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ETHICS OF CARE

Consider what it is to care about someone, whether in a relatively short emotional engagement, as through *sympathy*, or in an ongoing relationship. Suppose, for example, that you see a child on the verge of falling into a well. You are gripped by the child's plight and moved to prevent the fall.¹ What would be your reason for acting?

You may, of course, hold some universal moral principle that counsels giving aid in such situations. This would give you a reason to help the child, since it would give you reason to help anyone who is in the same position the child is. It would, however, give you no reason that is essentially tied to this child *in particular*, only a reason to help him as someone who needs help in a situation like this.

But how do things seem from your perspective in feeling compassion? Isn't the object of your concern this particular child? Don't you have, through your sympathetic engagement, an interest in *his* plight? Imagine that years later your thoughts return to the scene. You might have a warm interest in the child's subsequent life path without caring similarly about the lives of all other children who had survived similar close calls.

Seeing the child in danger, you are moved to prevent the fall. But why? What is your reason? Don't you want to do so for *his* sake? Through sympathy, you have come to be concerned about him in particular. Your reason for acting is to prevent harm to *him*, not just to someone in need in a situation like his.

These points are reinforced by reference to more extended relationships. In a now-famous example, a man is in a position to save only his wife, Joan, or some stranger from drowning, but not both.² Presumably, morality requires the man to save one of the two, and, of the two, it presumably requires him to save his wife, given the importance of human relationships and the family. If, however, this is the man's full reason for acting, then his concern for his wife will be far from what we might expect in such relation-

ships. He might have no concern for her at all and still have *this* reason. If, however, he cares about his wife in a way appropriate to relationships of mutual love and concern, his reason will be more like “*Joan* will drown unless I save her” than, say, “a person whom I am married to and consequently required to save will drown unless I save her.”

Reflections like these have led in recent years to a critique of orthodox moral philosophy. For example, recall that for Mill, the central problem of ethics is to articulate universal principles or “criteria” of right and wrong; according to **particularist** critics, however, ethics begins with concerns like sympathy and love. Unlike motives resulting from the acceptance of universal principles, these concerns inevitably have particular individuals or groups as objects. They help define a web of relationships to others in which ethical questions apparently take the form, not of What is a person to do in a situation like this, but of What am I to do for this particular person, in light of her situation and our relationship?

Moral Development: From the Perspectives of Kohlberg and Gilligan

It will be useful to discuss these themes in relation to work on moral development presented by the psychologist Carol Gilligan in her influential *In a Different Voice*.³ To establish a sense of context, let’s begin with a recent history of psychological theorizing about moral development.

Gilligan began as a co-worker of Lawrence Kohlberg, whose theory of moral development was the leading paradigm during the 1970s and early 1980s. Kohlberg’s “structuralist” approach was itself a reaction against behaviorist and Freudian theories, which held that moral development consists entirely in socialization rather than the development of inherent potential. According to behaviorist learning theorists, moral beliefs and attitudes are the product of positive and negative social reinforcements. And according to Freudians, they result from internalized parental directives fueled by powerful unconscious motives, such as fear of the loss of parental love. In either case, moral development has no specific inherent tendency. What people end up approving and disapproving, the content of their moral opinions, depends entirely on how they are “educated.”

Kohlberg. In 1932, the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget published *The Moral Judgment of the Child*, in which he argued that moral thinking undergoes developmental stages and that these correspond to stages of cognitive development. Kohlberg pursued this theory experimentally in a series of papers beginning in the late 1950s, arriving at an elaborate and influential three-level/six-stage theory of moral development. Specifically, according to Kohlberg, moral development proceeds through three levels—pre-

conventional, conventional, and postconventional—with each level involving two stages.⁴

In Stage 1 (punishment and obedience), children identify being good and bad solely in terms of avoiding punishment. Then, in Stage 2 (instrumental-relativist), they come to see their own needs and interests as having ethical standing and accept a rudimentary conception of fairness as advantageous reciprocity (“Scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours”).

These first two stages are preconventional in the sense that social rules are given no intrinsic ethical status; their salience depends entirely upon avoiding punishment or advancing egoistic aims. In the second, conventional level, children begin to see morality as having authority apart from their own needs and identify it with social expectations and rules. Stage 3 (interpersonal concordance) identifies good conduct with what others will approve or be pleased by. And in Stage 4 (law and order), individuals see the social order as a source of authority.

In the third, postconventional level, individuals begin to conceive of morality as a standard that is independent of social rules and that provides a standpoint from which to criticize social custom. Stage 5 (social contract) identifies this standard with values and ideals that have resulted from a society’s own critical reflection. And Stage 6 (universal ethical principle) distinguishes between any actual consensus and the universal principles at which such a consensus aims, identifying morality with the latter abstract standard.

Kohlberg argued that these stages amount to a developmental sequence whose underlying mechanism is fundamentally cognitive. As human beings develop more sophisticated capacities for abstract reflective thought, he said, we come to increasingly adequate moral conceptions, culminating in the idea of a universal standard of conduct that is distinct from any actual social rule or custom or even from any standard on which people happen to agree.

Gilligan. As she worked within Kohlberg’s theory, Carol Gilligan became increasingly troubled by implications it appeared to have concerning moral development and gender. For one thing, all the original experimental evidence for Kohlberg’s theory came from studies of boys. For another, girls and young women tended to be less represented among Kohlberg’s higher stages than were males. In particular, they were much likelier than boys to cluster in Stage 3, which emphasizes the pleasing of others (DV.18). Finally, when Gilligan conducted her own studies of both boys and girls, she began to notice what seemed to her two quite different ways of thinking about ethics, two different “themes” or “voices,” which she found differently represented in males and females, respectively. The one more highly represented among males fits comfortably in Kohlberg’s categories. She called

this the “ethics of rights.” The “different voice,” represented more highly among females, and which did not fit well in Kohlberg’s categories, she called the “ethics of care.”

As Gilligan is careful to point out, she is not saying that there is anything essentially male or female about these respective ethical “voices” (DV.2). That the “ethics of care” tends to be associated with females and the “ethics of rights” with males is only a tendency and “an empirical observation.” Gilligan’s project has been to listen to the different voice of the ethics of care that she heard more frequently from girls and women in order to understand it in its own terms and to try to comprehend how ethical thought might develop within it. Even though her explicit aims are psychological, it is this element that makes her project interesting for philosophical ethics. It offers the potential to explore a different, particularist approach to ethics that might be either supplementary or alternative to the philosophical conceptions of “universalist” morality that we have previously considered.

Ethics of Rights Versus Ethics of Care

What exactly are these two different voices? Gilligan tells us that the ethics of rights

- (a) constitutes a fair or just “system of rules for resolving disputes” (DV.10),
- (b) conceives of self and other in universal or general terms (DV.11),
- (c) aims to be impartial (DV.18),
- (d) treats all as separate but equal individuals (DV.27), and
- (e) recognizes the primacy of universal individual rights (DV.21).

With the possible exception of (e), this characterization corresponds to the conceptions of morality advanced by Hobbes, Mill, and Kant. If the problem of collective action was the issue to which the “modern” conception of morality was the solution, as I suggested in the discussion of Hobbes in Chapters 10 and 11, then Gilligan’s characterization of the ethics of rights is close enough to morality as it has been conceived by the moderns. Not all consequentialists have been prepared to give primacy to universal human rights, of course, but some, like Mill, have. And virtually all consequentialists have felt the need to accept the doctrine of universal human rights in some form.

At the most fundamental level, morality assumes no particular connections between individuals other than equal membership in the moral community. Of course, other forms of relationship affect what is morally proper, as in the case of Joan and her husband above. But working out what morality calls for is not *fundamentally* a matter of figuring out what

to do within these more specific relations. What morality requires of me is what it would require of any person in a situation like mine.

By contrast, Gilligan tells us, the ethics of care sees caring for others as primarily “an activity of relationship” (DV.62). It is concerned with responsibility and responsiveness *within* relationships—that is, with how we are to respond to the particular people to whom we are related.

Each of us enters into a complex web of relationships, including family, friends, neighbors, colleagues, fellow community members, fellow citizens, and so on. Relationships of these different kinds involve different forms of care and concern. What it is for a parent to care for a child is different from the kind of concern that friends or colleagues have. Our place in the network of relations is thus also a locus in a network of different forms of care.

As we saw illustrated earlier, care is particularistic. Its object is some *particular* individual(s) or group. My love for my children is for the particular individuals who are my children, not for anyone who might happen to be my child. My concern for my colleagues is for the particular people to whom I bear that relationship, and so on. The ethics of care sees ethics as fundamentally concerned with how properly to care for the particular others to whom we are related *within* the various different relations of care and concern we share with them. The form in which ethical issues present themselves is thus not a matter of what someone should do in a situation like mine where a person to whom I am related in such-and-such a way will be affected in such-and-such a manner. Rather, ethical issues will appear in particularistic form: What am I to do to respond adequately to *Joan's* need? What is my responsibility to *Harold*?

Given the ethics of care's focus on relationships, we can perhaps see why, if Gilligan is right about its being more representative of the thinking of girls and women, this might explain an overrepresentation of females in Kohlberg's Stage 3. As noted, this stage is the initial conventional stage, in which acting morally is identified primarily with pleasing others. From the perspective of Kohlberg's scheme, these traits seem to amount to a relatively immature confusion of the approval of others with being *worthy* of their approval—similar to what Aristotle said about the confusion of honor with genuine virtue. From the perspective of the ethics of care, however, relating to others in a way that elicits their continuing acceptance and affirmation is essential to maintaining connection.

An Example

I can illustrate some of these differences by noting what Gilligan says about the responses of two children, Jake and Amy, to an example she posed to them. The example, which also figured in Kohlberg's experiments, concerns what a man, Heinz, should do when his ill wife needs a certain drug to sur-

vive, Heinz cannot afford to buy the drug at the druggist's price, and the druggist will not lower his price. Specifically, the children are asked whether Heinz should steal the drug, and they are asked also to discuss the reasons for their response.

Eleven-year-old Jake is clear that Heinz should steal the drug, saying, "a human life is worth more than money" (DV.26). Although the druggist will continue to live if he loses money, Heinz's wife will die if she does not have the drug. Amy, also eleven, is less clear when asked whether Heinz should steal the drug. "I don't think so," she responds. "There might be other ways besides stealing it, like if he could borrow the money, . . . but he shouldn't steal the drug—but his wife shouldn't die either" (DV.28). Amy suggests that Heinz might work out a solution with the druggist by making his wife's condition more salient to him. "If Heinz and the druggist had talked it out long enough, they could reach something besides stealing" (DV.29).

What are we to make of these two different responses? Jake describes the issue as "sort of like a math problem with humans" (DV.26). For him, the problem is the relative value of life and property. Settling that determines whether, in a case of this kind, the prohibition against theft is weightier than the obligation to save lives or, more specifically, to save the life of one's spouse. Gilligan points out that Amy sees the situation in very different terms. For her, the issue is primarily how to maintain relationships—between husband and wife, customer and druggist, and so on. What may appear as a feeling of powerlessness or passivity in Amy, an inability to think systematically about moral questions, or an unwillingness to challenge authority, Gilligan suggests, may actually be a reluctance to think about the issue from a perspective outside the respective relationships involved or to "impose" a solution on the individuals in those relationships.

Jake's perspective on the situation is as from outside it. He adopts a **moral point of view**—a perspective that is impartial as between all persons. The problem as he conceives it is What, considered from that perspective, should *someone* do in a situation like this? But Amy is evidently reluctant to think about the issue in these terms. The problem as she conceives it occurs within a web of relationships and can be solved only within them—only, that is, if some solution is found by the *participants* that is mutually acceptable and maintains their respective relationships. For Amy, the problem is, as Gilligan puts it, "a fracture of human relationship that must be mended with its own thread" (DV.31). Since different relationships are structured by different forms of particularistic concern, a solution must be found by the people involved in a way that is consistent with or that expresses the respective relation-defining forms of care for each other as particular individuals.

The foregoing suggests two important apparent differences between the ethics of care and the ethics of rights: (1) the ethics of care is particularistic,

whereas the ethics of rights is universalistic. And (2) the ethics of care conceives of ethical issues as tears in a fabric of relationship that “must be mended with its own thread,” whereas, according to the ethics of rights, the solution to moral problems can be found only from an impartial perspective that transcends personal relationships.

Later we shall consider how real these differences are and, if they are real, how deeply they run. For now, however, we should note that neither depends essentially on the idea of universal *rights*. With respect to these two features, a utilitarian or consequentialist moral conception giving rights no intrinsic standing whatsoever would apparently still contrast with an ethics of care. Indeed, we might imagine a “consequentialism of relationships” which held that flourishing relationships are the only valuable thing in the world, and that the rightness of acts is reckoned by their promotion of this value. Would this be an ethics of care? It seems that it would not, since it would still reckon what to do from a perspective of impartial concern for this value, not from a perspective of particularistic concern within specific relationships themselves.

What Is at Issue?

What really is at issue between an ethics of care and the conception of morality defended by Hobbes, Mill, or Kant? I have indicated two apparent issues—one concerning the perspective of ethical thought and one concerning particularity versus universality. But how real are these disagreements?

Recall Amy’s response to Heinz’s dilemma: that what Heinz should do is to attempt to work out a solution with the various parties that will be mutually acceptable. Is this in unalterable conflict with Jake’s response? Jake treats the parameters of the problem as fixed so that there is no option of convincing the druggist to lower his price or of taking out a loan. Were Jake to think either option a genuine possibility, there is no reason to conclude that he wouldn’t think them morally preferable to theft. Similarly, it is not clear from Gilligan’s reports what Amy thinks Heinz should do if all attempts to work out a mutually acceptable solution fail. Amy says both that Heinz shouldn’t steal the drug and that his wife shouldn’t die. Of course, her position may be that Heinz shouldn’t steal the drug even if it is absolutely necessary to keep his wife alive. But it’s hard to see how that position would be grounded in an unalterable conflict with orthodox conceptions of morality as opposed to springing from some idea within a moral conception—for example, that direct harm or theft is always wrong.

What seems undeniable is a difference of *approach* between Amy and Jake. Whereas Amy’s instinct is to think about a *process* of ethical thought and discussion involving the participants, Jake’s is either to confront directly the issues that such a process would itself address or to say what

Heinz should do if such a process were to break down. For his part, Jake is relatively blind to procedural questions concerning how Heinz should involve others in thinking through their respective problems and how their input is itself relevant to what he should do. And Amy, for her part, is relatively blind to the issue of what Heinz should do if such a process were not to yield a mutually acceptable solution. For all that Jake and Amy say, however, it may be that they would *agree* that Heinz should first attempt to find a mutually agreeable solution that will honor his various relationships and, only if such an attempt fails, that he should then steal the drug.

Amy's concern for process is rooted in her seeing the ethical landscape as a network of relationships. The idea is not that we should involve others in our deliberations because they will help us come to the right decision. Rather, because the question is always what to do in light of the various relationships we have to others, there is no way of specifying the right decision independent of others' input. And since the relevant relationships are often reciprocal, appropriate deliberation must often be *collective*. But here again, it seems that this point could have been fully acknowledged by Mill or Kant. Both could have agreed, for example, that friends have a duty to consult each other, if possible, on matters bearing on their friendship.

Particularism

Even so, there may remain a difference. For a utilitarian like Mill, such a duty would be grounded in the fact that social recognition of the duty is likeliest to promote the general happiness, especially when we take account of the important role that personal relationships play in human happiness. And for Kant, it would derive from the fact that, from the perspective of one rational person among others, anyone would will that friends consult one another. However, although Mill and Kant could have acknowledged a sense in which such a duty is owed to the individual friend, the individual-regarding character of this duty would itself derive from more fundamental universal considerations—utilitarian or Kantian, respectively. Each would owe it to the other, because friends having such a claim on each other in cases like this is recommended from an impartial, moral point of view.

Now, in one way, at least, an ethics of care is bound to agree with this thought. After all, someone who advances or even sympathetically describes an ethics of care, as Gilligan does, is herself thinking or writing not from the perspective of the friends themselves but from a reflective critical standpoint that anyone could adopt. So, although the form of concern that the ethics of care recommends is individual-regarding (defining a perspective of care for, say, Jack, in particular), the ethics of care recommends this

concern not from that same point of view (a concern for Jack's welfare in particular) but as an ethical or moral ideal from a standpoint transcending any particular personal relationship.

But even so, the ethics of care recommends particularistic, individual-regarding care in itself. Its recommendation is not derivative. Utilitarianism and Kantianism, on the other hand, would seem to have a place for particularistic care only to the extent that it can be derived from equal concern and respect for all.

Morality as Derivable from Individual-Regarding Care and Respect

This way of viewing things may be somewhat superficial, however. It may be that both utilitarianism and Kantianism can themselves be seen as deriving from forms of concern and respect that, at their deepest levels, are also individual-regarding.

Utilitarianism. For example, sympathy plays an important role in one traditional route to utilitarianism. Utilitarianism can be seen as the extension to all of the kind of concern we feel for a particular individual through sympathy. Begin with the kind of sympathetic concern for a person that we considered in the example of the child on the verge of falling into a well. In experiencing sympathetic concern, we care about the child himself. We are concerned for *his* plight, for his sake. What happens to him matters to us because *he* has come to matter to us. We see his welfare as valuable because we see *him* as valuable.

Note, first, how this way of seeing the child's welfare as valuable differs from other forms that this thought might take. For example, I might generate an abstract or impersonal interest in the welfare of human or other living beings without genuinely caring about *them*. I might just think the improvement of their lives would make the world better in some abstract, impersonal way. Sympathy, however, is an individual-regarding concern. In having sympathy for the child, I care about *him*. And because I am emotionally engaged with him, and on his behalf, I care about what happens to him. I *therefore* see his welfare as valuable and important. Through sympathy, I come to value the child's welfare *for his sake* by coming to value *him*.

But sympathy is repeatable, of course. Although it can be overridden or stifled in all sorts of ways, sympathy is, by its very nature, a sensitivity that can be engaged by anyone. (Maybe even by any sentient being whose behavior we can interpret as expressing pleasure and pain—but we will confine ourselves to human beings in this discussion.) After all, I described a hypothetical example: a child about to fall into a well. Did it occur to you then that it would matter which *particular* child I was talking about? I

doubt it. So although sympathy is a form of concern for a particular individual and a way of valuing that individual in himself, it is nonetheless implicitly general or universal. Although it is *this particular* child who has engaged our sympathy and who, through sympathy, we value in himself, there may be nothing about him in particular that has engaged us. Although he and no other child exactly like him is the particular object of our concern, another child just like him would equally have engaged us or, more accurately, would have been equally *apt* to do so. When, consequently, we reflect on what it is about the individual child we find valuable and warranting our concern, we must admit that it is nothing over and above the fact that he is *a* child, or even a human or sentient being—someone with a conscious life that can be affected for good or ill.

We can thus arrive at the foundational idea of utilitarianism, that everyone's welfare matters and matters equally, by reflecting on the particularistic, individual-regarding experience of sympathy. Although sympathy involves an experience as of some *individual's* value in himself, it is based on nothing that distinguishes him from any other sentient being. As we might then say, it is because each individual sentient human being (and so her welfare) matters intrinsically that the general happiness matters. In acting for the sake of the general happiness, therefore, we should think of ourselves as acting for *every individual's* sake.

Kantianism. A similar line of thought, but featuring respect rather than sympathy, might be seen as underlying Kantianism. Because Kant spoke of respecting "humanity" or "rational nature" *in* persons, it might seem that he was calling us to the respecting of the feature of personhood or rational agency in persons rather than to the respecting of individual persons *in particular* (G.429). But as with sympathy, this appearance may be deceiving.

First, notice that the kind of respect we are talking about is one that consists in recognizing or acknowledging someone's **dignity** or standing (**recognition respect**) rather than esteeming their character or accomplishments (appraisal respect).⁵ For Kant, all persons have dignity just by virtue of their moral agency, even scoundrels. Thus all are entitled to respect (recognition respect), even those whose character and conduct are not worthy of moral esteem (appraisal respect). Wrongdoing may involve the forfeiture of certain rights to, say, freedom, but wrongdoers do not forfeit their moral status as persons. Even criminals must be treated as ends in themselves.

When he spoke of valuing rational nature *in* someone, however, Kant did not intend any contrast with valuing the individual *herself*. For Kant, there is no distinction between the individual herself and the individual, a rational being. Valuing rational nature in someone is not like valuing her for the gold that is in her teeth. It *is* valuing the person herself.

As an illustration, consider what it is like to have a vivid experience of someone *as a person* whose dignity demands respect. Suppose you are a parent who, complacent in your authority, have become overbearing and self-righteous toward your emerging adolescent. For a while, your child has just been taking it; but this time you've gone too far, and your child upbraids you, saying something like "You treat me as if I were an irresponsible boob. But the fact is that I'm just like you, and you don't like it. I'm just as responsible as you are, and you're a hypocrite to pretend otherwise. You wouldn't stand for me to treat you the way you treat me. And you have no right to do so." You might be brought up short by such a remonstrance. Indeed, the blood might rush to your face as you recognize the justice of your child's charge.

In feeling shame, you also feel respect for your child.⁶ Your shame consists in recognizing yourself through the eyes of your child. And to do that you have to acknowledge the authority of your child's view. You have to see him as having the standing to evaluate you, as someone whose view of you is to be taken seriously. Moreover, in recognizing the justice of his charge, you must be seeing your child as having the standing to lodge the claim he makes against you. This is different from the evaluative authority you see the child as having when you credit his evaluation of you as a hypocrite. In seeing him as having the standing to make the claim to respectful treatment, you see him as someone who can demand respect.

As with sympathy, there should be no doubt that your attitude is directed at an individual person, your child. It is *him*, in particular, whom you are experiencing as having a dignity deserving respect. And if you are moved by what he says to reflect on and change your conduct toward him, your changed conduct will express respect for him *individually*. At the same time, however, what it is in or about him that warrants your respect is nothing unique to him in particular but, rather, something he shares with any rational agent. So, although respect is individual-regarding, it is also implicitly general or universal. When you reflect on your respect for your child, you must admit that it is based on nothing that distinguishes him in particular. (A complication might be that you now respect him partly because he was willing to confront you. But even if this feature is part of the ground for your respect, it is a feature had by anyone who has been likewise willing.)

In this way, then, respect involves recognizing an *individual's* dignity or value in himself, but it is grounded in features that a person shares with any other moral agent. So just as utilitarianism can be seen as extending to all sentient beings (as equally warranted) a sympathetic concern that is directed at particular individuals, so likewise can Kant's ethics be viewed as extending to all persons a kind of respect that is directed at particular individuals also.

Conclusion

If we view them in this way, the conceptions of morality advanced by Mill and Kant are far from being in irresolvable conflict with the ethics of care. Indeed, Gilligan herself sees the ethics of care as involving a developmental process in the direction of “a responsibility to discern and alleviate the ‘real and recognizable trouble’ of this world,” balancing needs of self and others (DV.100). This project seems entirely consistent with Mill or Kant, if not also with Hobbes.

In the end, the ethics of care may not be a radically opposed alternative to morality as conceived by the moderns, so much as an important supplement as well as a different path to some of the same ideas. In the former vein, it brings into the forefront of ethical reflection issues of relationship that, although they provide much of the stuff of our lives, have been relatively neglected by moral theorists. And in the latter, the ethics of care provides a way of seeing equal concern and respect as themselves rooted in ways of relating to others as particular individuals.

Suggested Reading

- Baier, Annette. *Moral Prejudices*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994.
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Bruce Young: An introduction to Levinas

Emmanuel Levinas is considered by many to be one of the most important philosophers of the twentieth century and perhaps of the entire philosophical tradition. He has commented on many strands of the Western philosophical tradition, including the thought of Plato, Descartes, Hegel, and Heidegger, all of whom he has critiqued, but also sought to find value or insight in. Levinas has had great influence on other thinkers, including Jacques Derrida, who owes some of his most important concepts (including "the Other" and "the trace") to Levinas. Levinas himself is often called a "postmodernist" (because along with other recent philosophers he has questioned the tradition's privileging of reason, conceptual knowledge, and certain kinds of metaphysical systematization); he is sometimes called a "phenomenologist" (because he uses some of the methods of Husserl and Heidegger in observing and analyzing human consciousness).

But, though he has been given many labels, Levinas is most often associated with the word "ethical" (and is sometimes called "an ethical postmodernist") because of his emphasis on and concern with what he calls the "ethical" or "social" relation: the relation with "the Other" (meaning "the other person"). Levinas shows persuasively how the various aspects of human experience are founded upon, and bear traces of, the primordial relation with the Other, who brings the self into being by calling it to responsibility and service. By speaking—or even before audible speech, by facing me, looking at me—the Other reveals to me his or her exteriority and infinity: the Other cannot be reduced to a concept. Further, the face of the Other reveals to me the injustice—as well as the impossibility—of my claim to sovereign freedom and egoistic enjoyment. Though Levinas's thought has some affinities with Martin Buber's, the relation with the Other as Levinas describes it is to be distinguished from Buber's I-Thou, since what Levinas describes is not a relation between preexisting entities (according to Levinas, the relation itself makes possible both the interiority of the self and a world held in common with others) and since the relation of the "I" and "the Other" is not self-contained, but involves and from the first reveals the "third party" and the whole of social life. The presence of the Other calls me to service—not only to him or herself, but to all other Others.

According to Levinas, I must accept my relationship with and responsibility toward the Other in order to escape isolation and solipsism and become fully myself. Yet, as Levinas skillfully shows, this relation is not something that comes into existence *because* I have chosen or initiated it. It had to be there already so that I could be in a position to choose. I have never *not* been in relation to someone other than myself. It is this relation with the Other that makes possible and gives rise to my very consciousness. The presence of the Other—with its implicit call to responsibility and service—thus brings me fully into being, reveals to me my separation from what is other, hollows out my interiority, initiates discourse, and makes possible a world I have in common with the Other.

Emmanuel Levinas was born in January 1906 in Kaunas, Lithuania. He died in Paris on December 25, 1995, just short of his 90th birthday. A couple of years or so earlier, Ralph Hancock (of BYU's Political Science Department) met with Levinas and his wife in their Paris apartment and found them warm and charming. Levinas, who is Jewish, grew up in Lithuania and Russia, studied at the University of Strasbourg (France) from 1923-30, spent some time in Germany studying the philosophy of Husserl and Heidegger, became a French citizen (1930), spent six years in a prisoner of war camp during World War II, lost relatives to the Holocaust, and has taught at several French universities, including the Sorbonne.

Through his writing on Husserl, Levinas helped introduce the philosophy of Husserl and Heidegger to France and in particular sparked Sartre's interest in Heidegger (leading to Sartre's writing *Being and Nothingness*). In the late 1940s Levinas gave an influential series of lectures titled "Time and the Other" which, among other things, provoked criticism from Simone de Beauvoir for associating "otherness" and "the feminine." In the late 40s Levinas also published a slim book, *Existence and Existents*, a brilliant but difficult response to Heidegger's claim that anonymous and impersonal "Being" is the fundamental reality or process, a process or reality that gives rise to but then, as it were, swallows up again all individual, ephemeral beings. Levinas, refusing to give priority to a single, anonymous entity or process ("Being"), argues that existence is irreducibly plural. He shows the significance and value of being an "existent," an individual being, especially a personal one, with a separate, unique identity. "To

be" means, among other things, to actively maintain one's separation from all other beings and from the apparently impersonal "background" of being (what Levinas calls the "*il y a*"=the "there is").

Levinas published a number of important articles during the 1950s. His first major book was published in French in 1961; the English title is *Totality and Infinity*. If I had to summarize the book in a nutshell, I'd say that Levinas demonstrates the tendency of the philosophical tradition (as well as academic disciplines and consciousness generally) to try to encompass all of reality in a single vision, reducing it to a single comprehensive system or essence that can be grasped by the mind. He calls this activity "totalizing" and associates it with self-satisfaction, control, and possession. But "totalizing" is not simply evil; it describes, in fact, how the mind necessarily works, even how each of us as an organism necessarily functions, maintaining our separation from everything else by trying to be a complete, self-sufficient entity. Yet Levinas demonstrates over and over that "totalizing" is never entirely successful and that in all of our efforts at self-sufficiency and self-satisfaction there are traces of *something other* than ourselves, something on which we depend, or from which we live, or which we seek. Even the anonymous "there is" is haunted by the very absence of a voice we know we have heard somewhere.

For Levinas, the clearest and most potent revelation that I am not everything—that everything does not belong to me and that my consciousness does not encompass everything—is the face of the Other. "Other" here (especially when capitalized) means "someone else," "the other person," "the person I encounter"; it translates the French "autrui" (the personal other, as in "Aimez autrui comme soi-même"="Love the other person as you love yourself"). If it were not for the face of the other person, I might indeed maintain the illusion that everything I experience and enjoy (food, landscapes, things) is indeed mine. But once I encounter the Other, I realize that there is something absolutely and irreducibly other than myself and that the world that I enjoy and seem to possess also belongs to the Other; my possession and sovereignty are contested. But this does not limit my freedom, for freedom would have no meaning in a world that belonged entirely to me. The Other "invests" my freedom, gives it meaning, makes it possible for me to make moral choices. I become "responsible," for the Other invites me (simply by his or her presence) to respond. The Other, through his or her neediness and vulnerability, invites me to offer myself and what I have in service and sustenance. At the same time, the Other commands, not by words but simply by the vulnerability of his or her face, "Thou shalt not kill."

Besides introducing me to moral responsibility, the Other also makes the world "real." That is, I know the world is not just an illusion because I have it in common with the Other. Reality thus becomes genuinely "exterior"—and at the same time, I become genuinely "interior," because I am now truly differentiated from the external world and because I have been called upon to turn to my resources (what belongs to me and is in some sense a part of my "interior" world) so as to respond to and serve the Other. This "calling upon" and "responding" is the basis of language or conversation; and through language (discourse, conversation) the world becomes "communicable," something that can be shared.

The Other is identified with "infinity" (hence the title *Totality and Infinity*): because I cannot contain or possess the Other or reduce the Other to a finite concept or image, the Other is, in that sense, without bounds. The Other thus produces in me "the idea of Infinity": the idea of something more than I can contain. Since I can never fully satisfy my obligation to the Other, my responsibility for the Other is also "infinite." Ethics is thus not first of all a matter of "reciprocity": I do not owe certain things to the Other only in return for what has been done for me. The obligation toward the Other comes with the relationship itself, which precedes any actions performed or even any thoughts by which I would be able to measure my own and the other's relative obligations. Furthermore, I can never get out of myself in such a way as to "objectively" (from the outside) compare the relative obligations of myself and the other. My unique position as a self depends on *my* responsibility to the other, which (as far as I am concerned) always precedes and exceeds any obligation the other may have toward me.

Another way to summarize Levinas's thought is to say that, though I am necessarily separate, I must (to be separate) also be in relation to something other than myself. Though enjoyment, work, and knowledge partly put me into relation with something other than myself, they do so only imperfectly,

since I can always (at least mentally and attitudinally) reduce what I enjoy, create, or know to "the Same"—to what belongs to me: myself, my consciousness, the totalizing system or essence I identify with reality. Only "the social relation," which Levinas also calls "the ethical relation," brings genuine transcendence: that is, makes it possible for me both to be myself (maintain my separate individuality) and also be in relation with something genuinely (and infinitely) other than myself—the other person. (A comment Levinas makes on *Robinson Crusoe* nicely captures the quality of this transcendence, this escape from isolation achieved while still remaining oneself—or, as Levinas puts it: **"the situation Robinson Crusoe is privileged to experience when, in a magnificent tropical landscape, where he has continued to maintain civilization through his tools and his morality and his calendar, he still finds in his encounter with Man Friday the greatest event of his insular life. It is the moment when finally a man who speaks replaces the inexpressible sadness of echoes"** [*The Levinas Reader* 148].) Levinas explores how this relation with the Other involves (and in some sense, is) language; how it involves (in special senses he uses) truth and justice, or goodness; and how it makes possible the fullness of my individual being, since I am unique and irreplaceable only insofar as *I* am the one called upon at this place and this moment to respond to the Other. Levinas associates this response I can make with the biblical phrase, "Here I am," or—to more precisely translate the Hebrew—"Behold me here."

(Another way he makes the same point: **"I am defined as a subjectivity, as a singular person, as an 'I,' precisely because I am exposed to the other. It is my inescapable and incontrovertible answerability to the other that makes me an individual 'I.' So that I become a responsible or ethical 'I' to the extent that I agree to depose or dethrone myself—to abdicate my position of centrality—in favor of the vulnerable other. As the Bible says: 'He who loses his soul gains it'"** [*Face to Face with Levinas* 27].)

As these and other details in Levinas's works indicate, there is a religious dimension to his thought—and in fact, he makes it quite clear that he believes ultimately the Other who is calling us to service and responsibility is God. He argues, however, that God does not do this directly, but rather through the face of the Other—i.e., through the neighbor ("near one"), whoever it may be, that I encounter—as well as through scripture (i.e., the Bible) and through "testimony," that is, the response within ourselves that (even before we have a chance to analyze or choose it) is aroused by the Other.

By the way, Levinas wrote another book (yet more difficult than *Totality and Infinity*) titled *Otherwise Than Being*, in which he explores some of these matters of responsibility, interiority, testimony, and so on. The title *Otherwise Than Being* is associated with one of Levinas's central claims: that "ethics precedes ontology." By this, he means several things: that the ethical relation makes "being" possible, and that my responsibility to the Other precedes and is more important than my knowledge or use of "being" or of "beings." Furthermore, where Heidegger argues that authentic being means heeding the call of anonymous and all-encompassing "Being," for Levinas "to be" most truly means to be "for the Other," the personal Other. In testifying that there is something more important than "being," Levinas is thinking not only of "Being" in Heidegger's sense, but also of individual being—the self as an entity that sustains and protects itself by grasping and possessing the world. In calling me to responsibility, the Other in this sense interrupts the order of being, calls me "beyond being," commands me to "be otherwise"—i.e., to be "for the Other."

One more thing worth noting: besides the ethical and religious dimension of Levinas's thought, there are what might be called "the familial" and "erotic" dimensions. Levinas argues that the family is "an ineluctable structure"—that is, one that human beings must have to be fully human—and that the family makes possible the ethical relation by allowing human beings to learn responsibility and by opening up spaces in the social landscape that do not belong to the "totality" represented by the State. For Levinas, "the erotic" not only makes the family possible, but also makes time possible by bringing human beings together in desire for "the not yet": the future that belongs to the self but that the self does not possess or control; in other words, "the child."

Levinas's thought is thus wide-ranging, but its most influential feature has been his emphasis on the ethical relation. Among the consequences of his analysis is his making us aware that any view

pretending to "see" the ethical relation (the relation between the self and the Other) from the outside must be erroneous. A third party can never "see" this relation; it must be experienced by being part of it. The relation between one person and another (which always means the encounter between a "myself" or "I" and someone Other) can never be totalized, can never be reduced to an element in a totalizing vision. Levinas thus brilliantly shows that no philosophical view—or political or historical or sociological analysis—is ever adequate to the reality it attempts to represent. What is more, such views and analysis testify to their own inadequacy by always being offered by *some person to other persons*. This offering—the essential gesture in all intellectual and political life of presenting one's views—is itself an instance of the social or ethical relation, which therefore always transcends any attempt to represent and analyze it.

Levinas's books (published in French from 1930 on) began to be published in English in 1969 with *Totality and Infinity*, followed in the 1970s by collected essays and some of the earlier books, and in 1981 by *Otherwise Than Being*. Meanwhile (back in French), Levinas had begun writing on Judaism and the Talmud, but always with his philosophical thought present at some level. Further translations and collections continued to be published during the 80s and 90s, and are still coming.

As Levinas's work comes to be assessed, I believe it will be recognized that he is one of the most important thinkers of the century on virtually every philosophical topic (and some apparently not so philosophical) and that he offers remarkably helpful and insightful responses to the questions that have arisen in modern thought. His influence is strong (though relatively quiet) in many fields; I hope and believe it will continue to grow. As we keep looking at his work, I'm sure we'll also become more and more aware of the flaws; but that would not surprise or disturb Levinas. He did not conceive of his works as outlining a complete and flawless system; rather, they are *his* words addressed to those others who choose to read them, and they thereby bear witness to the priority of the Other and of the social relation over any encompassing vision or system of thought.

Recommended reading:

Ethics and Infinity: This is a relatively short introduction to Levinas based on radio interviews. I recommend reading the whole thing. If you read only part, I'd recommend reading the 3-page "Interviewer's Preface," skipping the translator's introduction, and then reading chapters 1 (to get a feeling for Levinas and the background of his thought), 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8—especially chapters 6, 7, and 8. [For classes, see the exact assignments: usually, interviewer's preface, translator's note, chapters 1, 4, 6-10.]

A brief essay by Levinas (from his book *Difficult Freedom*) titled "Signature," in which he summarizes his life and thought

Interview with Levinas in *Face to Face with Levinas*

When you feel you're ready for it: *Totality and Infinity*

Other: By the time you get through the above, you should be able to navigate your way through other items by Levinas. Here's a very short guide: (a) *Time and the Other* (a series of lectures from early in his career; it has a different emphasis from *Totality and Infinity* but covers some of the same ideas); (b) *Existence and Existents* (a short, early, but dense and difficult book; for the philosophically informed it gives a helpful sense of where Levinas started from); (c) *Collected Philosophical Papers*, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, and *The Levinas Reader* (collections of essays mainly from the 1950s, 60s, and 70s; see especially "Freedom and Command" and "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity" in *Collected Philosophical Papers*); (d) *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence* (usually considered Levinas's other major philosophical book, besides *Totality and Infinity*; it is even more difficult, but introduces ideas of extraordinary importance in Levinas's thought, including exposure, substitution, and testimony); (e) various writings on Judaism and the Talmud (*Difficult Freedom*, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, *Beyond the Verse*, *New Talmudic Readings*, etc.); (f) other recent collections or translations (*Outside the Subject*; *Proper Names*; *God, Death, and Time*; *Of God Who Comes to Mind*; *Entre Nous*; *Alterity and Transcendence*; *Is It Righteous to Be*; *In the Time of the Nations*; etc.).