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Making Ethical Sense of Useless Suffering with Levinas

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CHAPTER 9

Making Ethical Sense of *Useless Suffering* with Levinas

Jules Simon

I. A Phenomenology of Suffering

Throughout the body of his work, Levinas contests the dominant modern Western paradigm. He counters the view in which peace is only achievable as a dialectical resolution of the competing assertions of self-satisfying egoist superiorities. In contrast to privileging relationships of domination, he offers a phenomenology of the unrelenting obsession with responsibility for the other, in works such as *Otherwise than Being: Or Beyond Essence*.¹ As a philosopher, he raises questions about the philosophical foundations of knowledge that subtend the three major Western ethical traditions: virtue ethics, deontological ethics, and utilitarian ethics. Especially in the modern period, utilitarian, instrumentalist ethics have come to dominate our decision making. It could even be said that a form of this sort of ethics was used to justify committing the genocidal murder of millions of Jews by the Nazis during World War II. The greatest good for the greatest number can be interpreted in many different, even obscene, ways. The German people were taught to accept this utilitarian tradition as a limit to their horizons, even though the principal intent of utilitarian ethics is to preserve the general good. But a “double bind” emerges when the general good is so defined as to entail either victimizing the excluded few within a bounded nation-state or, what was just as deleterious in the case of the Holocaust, justifying the suffering of the few for the sake of the general good.

Levinas does not claim to have a direct answer for this problem because of the inherent difficulty in identifying what precisely constitutes suffering. Instead, he merely asserts that “the least one can say about suffering is that, in its own phenomenality, intrinsically, it is useless: ‘for nothing.’”² The phenomenon of the suffering of an other cannot be systematically justified, teleologically rationalized, or categorically classified. In fact, playing on the double sense of the French word *mal*, which means either “pain” or “evil,” Levinas claims that suffering is not merely a restriction of one’s freedom, constricting possible spontaneous movements, but an overwhelming of one’s humanity so concretely violent and cruel that we can only describe such pain as “evil” or “absurd.” These words simply say that suffering is intrinsically “useless,” in the sense that it serves no purpose and is “for nothing.” Suffering, and by this Levinas means “innocent suffering,” is meaningless.

But does that mean that we are left with nothing to say? Are we left with no accounting for suffering, with no accountings to give to each other? At just this border of determining meaningless and meaningful statements, Levinas’s ethically informed phenomenology provides us with a resource for a restrained but expressive way of accounting for the empirical fact that an other suffers and that in our communications we can perceive traces of the palpability of that suffering. Accustoming ourselves to detecting these traces is not an easy or formulaic process, however, and is counter to the learned responses normally associated with our most familiar ethical orientations. Learning to become sensitive to the vulnerability expressed by another in his or her gestures or in the verbal inflections of his or her utterances is another way of expressing the Levinasian notion that traces of the saying of a voice that would be forgotten or ignored trouble the said. The Levinasian demand is a demand for personal, intimate, and responsible involvement in the life of another. If I merely indicate or point out as an impartial, third-person observer “that one suffering over there,” I succumb to the temptation to replicate the indifferent impersonality of traditionally reified forms of language, relying on the familiar patterns of stereotyping, objectifying, and thus being tempted to utilize the suffering one for my own personal agenda.

Rather, what counts in the nonfreedom of suffering is the concreteness of the *not*, looming as an evil more negative than any

apophatic *not*. As Levinas notes, this negativity of evil is probably the source or kernel of all apophatic negation, of *not* being able to show or indicate, of *not* even being able to be able.³ Hence, in that all evil relates back to suffering, this *not* of evil is a negativity that extends as far as the realm of unmeaning. It is the *impasse* of life and of being—the limit beyond which is absurdity—in which pain does not just somehow innocently happen to “color” consciousness with affectivity. Rather, the evil of pain is the outburst and deepest expression, so to speak, of absurdity.⁴ Levinas insists that the only time that I can say that suffering is meaningful is when I personally take on the responsibility of suffering for the suffering of an other.

With this judgment, Levinas opens a breach in the usual approach to dealing with the failure of traditional normative ethics. The breach becomes abysmal when those normative systems are relied upon in the face of the overwhelming intentional infliction of and casual indifference to the countless sufferings that occurred in such an event as the Shoah.

But is Levinas’s philosophy for orienting our teaching in the area of ethical inquiry fraught with fragility, despair, and uncertainty? Evidently, Levinas’s words do not provide us with clear prescriptions for the “new ethics” called for by John Roth in his reflections on “double binds” and in his guarded hope for a new community. In fact, Levinas seems intent on showing just how violent our own attempts at forming sovereign or autonomous political communities have been. The plausibility of appeals to individual and sovereign autonomy are thrown into radical question. Indeed, Levinas’s claim that “ethics is first philosophy” seems to originate from his radical skepticism about any and every attempt at rationalizing the prioritizing of any individual’s rights at the expense of the weaker one, the sufferer.⁵ The biblical trope that Levinas relies upon—“the widow, the orphan, the stranger”—to refer to destitute and suffering others echoes Western monotheistic traditions, but his reference to the ethical monotheism of the Jewish and Christian traditions is misleading.⁶ Levinas was convinced that the possibility of enacting an ethical response—one other than the anesthetizing and desensitizing of traditional ethics based on this or that theodicy—could only emerge from a darkened and radically uncertain horizon.

In fact, in the presence of innocent suffering, the ethical response should invoke absence and the very loss of possibility. Such an

invoking of absence and an uncertain horizon attends to an irrecovable past inflected with the voices of those who should have been heard but whose voices have been either violently silenced or indifferently ignored. But even such simple testimony to lost and absent others is insufficient because such testimony is just a preliminary response in the presence of the suffering of innocent ones. What this means is that it is not enough to point toward those who have suffered, toward the loss of new beginnings and children. Those very children are victims of institutional structures that support the actions of those members of our society who have lost their sense of responsibility. Thus, the creation of an environment where the voice of the victim can be raised as narrative testimony needs to be accompanied by an ethical critique. Such a critique assesses the logical principles, presuppositions, and intentions of the policy makers and educators who instruct, influence, direct, and lead the many among us who cause suffering through direct intentions, complicit toleration, or indifferent complacency. After assessment comes judgment and then coordinated action.

Levinas's use of the term "ethics" as interruptive, as ethical critique, helps us to better confront those very traditions of philosophy that have produced the systematic and normative ethics that have been used by successive political regimes to enforce totalitarian and genocidal policies. In confronting those traditions with Levinas's writing, we become more sensitive to the suffering and pain of others on the practical and interpersonal levels of our day-to-day lives. In fact, accompanying those very others who are disruptions heightens my sensitivity to them and thus leads to a questioning of my own reified principles. This is a process whereby I become more vulnerable and open to the disruption of the routinely pragmatic orderliness with which I integrate or justify the pain and suffering of those others into my "business-as-usual" life of acquisition and possession. Through their disruptions I am uniquely called to respond without the voluntary possibility of declining such a call. I am called in such absolute and extreme passivity that I would substitute myself for the suffering other, even for the persecuting other. Unfortunately, the burgeoning records chronicling the Shoah and other atrocities continue to provide overwhelming evidence of how so many colluded with those who intended to cause pain, and add to the unavoidable conclusion that so many failed to respond to those in need, failed to

resist the policies of concentration and extermination that took so many helping hands to accomplish.

Fortunately, and paradoxically, we have also been provided with the evidence of exceptional humans who helped others in community efforts, often risking their own individual lives, such as the Danish people who united to rescue their fellow Danish Jews or the Protestant Christians in Le Chambon, France, who united to hide the Jews in that region. As Hanne Trautner-Kromann points out, what seems to be a common denominator in these unrelated instances of “collective” response to the suffering of others is that the response was not motivated by obedience to any law or normative ethics, but rather by a face-to-face confrontation with the suffering of others. Levinas claims that “life is a fine risk to be run” and that those who do not risk the uncertainties, ambiguities, and openness of face-to-face encounters with the ultimately unknown and unknowable other are simply not living the adventure of life, that is, not living the adventure of enjoying and *suffering* the “good” life.⁷

Confounding the problem of how to address the immediate suffering of the particular one facing us and how to de-anesthetize ourselves to the prevalence of politically and socially engendered causes of suffering is the urgency and the ambiguity of the issue. Despite the unconscionable recurrence of social and political atrocities, the very means by which we have attempted to respond to suffering and to address the causes of suffering have, as Roth insistently points out, failed us and continue to fail us. Established ethical traditions ultimately failed to provide a means to avoid the massive and tragic loss of lives in the Shoah. What should continue to trouble us is that genocides have continued on a massive scale throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries—in the killing fields of Cambodia, the ethnic cleansing of Bosnia, the tribal revanchism of Rwanda, and the destruction in Darfur. And while the slaughter of many thousands of innocents defies comprehension, what of the neglect or the intentional avoidance that has resulted in the continued murders and loss of lives on a daily basis in our own neighborhoods? By any reasonable or quantifiable standards of measurement, we are failing in compassion, generosity, and kindness for each other.

But it could very well be the case that relying on “reasonable or quantifiable standards of criteria” is precisely the root of the

problem. It has become readily apparent that at least in the United States, the standard forms of jurisprudence, legislation, and education are failing, given that as of December 2007, one in every 32 Americans was either in prison or on probation.⁸ Perhaps our traditional response patterns are no longer adequate, and we need to expose ourselves to other kinds of nonquantifiable cultural events. Perhaps, despite Levinas's aversion to the arts, we need to read more poetry and literature and to become accustomed to hearing the voices of others in ways that are not formal and mechanistic or prepackaged for consumption, instant gratification, or populist demagoguery. Perhaps we need to learn to distrust the empty promises of every kind of system based merely on logical notation and learn to question the currently fashionable formalisms of global economies of scale, patriotic nationalisms, the indifferent technological projects of positivist science, and the agenda of rugged, self-gratifying individualism.⁹ These contemporary forms of totalizing vehicles, each in their own way, not only contribute to a process of dehumanization that allows for maintaining and even expanding a class of expendable humans but also contribute to establishing a discourse, and the material and mechanical means, for creating an environment where violence and murder are essential elements of an inverted system of justice.

If, as Jean-François Lyotard has claimed, the narratives of such a conservatively "progressive" modernity can no longer be trusted—namely, the modern project of reconstructing metanarratives that continue to create, maintain, and expand hierarchical group structures of political and social domination and exploitation—then perhaps, as Husain Kassim suggests, we need to examine ways to deal with the fragmentation of our social and political relations in more cooperative ways. Perhaps what is now needed post-Holocaust is that sort of ethics that encourages us to become better able, better trained, and better disciplined to respond to "innocent suffering." In other words, we need to be better able to initiate ethical critique. This returns us to the double bind that is the theme of this book. On the one hand, we have the problem of the need to communicate, to listen to each other, to speak, and to understand. On the other hand, we have the problem that what needs to be communicated is, in essence, incommunicable. What is incommunicable is, precisely, an insightful reference to the tortured one, to the one in pain and

suffering. The pain of the other is ontologically always beyond me and beyond what I am ever able to know.

II. Beyond Murder, Mere Survival, and Indifference

The double bind of attempting to communicate that which is incommunicable is taken up by Levinas when he claims that using language itself is an experience of exile. On the one hand, I use language to express my rootedness in a necessary affirmation of autonomous subjectivity, of dwelling and developing the sovereign freedom of myself as “I.” On the other hand, language reveals to me the face of the vulnerable and sensible destitution of the other who appeals to me not to commit murder. This is another way to consider the double bind of language. For Levinas, “the face speaks to me and thereby invites me to a relation incommensurate with a power exercised” as joy or knowledge, introducing to me my very “ability for power” (*mon pouvoir de pouvoir*).¹⁰ And the exercise of that power is “measured” in terms of domination or annihilation, since murder is accomplished over what escapes power, what is incomprehensible and beyond grasp and domination. I murder simply because I am able to murder, in the sense of annihilation of that which is beyond my control. When I am presented with the absolute alterity or otherness of the other I encounter, whose very otherness I am not able to master or dominate, I am presented with material possibility. The “face” of the other is that which expresses the very material sensibility that rends my own sensibility, expressing thereby its absolutely independent existence and, thus, its resistance to murder.

But the other can be murdered by the very force I possess in spite of the resistant force with which she may oppose me. She resists as absolutely other and can oppose the force that strikes her, not with a force of resistance but with the very *unforseeableness* of her reaction. She opposes me not with a greater force, an energy assessable and consequently presenting itself as though it were part of a whole, but with the very transcendence of her being by relation to that whole. She resists not with some superlative of power, but precisely with the infinity of her transcendence. This infinity, stronger than murder, already resists me in her face, is her face, is the primordial *expression*, is the first word: “you shall not commit murder.”¹¹ The appeal of the other as infinitely transcendent and beyond my comprehension

and mastery is revealed in her defenseless eyes, in the vulnerable nudity and absolute openness of her face. The absolutely other does not resist me by a greater force, but resists me as absolutely other, as ethical resistance.

In discontinuity with me, the other calls into question my agenda, my quest for self-certainty and security, and spurs into restlessness my complacent comfort of being uncritically at home with myself. But the approach and appeal of the other *should* call into question the very narrative that I weave to consolidate my possessions and my ever-encroaching domination of the world. Unfortunately, such self-critical accusation only occurs unnaturally—metaphysically—since what is at stake is not the repetition of a mere asceticism, of voluntarily denying myself for an altruistic gesture of benevolence toward the other. Rather, what is most important is that I come to terms with the priorities in my life, namely, coming to terms with the appeal of the other to not commit murder is to determine what comes first or second, or who comes first or second. In this way, Levinas leads us to better understand the development of our subjectivity as including enjoyment that is both necessary and yet the source of our persecution of the other and thus is an occasion for self-accusation.

I struggle with and yet enjoy the process of laboring to establish myself on the land, a process in which what I need for gathering and building up a store of possessions comes from the very land from which I exploit irreplaceable resources in my accumulating and possessing activities. Historians make their living by recounting the wars and conflicts that constitute the narratives of such commerce. For example, how much airtime is given to the history of warfare and conquest on the History Channel? How many standard textbooks chronicle the “progress” of civilization as moving from one battlefield to the next? What is not self-evident is the extent to which we are insensitive to the aching hunger or pain of the other, caught up in the inertia of securing our own relative level of security and enjoyment, in an ongoing quest for security that inevitably causes the suffering of those with whom we share this world.

But for Levinas, even the “sins” of environmental injustice are, at their very core, a consequence of not coming to terms with the issue of “useless suffering” and the ways in which we calculate or give accounts for the suffering of others. By reckoning their quotient of

suffering in our accounting as justified for a range of instrumental or utilitarian reasons, we can and have justified the genocides that have occurred over the course of the twentieth century. But if suffering is ultimately absurd, what is the point of even trying to “make sense” of suffering? Levinas’s contention that I can only murder the other because I am commanded by the presentation of her face, as my neighbor, precisely, not to kill her, still leaves us with the nagging issue of a “so what” response to such proximity. Who is to say that this command by the face of the other to not murder, to not violate what should be inviolable, to not act with indifference to what should claim my respect, has any compelling claim on either my attention or my desire to act otherwise than in the traditional self-serving ethics of utilitarianism and instrumentalism? Who is to say that I should act otherwise than according to the rational calculations of the various social contract theories that have founded our modern democracies and that explicitly affirm my right to murder that other if she merely trespasses on my property?¹² Who questions the way that I justify the daily sufferings of others to sleep well at night?

Levinas contends that suffering is both a brute datum and a passivity and that “justification of the neighbor’s pain is certainly the source of all immorality.”¹³ The most insidious sort of justification is the choice to act with indifference to the suffering of the other, because such indifference denies the vulnerability of the suffering one, a denial that Levinas calls evil precisely because suffering, as such a radical undergoing that overwhelms, is unbearable but also unassumable. To be indifferent to the unassumable unbearability of the other’s suffering thus compounds the pain of the one who suffers. It is unassumable in the sense that as unbearable, suffering is untransferrable—one is caught in a phenomenon that is beyond the formal structures of consciousness and is revolted by a Kantian assemblage of data into order and meaning that constitutes a state of consciousness or unity of apperception. Because suffering happens as a physiognomic revulsion, it is the denial of all meaning, since in suffering the sufferer undergoes a passivity that is so beyond simple sensory receptivity that it is untranslatable into a formal, communicative schema. It is the bearing of the unbearable whose only possible expression is the moan of woe, the groan of submitting and not grasping or conceiving. What the suffering moan of “extreme passivity, helplessness, abandonment and solitude” also indicates, however,

is the “possibility of a half opening” that the moan, or groan, or cry slips through as a cry for help.¹⁴ It is this expression of vulnerability and cry for help from another that is primordial, irreducible, and ethical—and, Levinas claims, undeclinable.

According to Levinas, such a cry provides the promise for a kind of “salvation” in that it opens up, out of the self-enclosed purity of an unbearable and unassumable suffering, a path to the interhuman. And it is the realm of the interhuman that seems most promising in Levinas’s ethical response to the phenomena of suffering, since it is in that domain that suffering arises. What Levinas means by “promising,” however, is not readily apparent. Rather than offering narrative descriptions of suffering, accounts that would edify or instruct us with fixed examples based on universal rules for addressing any possible empirical event in the future, Levinas attempts a phenomenological analysis of suffering.

He does so because of his contention that providing this or that account of suffering obviates the possibility for the discreet intimacy with the other that is necessary for self-accusation. The narrative account distances me from encountering the unpredictable and unforeseeable immediate exteriority of the other and from hearing the “half-opening” moan of pain that escapes from her interiority. And without the possibility of the intimacy that could develop from one interiority to another, through the sensible exteriority with which a trace of the inviolable vulnerability of the other is expressed, I make no “progress” toward alleviating the pain of the other because I am not even able to sense her pain. Normally I am so caught up in my own projects, with executing my own “narrative,” that I am oblivious to even the approach of the other; consequently I am incapable of any response whatsoever. In fact, it could be that I deny the suffering of the other because not to do so would be to have to undergo my own undeclinable call, the source of my uniqueness. That is, when I decline to undergo suffering for the other with a responsibility to the point of substitution, I deny my own subjectivity and become a cipher, a manipulable number, and contribute to the erosion of the possibilities of distributive justice that would result in more “enjoyments” for those others suffering in plain sight or in relative silence.

Beyond utilitarian consequences, the problem, however, is that suffering reveals to us the phenomenon of meaninglessness, since the

suffering surpasses our intellectual means of grasping and holding. The suffering of the other, enveloped in his or her pain, is beyond every attempt at schematization and resists every effort to harmonize his or her essentially absurd passion in any kind of theodicy of ends justifying the means or of any and every political teleology or sacred history. Suffering is, as it should be, beyond all social, political, or religious institutional uses and, especially, should be beyond all rational administration of pain based on oppression of the weak. Of course, the specter of the work camps, concentration camps, and extermination camps—as exemplary institutions for *penal reform*—should serve as historical markers of the possible horrors of allowing administratively ordered pain to be enacted on members of our social body in the name of social justice.¹⁵

Levinas rejects justifying suffering for the sake of a “kingdom of transcendent ends” that would guide one by a benevolent wisdom, rejecting all grand designs and any suprasensible *project*, including those involving an arbitrary god, belief in progress, a metaphysics of original sin, or a congenital failure. Instead, Levinas tells us that suffering is a denial of meaning: it is the way of not bearing (a breakdown of my being able to bear) and takes place as the sensation of passivity. It is important to note, however, that such passivity is precisely a sensibility that is conditioned by direct and sensual engagement in the face of the other. By *not* forcing the other into the preconceived categories of my own project, I enable the possible working out of the desires and needs of that other. For Levinas, my desire is *for* the other insofar as I become responsible for the suffering of that other in the passivity of his or her undergoing an unbearable pain. But how is such a responsibility enacted?

As passivity, suffering is “useless” and is heard as the moan, ache, or woe of pain that *escapes* from the person who is enclosed and enveloped in his or her pain—a moan, ache, or woe that, for example, projects and exposes *me* to a medical, undeclinable ethical *duty* that is “my unique duty.” That unique, undeclinable duty is a duty to respond to the sufferer’s original call for aid via a merciful responding that imposes itself as the most basic and primordial task. In fact, this task defines the uniqueness of my very subjectivity, a task that takes form as an imperative to *not* act in indifference or rationalization or abandonment, but to act *beyond* my given categories in providing an interhuman response to alleviate *in any*

way the suffering of the immediate other. This includes making use of technological and medicinal means to alleviate the pain of the other.¹⁶

More importantly, for Levinas, the useless suffering of the other imposes itself on *me* a *just* suffering, namely, *my* suffering for the suffering of the other. In other words, such a just suffering, as opposed to the useless suffering that I encounter in the face of the other, points out the radical difference between the suffering of the other and the suffering in me—and is the only way that suffering can be meaningful. Suffering or enduring pain *for the other* is then raised to a compelling ethical principle that takes the form of shaping hopes and commanding the discipline of peoples, such as sharing wealth and coming to aid. Indeed, such suffering *for the other* is an inescapable obligation and is so inescapable that waiting for divine action in order that I might then imitate it is degrading. I lower and degrade myself with waiting for a redeemer or any other to take over the responsibility that can only ever be mine, a responsibility of which I become aware in the face of the immediate suffering of the other with whom I am sensually and directly engaged.

And with whom do I engage? How do I become aware of the face of the other for whom I am responsible? Levinas contends that I engage with the stranger and the sojourner, the one forced into flight for political, religious, economic, or other socially oppressive reasons, the exilic one who stands in difference to all that is usual and ordinary.¹⁷ I engage with the one who calls to me out of the unbearable of his or her suffering.

To concretize the ethicality of his position even further, Levinas uses gendered language, such as feminine and masculine for, respectively, the word of passive welcome and the word of active command. The word of passive welcome is uttered from the interior of the home, symbolized by the feminine, the corresponding word and work of sharing—of giving the bread from one's lips to the other; while the word of active command is uttered from the height of the exterior, the corresponding word and work of teaching and mastery, symbolized by the masculine. Levinas has been highly criticized for his use of gendered terms, but such gendered language is unavoidably relevant in connecting what enjoyment and the home have to do with "useless suffering."¹⁸ The use of gendered terms by Levinas to refer to actual, historical conditions of stereotypical gender

relations is his way to lead his readers to consider the gender roles that we play in our own lives. However, what disrupts settling into accepting the stereotypes of these roles is what Levinas says about the face.

The face is not simply our biological face with eyes, ears, nose, and wrinkles, but rather the place of the history of smiles, groans, glances, weathering, wounding—but especially of the vulnerability that leads to wounding. Since the face is not merely biological, it transcends gendered terms as well—the welcome of generosity can be offered to the feminine or masculine stranger, sojourner, or sufferer by a masculine or feminine being and the work of teaching and mastery can be accomplished by a masculine or feminine being of either gender. Levinas's *ethical* point is that without being grounded in the concrete empirical order of gendered relations, regardless of the particular specificity of the functions associated with this or that gender, any ethical injunction would wither in mere abstract conceptuality.

For my reflections in this chapter on the double bind of ethics post-Shoah, the use of gender terms has the following consequences: their use is necessary for the sake of empirical accountability—we are men and women who live in socially determined gender roles—and those definitive roles were ignored by the Nazis. In fact, since those roles are grounded in how we bring baby girls and boys into the world and raise them into young men and women, without taking into my account gendered identities, I would lose contact with actual suffering ones, such as the “more than one million Jewish children murdered in the Nazi Shoah [who] died neither because of their faith, nor despite their faith, nor for reasons unrelated to the Jewish faith [but] because of the Jewish faith of their great-grandparents [who brought] up Jewish children.”¹⁹ Significantly, they also did not die because they were born as girls or boys, but simply because they were born of Jewish parents. Perhaps a better question to ask would be: what place or space did these innocent boys and girls enjoy and from which their presence and possibilities were removed?²⁰

Levinas was fond of quoting the philosopher-mathematician Pascal who once wrote that the phrase “this is my place in the sun” constitutes “the beginning of the usurpation of the whole earth.”²¹ For Levinas, every appropriation of bread for my own mouth, every

tree that I cut down to build my own house, and any possession that I consume to nurture my own existence is in tension with the needs and desires of every other being. Whereas a Heideggerian would say that I have been “thrown” into the place in which I find myself living and must therefore work out my own destiny as it originates in the destiny of “my” people, a Levinasian would say that “my” destiny only takes shape in relation to the ongoing issue of justifying my place as more important and needful than my neighbors or, and especially, more important than the stranger, orphan, or widow who stands outside the comfort of my home signifying and assigning me to attend to his or her call.²²

For Levinas, such justification comes in many forms: enlightened self-interest, the bargaining of the marketplace, pluralized greed, and any other form of rationalization of relative debts, that is, out of those forms of mutual reciprocity that constitute the daily manipulations of our marketplaces. But in Levinas’s sense of the ethical, the other calls to me in need, but does so asymmetrically. The other commands my attention to give without any thought of return, without any calculus of cause and effect, without putting my act of generosity into some kind of balance of exchange based on calculating a bottom line of return reducible to the terms of “what’s in it for me?” There is no “reserve.” Rather, the call of the other expresses his or her face lined in the event or history of suffering, most poignantly, the suffering of innocence—an expression of useless suffering that is beyond any scheme or framework of understanding and rationalization, or any holding back in expectation that I will be rewarded in my turn. The other calls for the bread from my own mouth.

III. Enacting the Ethical

But is that enough? Is such a dictum in response to the unutterable tragedy of the loss of so many precious and irreplaceable lives even enough? Is it enough to recount the despair that drove Améry or Celan or Kofman to suicide? Is it enough to recall in my writing the tragic death of more than a million innocent children, or their parents, and the absurdity of their “useless suffering”? I would contend that in order to *enact the ethical*, such recalling, such remembering is necessary but insufficient. Recalling and remembering deepen and

impel the imperative of response, but do not bridge the gap from me to the other whose pain calls to me for response, now, not in the future, not as part of a project or an altruistic agenda or a social contract, but immediately. The call of the other is the call of my neighbor and for me, for the very bread and breath from my mouth, here and now.

For me—here and now—is a call that takes form as *the* call of the hundreds of women who have been murdered within the last several years in Juárez, just across the river from my office at the University of Texas at El Paso. The deaths of the women in Juárez have gone on with alarming impunity, with barely a trace of official concern or institutional regard—political, educational, or religious. The overwhelming majority of these young women were exploited workers in the Maquiladora industry complex in Juárez, whose economic vulnerabilities were preyed upon by American and other foreign multinationals, only to have then been unaccountably abducted, sexually molested, and murdered by men who are still enjoying the spontaneous freedoms they so violently destroyed in their victims. Only recently has attention been brought more insistently to the loss of these women who suffered unutterable violence, the ongoing suffering of their families, and the malaise and complacency of those of us who constitute the systems of justice and education that *should* respond and judge the persecutors.²³

The suffering that these young women endured makes no sense, but the extent of the issue, and the threat to other young women, is compounded by the systematic economic injustice of the Maquiladora industry²⁴ that exploits them and puts them at the mercy of those Mexican men who have been acculturated to abuse their women and treat them as objects to conquer and penetrate, as faceless objects, *por chingar*, in the most violent and profane sense.²⁵ For the sake of other women who continue to be threatened and to be treated as disposable objects, specifically women who are subject to the historically dominant and politically tolerated paradigm of male sovereignty over women, a Levinasian phenomenology of the ethical would consider that the phenomenon of desire is, unlike need, never satisfied and never satisfiable. Could it be that what has happened and is happening in Juárez is the horrific inverse of the phenomenal movement of desire that is at the core of Levinas's ethics, a desire that should occur in the context of enjoyment?

Desire can never be satisfied and thus is the movement by which the other in his or her infinite alterity remains simply other—ungraspable and absolutely beyond mastery and domination. As Levinas puts it, desire deepens desire for the desired one. But the sensible rending of the face also introduces the temptation to profane and destroy, to annihilate that which cannot be mastered, consumed, absorbed, and which is absolutely beyond fulfilling a need. The sexual realm is the realm of the serious play of vulnerability and domination, of violability and violation, the abuse of the naked exposure of the other, in this case young, poor women from Juárez—Lila Garcia, Paloma Ledesma, Silvia Arce, Griselda Mares—resulting in torture and murder, perhaps because of the extremity of their innocent vulnerability, seized upon in a grasp meant to uncover the uncoverable, to violate and annihilate the very defenseless face that would appeal for patience and tenderness. Nonetheless, the murders have continued in the violent inverse of unsatisfied desire, but so have “exceptional” voices continued to be called to take a stand for the defense of the defenseless, even to the point of suffering for the suffering of these violated and now-silent others.²⁶

Responding to the suffering of my neighbors, the women from Juárez, is what I am called to do “here and now,” since the violent and oppressive domination of the male-majority culture of which I am a complicit member is, for me, my undeclinable responsibility. But what am I to do and upon what resources do I draw? Does Levinas’s phenomenology of the ethical provide me with the wherewithal to respond to their unanswered calls? To the grief of their families and friends? To redress the wrongs of the economic and cultural system that provides the context for their loss? At the first draft of this chapter, my office window faced the Rio Grande, the border beyond which murders are occurring with impunity. I could draw the curtains of my window to keep out the blazing light and heat of the sun, but no act of self-occlusion is able to shield me from the horizon that takes shape in the ongoing presence of unknown persecutors, bereaving families and friends, and the absence of the young women who have lost their freedom to make a difference in the world. In effect, I have become evermore uncomfortable in my skin. But again, it is not my skin that is being torn, raped, and murdered.

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas contends that our reasoned discussions are based on the vulnerable nudity of the face of the other who

has priority in my relating to her. In a face-to-face relation, then, in such a discourse, I am forever dependent on the other for my own significance. The transcendence of the other's face does not initiate a reciprocal balancing of obligations (an instrumental calculation), because that would justify the continuation of war and violence, and, as it did, the abyss of the annihilation of the Shoah—the abyss of meaninglessness and evil. Rather, the transcendence of the other's face, as absolute priority, initiates shame—not a letting-be, but an irritation and restless sensibility for an unfulfilled responsibility. That means, to justify my neighbor's pain is to justify his or her suffering in a reasonable scheme of morality, or a justified scheme of reciprocal violence.

In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas further maintains that in elevating the other as a priority over my self-seeking, I become, in effect, a hostage to respond to his or her needs and desires: “To be oneself, the state of being hostage, is always to have one degree of responsibility more, the responsibility for the responsibility of the other.”²⁷ This means that I am responsible not only for the other, for his or her suffering as a victim, but for the other's responsibility, for his or her causing others to become victims. Auschwitz commands me in a double bind of responsibility: the many lost faces of those with whom we could have shared unknown pleasures—a glass of wine, a loaf of bread—is what commands me. These lost ones command me to act ethically here and now, despite the overwhelming of human responsibility that occurred there and then. The asymmetrical command originating in the vulnerable face of the other reveals an anarchical responsibility that is without precedence; it is nonreciprocal and without a founding principle. But such a command calls me not only to prioritize my responsibility for the suffering other, but it also calls me—and this is the double bind—to a wakefulness that challenges reason at every turn and resists any argument or morality that leads to or from the lost faces of Auschwitz, to or from the lost faces of Juárez.

But with the failure of justifying theodicies and ideologies, in what should I place my faith? Rather, to rephrase the question, after reflecting with Levinas, in whom should I place my faith? The answer to this question depends on how I define what Levinas calls the “interhuman order.” As Levinas points out, “The interhuman, properly speaking, lies in a non-indifference of one to another.”²⁸

But he also notes that interhuman responsibility is such that it demands that the ethical relationship of an I to an other I stands before any impersonal law or social contract, before reciprocity. This relationship is an asymmetry that does not preclude altruism and disinterestedness as conditions for the order of politics and the city, but does provide us with the dynamic condition whereby we can turn to help the other even prior to the simple exchanges of courtesies and the impersonal commerce of customs. For Levinas, the asymmetry of the relation of the one to the other, of my nonreciprocal response to the one who suffers, is the only responsible recourse to useless suffering. The deaths of millions of innocent ones during the Shoah, the suffering of just one touched by the genocidal abyss, is the dark horizon from which I am sensibly reminded that the death of one more young woman in Juárez should never happen.

Is such an immediate response to my neighbors even enough? Not if I take seriously the infinitely compelling demands of responsibility. “Enacting the ethical” means that I must also take up the work of justice, that is, I must engage in the difficult transformation of the material conditions of our institutional structures.

In the penultimate section of *Difficult Freedom*, “*Hic et Nunc*,” which is concerned with education in Judaism in particular, but also education in general, Levinas focuses on issues of education, humanism, and political critique as those tasks that must be taken up “here and now” to advance the work of educating young ones to become historically informed, culturally conversant, politically aware and active, and most importantly, ethically sensitive and awake to each other. As I read Levinas, to act here and now also means to act in the face of the material conditions of the human-created institutions that provide for the very possibilities of eliciting enjoyment *and* understanding other humans who suffer. This means engaging in the established structures of educational praxes and developing teaching relationships in that strange and uncertain social flux of private and public interfaces that constitute our sociality. That interpersonal commerce of our very sociality—our histories, politics, cultural exchanges, and language practices—is the source and object of our learning and where *both* suffering *and* joy happen. Ultimately, though, those phenomenal occurrences are the systematic expressions (however material or formal) of an ethical relation that is interhuman,

namely, the interrelationship of one to the other that occurs as *my* responsibility for *her*.

Notes

1. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being: Or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1981).
2. Emmanuel Levinas, "Useless Suffering" (1982), in *Entre Nous: Thinking of the Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 93.
3. See Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press), 198. These remarks occur in the context of Levinas's discussion of the phenomenology of murder and his argument about the disproportional relationship between the infinity of the Other as an absolutely independent being who is not in my power and thus confronts me with the possibility of my power to annihilate rather than, merely, conceptually dominate that other. He goes on in that same passage to note that the suspension of my ability to exercise power acutely occurs in the instance of murder, which "is still a power, for the face expresses itself in the sensible, but already impotency, because the face rends the sensible."
4. Levinas, "Useless Suffering," 92.
5. Emmanuel Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy" (1984), in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Seán Hand (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 75–87.
6. See *Totality and Infinity*, 215: "The Other who dominates me in his transcendence is thus the stranger, the widow, and the orphan, to whom I am obligated."
7. Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1997).
8. See About.com at <<http://usgovinfo.about.com/cs/censusstatistic/a/aain-jail.htm>>: "While 1 out of every 142 Americans is now actually in prison, 1 out of every 32 of us is either in prison or on parole from prison, according to yet another report on Americans behaving badly from the Bureau of Justice Statistics. This means that 6.7 million adult men and women—about 3.1 percent of the total U.S. adult population—are now very non-voluntary members of America's 'correctional community.'"
9. For a feminist critique of the abuse of logical notation, see Andrea Nye, *Words of Power: A Feminist Reading of the History of Logic* (New York: Routledge, 1990), and an online critique of that reading by Noretta Koertge, "The Feminist Critique [Repudiation] of Logic" at <<http://www.indiana.edu/~koertge/rfemlog.html>>. The classic critique of global economies of scale is by Lenin. See V. I. Lenin, *Imperialism: The Highest*

Stage of Capitalism (1916; London: Pluto Press, 1996). A recent critique of the dehumanization and environmental degradation of global economies of scale is *Justice in a Global Economy: Strategies for Home, Community, and World*, ed. Pamela K. Brubaker, Rebecca Todd Peters, and Laura A. Stivers (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006). On the dangers of patriotic indoctrination, see George Kateb, *Patriotism and Other Mistakes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

10. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 198.
11. *Ibid.*, 199.
12. John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government* (1690; Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1980), 15. Locke states: "This makes it lawful for a man to *kill a thief*, who has not in the least hurt him, nor declared any design upon his life." The point is that in not knowing the intention of the other, Locke prioritizes the survival of myself (himself) over the other even, and especially, in situations where private property is at issue.
13. Levinas, "Useless Suffering," 99.
14. *Ibid.*, 93.
15. This "theme" is also one of the motivating forces for Michel Foucault's social ethics, namely, that beneath the reasonable forms espoused by the social "uses" of suffering is the "outrage of torture" of the physically handicapped isolated in their pain and the rational administration of pain meted out as punishments by human courts that, especially because they happen during times of war, look like arbitrariness and failures of justice, but are simply crimes against and the oppression of the weak by the strong. See, for example, Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Random House, 1977).
16. Note how "Doctors Without Borders" exemplifies a contemporary instance of a Levinasian enactment, that is, they respond immediately to the suffering of victims regardless of the ideological parameters of the conflict that causes suffering to occur, and they make use of whatever technological means are at their disposal. According to their website: *Médecins Sans Frontières* (also known as Doctors Without Borders or MSF) their members, "deliver emergency aid to victims of armed conflict, epidemics, and natural and man-made disasters." See <<http://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/>>.
17. In fact, Levinas contends that useless and mass genocidal suffering signifies the end of theodicy, maintaining that the variety of sufferings of the twentieth century have destroyed the purported balance of harmonies promised by any and every theodicy because of how reason has become political and thus detached from all ethics, that is, ethics based on a face-to-face encounter with the other in need.

18. See Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), xxii, n. 3, where Beauvoir criticizes Levinas for maintaining a traditional objectivization of woman: “I suppose that Levinas 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 male privilege.” For Levinas’s response to such a criticism, see “Love and Filiation” in Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 65–72. For more sympathetic treatments, see Catherine Chalier, *Figures du feminine* (Paris: La nuit surveillée, 1982), and a remarkable treatment of the phenomenology of eros in Luce Irigaray, “The Fecundity of the Caress,” in *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard A. Cohen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 231–256. Both women take into account Levinas’s unambiguous prioritizing of the other over the subject.
19. Levinas, “Useless Suffering,” 98. Levinas quotes Emil Fackenheim who argues for the end of all theodicies in his text *God’s Presence in History: Jewish Affirmations and Philosophical Reflections after Auschwitz* (New York: New York University Press, 1970), 69–70.
20. See Irving Greenberg, “Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity and Modernity after the Holocaust” in *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era? Reflections on the Holocaust*, ed. Eva Fleischner (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1977), 27, for his claim that all ethical decision making should only occur, post-Shoah, in the face of the image of those tortured and murdered Jewish children.
21. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. W. F. Trotter (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1958), 295 and 456.
22. In keeping with the ethical questioning of “my” place in the sun of the New Mexico desert, I take seriously the call of the others whose spaces I have inherited as colonized or as suburbanized. In my case, that applies to Mexicans who once lived here, but more significantly to the Native Americans and wildlife who once roamed here, displaced from their migratory home.
23. See “Juárez Killings: New Report Emphasizes Obvious,” in the *El Paso Times* (December 1, 2003). The editorial cites an Associated Press article to the effect that a 1,600-page report by the Mexican National Human Rights Commission was delivered to the Mexican Senate and was being delivered to the President of Mexico, Vicente Fox, detailing that, besides the at least 263 documented murders of women in Juárez, 4,500 have been reported missing. See also Monica Ortiz, “Who is

Killing the Women of Juárez?” in *The Prospector*, vol. 90, no. 12 (November 12, 2003) (a student-run newspaper for the University of Texas at El Paso) for her response to the “brutalization and murder of more than 370 women in Ciudad Juárez” and a report on the first international conference directing attention to this injustice, which took place from Oct. 31 to Nov. 2, 2003, at UCLA: “The Maquiladora Murders—or Who is Killing the Women of Juárez.”

24. On the socioeconomic conditions underlying the exploitative dimensions of women and girls involved in the Maquiladora industry, see “Serial Sexual Femicide in Ciudad Juárez: 1993–2001” by Julia Monárrez Frago at <http://www.womenontheborder.org/sex_serial_english.pdf>, esp. 4–5.
25. See Octavio Paz, *Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950; New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1985), chapter 4, for his discussion of the stereotypical cultural and historical traditions of how Mexican men and women relate, perpetuating patterns of self- and other-destruction, and how the violent violation of women by men is at the heart of Mexican social history and gendered relations.
26. International attention was drawn to the events surrounding these murders by Eve Ensler and others on February 14, 2004, with the organization of thousands who marched in protest in Juárez and the presentation of Ensler’s play, *The Vagina Monologues*, in Juárez, El Paso, and Las Cruces.
27. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 117.
28. Levinas, “Useless Suffering,” 100.