as form in Levinas's thought, that is, as incarnated stranger. In fact, for him the alterity of transcendence (the face of the Stranger) is sharply differentiated from the alterity of strangers (the stranger as form) – those strangers in need of "translation", the "exotic", those relegated to the seemingly frivolous realm of "dance", those from a "lunar or Martian past"⁵⁴, and all "those underdeveloped Afro-Asiatic masses who are strangers to the Sacred History that forms the heart of the

⁵⁴ Levinas, *Les imprévus*, 172.

Judaic Christian world”.⁵⁵ Such nomenclature testifies to the fact that Levinas’s attitude towards actual strangers – strangers overdetermined by their physiognomy and their beliefs and/or allegiances that differ from the self’s – diverges dramatically from his ethical metaphysics founded on the rights of and the obligations we bear towards the Stranger as Other. Such remarks also bear witness to his undeniable Eurocentrism – Europe split between its allegiance to the Bible, on the one hand, and the Greeks, on the other. Levinas’s “Europe” is torn between the Hebraic ethical injunction to take up one’s responsibility towards the Stranger, and Hellenic rationality, which apart from wisdom signals the other-reductive violence of knowledge. The latter diminishes the transcendent Stranger as face turning it into a knowable object, reducing the face to its form.

Based on the above, it could be argued that the ethical responsiveness that Levinas theorizes would, on the one hand, be a responsiveness to Strangers, but not to Strangers that are “too strange”, and certainly not to Strangers that do not subject themselves to the Judaic-Christian law. On the other hand, one might more generously contend that Levinas’s own personal ethical fallibility does not stand in opposition to his ethical metaphysics, but underwrites it. His central point of critique levelled against Western metaphysics is its violent Other-reductive tendency to subject everything truly ‘strange’ to the logic of the Same – a tendency that Levinas diagnoses and critiques, but that he fails to abstain from being a thinker firmly steeped in that very tradition.

⁵⁵ Levinas, “Jewish Thought Today”, 160.

Furthermore, although Levinas contends that the face cannot be reduced to its form, the face is in actual fact inseparable from its form. For Levinas, the transcendent cannot be contained within the visible, yet it is precisely the visible person that appeals to me for aid and imposes a responsibility incumbent upon me. The ‘trace’ of the Other resides *in* the incarnated other person and addresses me through him/her. I am sensitized to the ‘trace’ by virtue of also being another’s Stranger myself, also infected with the ‘trace’. The ‘trace’ of alterity announces the absence of the face from the form,⁵⁶ but also the possibility of not reducing the face of the Stranger to its form, i.e. the possibility of being ethical. However, by virtue of the ‘trace’ the face is indivisible from its form. The Stranger as Other *is* the Stranger as another person that is ‘not one of us’. Sagi reiterates this argument by critiquing Levinas for equating the Other to the stranger: “In interpersonal relationships, however, we face specific concrete entities, not strangers.”⁵⁷ He further states that “for Levinas the other cannot be replaced since the demand comes from him, from his face, not from the subject: ‘the intersubjective relation is a non-symmetrical relation’ says Levinas, because ‘I am subjection to the Other’.”⁵⁸ “Is there any meaning to a demand addressed to me if it does not originate in a specific entity? ... if the other remains a stranger, what kind of demand is addressed to me beyond the basic ‘Thou shalt not kill’?, Sagi pointedly asks.⁵⁹ The Other in Levinas then “is unconditioned by the subject and precedes it”.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ The function of the trace is to divert attention to what is beyond without signifying it. Emmanuel Levinas. *On Escape*, trans. by Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 38-44.

⁵⁷ Avi Sagi. *Living with the Other*, trans. Batya Stein (Cham: Springer Nature, 2018), 60.

⁵⁸ Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 68, quoted by Sagi, *Living with the Other*, 61.

⁵⁹ Sagi, *Living with the Other*, 61.

It is this double-bind of the Other as face *and* as form that Levinas as both theorist of ethical metaphysics and ‘human-all-too-human’ thinker gets himself ensnared in on occasion. What this double bind throws into relief is the fact that Levinas’s ethical metaphysics is not to be interpreted as or translatable into a practical and/or practicable moral philosophy. It is not a guide to ‘how ought I to act’. ‘Love thy neighbour/stranger’ is an ethical *ideal*, its rare occurrence an anomaly in our world of existential misery and other-reductive violence. As an ethical *metaphysics* it deals with the first principles of things with no basis in reality. As he puts it: “there is no physics in metaphysics”.⁶¹ As an *ethical* metaphysics, the first principle or ‘first philosophy’ it propounds is our primordial responsibility to the Stranger as face. The question that this responsibility poses is: “By being, by persisting in being, do I not kill?”.⁶² For Levinas, this is the important question of the meaning of being and not “why is there something rather than nothing – the Leibnizian question so much commented upon by Heidegger”.⁶³ Levinas’s ethical metaphysics exposes this “crisis of being ... marked by the fact that what is most natural becomes the most problematic. Do I have the right to be? Is being in the world not taking the place of someone?”.⁶⁴ However, as Levinas rightly points out, Hamlet’s question, ‘To be or not to be’⁶⁵ is precisely *not* the question per excellence, for in reality we have not

⁶⁰ Sagi, *Living with the Other*, 128.

⁶¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 41/50.

⁶² Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 120.

⁶³ Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 120.

⁶⁴ Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 121.

⁶⁵ Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 63/169.

choice but to be. Not having come into being, but *brought* into being and yet guilty by that very fact. By virtue of taking someone's (a Stranger's) place – both of the Stranger as face and as form, the face that addresses us in its incarnated form – the Self is itself a Stranger in Being, the one that does not belong. Being “awakened” by the Stranger is becoming aware of our fundamental existential condition of *estrangement*.

We may conclude then that the notion of the Stranger may be interpreted to function as a key signifier in Levinas's thought – encapsulating the central tenets of his ethical metaphysics as it mediates the (ethical) relation between the self and the O/other and their respective metaphysical and existential conditions.

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