



LEVINAS, THE FEMININE, AND MATERNITY

Melissa Bradley

Western Carolina University

ABSTRACT

*French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas used rhetorical devices to attempt to overcome the limitations of language. However, his use of the “feminine” as a stand-in for alterity creates such an obstacle. Not only does a lack of inclusivity suggest totalization of the Other, it also deeply frustrates the female-bodied reader’s ability to adopt this ethical behavior in her own life. A woman reading *Totality and Infinity* cannot understand the feminine as alterity, as Levinas asks her to imagine “otherness” as herself. She does not see her own gender as foreign to her, and alterity as strictly feminine. In trying to envision otherness, she is given only an image of something close to herself. Alterity is an outdated, stereotypical metaphor of what femininity looks like, and an inflexible one. The feminine is a metaphor for many things perceived as female in a patriarchal society, such as household responsibility and sexuality. Levinas’s idea of alterity is highly indicative of a biological woman. The feminine is indicative of exclusion from the world of higher thought. She cannot understand how to recognize the Other and so cannot fully participate in the ethical relationship by Levinas’s definition. Levinas’s use of another gendered metaphor in *Otherwise than Being* does produce an occasion for intervention: Maternity, in substitution of the feminine alterity, is successfully gender-neutral and allows women back into the world of Levinas’ ethics. Through this metaphor, Levinas concedes that the relationship he describes between the Self and the Other is a perfect one and not easily achieved. Therefore, attempting the task of acting maternal to the Other becomes a matter of capability and not gender.*

Keywords: alterity, feminine, Levinas, maternity, metaphor

French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas sought to understand the atrocities committed in the 20th century. His work focuses on the ethical relationship and on ethics in general. He examined and expounded upon his definition of ethics in an attempt to provide his readers with a way to understand how the Other, any person other than the Self, should be treated. He employed several strategies to describe this relationship, including the use of rhetorical language. He focused in particular on metaphors and tropes, using analogies to describe what the ethical relationship is “like,” as it is not possible to say what it actually “is.” Two such metaphors are those of the feminine and maternity, used in *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*, respectively.

One task of modern feminism is to examine gendered language in philosophy, which has historically been unwilling to include women: Aristotle did say that “the relation of male to female is by nature a relation of superior to inferior and ruler to ruled.”¹ Throughout the centuries, women have been asked to respond to such language differently. First, they were asked to merely accept that this was the way of the world. To accept Aristotle in full, however, is to completely exclude women from philosophical thought on the grounds that their intellect is inferior to men’s. With the general movement toward inclusivity over the last century or so, women are finally able to participate in philosophy, but this language has hardly disappeared.

In the world of postmodernism, women are still silenced. We are now told that the issue of sexism has already been solved, that there is nothing more to say on the subject. However, when reading Emmanuel Levinas, we cannot help but wonder about his choice to employ gendered language. In describing ultimate alterity, he used the term “feminine.” What makes femininity so remarkably Other? Tina Chanter, Sonia Sikka, and Claire Katz have argued that he was unsuccessful in his separation between the empirical woman and the metaphorical feminine. Levinas was attempting to describe the ethical world in his work, and he had to use rhetorical strategies to properly convey his meaning. They must clarify his ideas, because if they fail, readers are left confused, and misunderstand what it means to be ethical. Levinas’s failure of the feminine not only miscommunicates a particular idea, but also misplaces the empirical woman in the ethical world. The feminine does not take an active role in the ethical relationship; thus, any woman attempting to follow Levinas’ description of an ethical relationship is destined to fail.

In his later work, Levinas used a second gendered metaphor, that of maternity. Lisa Guenther and Jennifer Rosato have argued that this metaphor is successfully inclusive, describing the ethical relationship in a way readers are capable of replicating for themselves. This paper first explores Levinas’s logic for using metaphors to describe the ethical relationship. The next section examines his decision to focus his philosophy on the ethical relationship and then how he talks about this relationship in the chapter “The Said and the Saying,” found in *Otherwise than Being*. The final sections discuss three of his metaphors, what is successful and unsuccessful in each, and the implications for women attempting to replicate the ethical relationship he describes throughout his work.

1. Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans. Carnes Lord (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 1245b12.

Why Metaphors Are Necessary in Levinas's Work

Through a combination of Jewish philosophy and a personal distrust of ontology, Levinas wanted to elevate ethics to "first philosophy," making it the very focus of philosophy itself. He argued that Western philosophy, from ancient Greek philosophy through Martin Heidegger, has been consumed with the task of understanding what Being means and looks like. In "The Trace of the Other," Levinas said, "From its infancy philosophy has been struck with a horror of the other that remains other.... It is for this reason that it is essentially a philosophy of being, that the comprehension of being is its last word, and the fundamental structure of man."² Philosophy has sought to know as much as possible however it can, including understanding individuals as completely as possible.

Levinas was personally affected by the individualistic and self-focused nature of ontology in a most horrific way: He and his family were put into internment camps during the Holocaust in World War II. While Levinas, his wife, and his children were spared the fate of many Jews of their time, he lost his father and his siblings. To add insult to injury, his mentor and teacher Martin Heidegger famously converted to Nazism. Levinas was left with a pressing question after the war: How could philosophy fail to deter its most revolutionary thinker to date from joining the Nazi Party? His answer was ontology.

The study of Being can be traced back to the beginnings of philosophy. Parmenides, a pre-Socratic, proposed that the world "cannot be in motion, change, come-to-be, perish, [or] lack uniformity."³ Plato argued that the world is made up of the material and the realm of forms, in which reality is an imperfect version of the ideal, thus allowing humans to strive toward perfection.⁴ The self-focus of ontology is apparent in Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*, where all that I can know is that I am. Therefore, all knowledge must stem from my understanding of existence. More modern philosophers focused even more specifically on the study of Being, including Heidegger in *Being and Time*. The heavy emphasis on understanding what it means to Be throughout philosophy's history affected even those branches of philosophy that attempted to discuss other topics. Levinas attempted to refocus the entire subject back to what he believed should be the first philosophy: ethics, or the engagement with the Other.

However, Levinas could not, and did not attempt to, completely dismiss ontology. It is difficult to imagine what philosophy would look like if it did not give primacy to the study of being, or discuss and define "existence." To understand ethical relationships, one must first understand who the Other is and to whom the Self has a personal responsibility. How could one know how to be ethical to a neighbor without first recognizing him or her as an independent being? "Does not all knowledge of relations by which beings are connected or opposed to one another already involve the comprehension of the fact that these relations exist?" asked Levinas in "Is Ontology Fundamen-

2. Emmanuel Levinas, "The Trace of the Other," in *Deconstruction in Context* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 346.

3. Jeremy C. DeLong, "Parmenides of Elea," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, n.d., <http://www.iet.utm.edu/parmenide>.

4. David Banach, "Plato's Theory of Forms," St. Anslem's College, 2006, <http://www.anslem.edu/homepage/dbanach/platform.htm>.

tal?”⁵ To discuss any relation between two things, there must first be space for such a relationship to exist. Recognizing that there is an “I” and an “Other” is essential to understanding how these two beings interact.

To understand what it means to be, however, there must be a focus on personal experiences. The Other is therefore placed into a category so that he might be comprehended. Neighbor, friend, spouse—these labels place the Other’s identity into a preexisting space, so that he⁶ can be treated accordingly. In an ontological system, the Other is treated based on his recognized role because it allows him to be understood. A brother is treated in the same manner as a mother and father, for he is immediate family. Ontologically, misidentifying a brother’s label may lead to unethical treatment. If a brother is treated as a neighbor or as a stranger, the ethical treatment provided to him may be insufficient.

Perhaps it is labeling itself that is responsible for unethical treatment. Forcing the Other into a role or label in order to give a preconceived type of treatment denies all the other labels the Other also holds. Levinas called this suppression of identity “violence.” Committing violence against the Other allows for true violence to take place by denying ethical responsibility to certain labels. A neighbor or a stranger need not be treated as ethically as family in an ontological system, because a neighbor or stranger is not “as important.” Worse still, when a specific identity, such as Jewish, black, or gay, is labeled as subhuman, it becomes permissible to treat these lives without respect. A nonhuman can be treated violently, and the Holocaust is a prime example of this way of thinking.

Levinas argued that “in our relation with the other (*autrui*), he does not affect us in terms of a concept.”⁷ He affects the Self in a complex way, which Levinas explored. “The comprehension of the other (*autrui*) is inseparable from his invocation,” Levinas said.⁸ To truly understand the Other would be to *Be* him, as true comprehension of him must be as complicated as he is himself. It is impossible for the Self to accomplish, and to try to reduce his identity down to an easily understandable label denies him an existence outside of the Self’s experience with him. By removing these labels, every category of human becomes regarded as equally as important: Only then can ethics take precedence.

The ethical relationship is primarily based on an understanding of the Other, and how Levinas described the relationship with the Other changed over time. In *Totality and Infinity*, first published in 1961, Levinas’s definition of ethics had yet to take on the more extreme nature of some of his later writings, including *Otherwise than Being*. Ethics in *Totality and Infinity* involves my response to the Other. I am always faced with the call of the Other, who asks me to feed him, to nourish him, and provide for him. I am able to respond to the Other through “enjoyment, possession, labor, and habitation,” said Morgan in his introduction to Levinas’s work, because these things create a space, a separation that “becomes the framework in which language, discourse, description, perception, and

5. Emmanuel Levinas, “Is Ontology Fundamental?” In *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 2.

6. For consistency with Levinas’ methodology, I refer to the Other as “him” throughout this text.

7. Levinas, “Is Ontology Fundamental?” 2.

8. *Ibid.*

so forth can take place.”⁹ I find my responsibility through the things that nourish and sustain me, like “air, light, spectacles, sleep, and so on.”¹⁰ I respond to the ethical demands of the Other through many different forms, most specifically through the form in which he requires my communication. At the same time, responsibility is communicated to me through everyday experience.

In *Otherwise than Being*, published in 1968, Levinas called responsibility to the Other “substitution,” meaning that to fully answer the call of the Other, I must completely abandon my own interests and take on the needs of the Other. Instead of being able to answer the call through nourishment, through the positivity of enjoyment, the Self has become “hostage” to the Other, unable to assume anything less than total responsibility for his needs. The Self completely replaces its needs for those of the Other, making ethics in *Otherwise than Being* the most responsible form of Levinas’s ethics to date. Thus, substitution is a more demanding type of ethics than what Levinas described in *Totality and Infinity*, in which hospitality is not replaced but is instead exaggerated to create a hostage Self.

The Said and the Saying

Levinas was not always successful in defining the perfect ethical relationship, as he admitted in “The Said and the Saying,” a chapter in *Otherwise than Being*. Over the years, feminists reading Levinas’ work have greatly criticized some of his choices in language for totalizing women through the rhetorical devices he used to describe the ethical relationship. Two such choices occur in “The Said and the Saying” and *Totality and Infinity*: those of maternity and femininity.

The two texts feature significant differences that may also help explain why the later text has an exaggerated version of ethics. Because he intended for first philosophy to become ethics, Levinas believed that the way that philosophy is discussed must change. We have to use language to talk about philosophy, but language is inherently ontological, in that everything we say fits into categories so that we can understand it. However, Levinas believed that the totality of a human cannot be described with language, as “it is not that the essence qua persistence in essence, qua conatus and interest, would be reducible to a word play.”¹¹ It is impossible to understand the Other through language alone, so Levinas was forced to use a different approach to describe the Other. This new approach extends to the ethical relationship, as language is also insufficient to describe the Self’s interaction with the Other. Because ethics (in Levinas’s sense) aims specifically to avoid placing the Other into such categories so as not to “totalize” him, language becomes problematic in this process.

Levinas used the terms “the Said” and “the Saying” to explain why language fails to encompass the entirety of the ethical relationship. The Said is the limitation of the language of ontology, “the content of my words, their identifiable meaning.”¹² When I try to express grief to a neighbor

9. Michael L. Morgan, *The Cambridge Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 104.

10. Ibid.

11. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, Or, Beyond Essence*, ed. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1981), 5.

12. Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi, *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 18.

over the loss of a loved one, I am attempting to reach out with language. I want to convey remorse and sympathy, to say that I recognize my neighbor's loss and truly feel grief for that loss. What I actually say, however, is never able to fully capture this sentiment.

The Saying, the ethical communication, is also the ethical relation and is "antecedent to the verbal signs it conjugates."¹³ The Saying is my interaction with the Other. It is my ethical relationship with the Other, "my exposure – both corporeal and sensible – to the other person."¹⁴ When I speak to the Other, I participate in some sort of relationship with him, and the Saying is the way my responsibility reaches me through discourse. It comes through in conversation, even if it is not necessarily directly communicated. The Saying is also proximity, according to Levinas, because the Saying, and language in general, is what places me in front of the Other. How else could the call be communicated if not through discourse? "The original or pre-original saying, what is put forth in the forward," Levinas said, "weaves an intrigue of responsibility."¹⁵ The Other does not actually have to tell me I am responsible to make me so, but any kind of communication will automatically create this responsibility. The Saying is conceptual, as it is in the use of language that my responsibility is conveyed. My conversation with the Other brings me into contact with responsibility but does not necessarily require the message to be stated in order to be true.

To clarify his idea of what the Saying represents, Levinas further stated that the Saying is "the very signifyingness of signification."¹⁶ The Saying is what gives the signification its ability to signify; without it, there is no signification. It is through discourse that I learn about responsibility, which is meaning itself to Levinas. Any sort of communication with an Other is a call to ethical action, which is meaning itself to Levinas. Without an existing relationship, nothing could be communicated, and what is communicated is of the highest importance.

Levinas believed that the only way to attempt to overcome the cooption of the Saying by the Said is through the strategic use of rhetoric, like metaphors and tropes, which he used liberally in his writing. There is no way to fully escape the cooption by the Said, but Levinas believed that the use of rhetorical language allows us to work around the issue, if only partially. When rhetorical devices are used, there is a method by which to speak about a subject that allows the listener to determine a meaning that is not necessarily stated. Levinas used metaphors, analogies, and tropes to try to speak ethically, rather than ontologically. He pushed language to become ethical despite its ontological nature, manipulating it and turning it on itself to talk about the indescribable.

However, this method is not able to escape the problems of language, as it is still chained to the realm of ontology. Levinas could not create a new method of expression that would allow for a different kind of communication. Instead, he manipulated language that already exists to create a better method by which to speak about ethics.

13. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 5

14. Critchley and Bernasconi, 8.

15. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 5–6.

16. *Ibid.*, 5.

In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas conceded that he will fail in his attempt to completely communicate his meaning. He has to: Language is ontological, and he wanted to speak about ethics. He said, "The correlation of the saying and the said, that is, the subordination of the saying to the said, to the linguistic system and to ontology, is the price that manifestation demands. In language qua said everything is conveyed before us, be it at the price of a betrayal."¹⁷ Thus, the price of using language is that there is always subordination to ontology. We have to use it, but it always comes at a price. While Levinas had to use the Said to communicate the Saying, he wanted to do so in a way that did not confuse his description of the ethical relationship. Consequently, he chose to use metaphors and other rhetorical devices. The question becomes whether or not Levinas was able to get the Saying across without overusing the Said. How effective are his metaphors? Did he manage to successfully explain the essence of ethics using rhetorical devices? The answer is not clear. For example, the next section shows that in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas's use of the feminine is ineffective. He failed to separate the Said from the Saying, and readers cannot develop an accurate idea of how alterity in an ethical relationship works.

The Metaphor of the Feminine

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas attempted to convey the concept of alterity through the use of a metaphor: the "feminine." This section explores whether the discrepancy between Levinas' Saying, conveying alterity, and his Said, expressed through the metaphor of the feminine, is a wide enough gap to frustrate Levinas' Saying to a point of unintelligibility. Further, this section asks whether Levinas's Said is detrimental to his philosophy. If the feminine does, in fact, convey a sexist notion, does this mean that women are excluded from the world of ethics?

In *Time and the Other*, Levinas said, "The feminine is not merely the unknowable, but a mode of being that consists in slipping away from the light... Hiding is the way of existing of the feminine, and this fact of hiding is precisely modesty."¹⁸ This, like other parts of Levinas' philosophy, is a positive view of women, or at least the feminine, at face value. It is only after breaking down what makes the feminine ultimately other that the patriarchal message underneath is revealed. Partially, the feminine is described as the embodiment of mystery because she seems to live unconcerned with the infinite, the scholarly, and the abstract. She becomes a "retreat home with oneself as in a land of refuge," said Levinas.¹⁹ She serves as what Sonia Sikka referred to as a "break," an "interruption in the continuity of the 'virile' existence."²⁰

However, she also serves a pivotal role in Levinas' philosophy. She allows the Self to realize ultimate alterity, to recognize the absolutely different. It is only through the feminine that transcen-

17. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 6.

18. Emmanuel Levinas, *Emmanuel Levinas: Time and the Other [and Additional Essays]*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 87.

19. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 156.

20. Sonia Sikka, "The Delightful Other: Portraits of the Feminine in Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Levinas," in *Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas*, comp. Tina Chanter (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 102.

dence is achieved for the subject because her radical otherness exposes the Self to the Other. She is so different that the Self sees the clear separation between them, and can then recognize similar separations between its own being and others. "She — or at least the dimension of the feminine — breaks the obsession of his self-assertive concern with his own projects and, through the gentleness of her welcome, points him toward the possibility of the ethical," Sikka argued.²¹ Because the feminine is used by the masculine to achieve the ethical, this form of transcendence is not available to the feminine. The feminine is but preparation for the masculine, providing him with the means to ethics without access to ethics herself. While the masculine is allowed to use the feminine in this way, Levinas did not include room for any sort of similar, but opposite, option to be realized. The masculine does not promote the ethical relationship for the feminine in the way that the feminine does for the masculine. Thus, the door of possibility for the feminine to participate in ethics is closed, as she never realizes the essential truths that the masculine does. Without exposure to "otherness," she never recognizes the responsibility that she has as a part of Levinas's system. In fact, most of what the feminine does is without conscious effort. The only role she has in ethics is accidental. In Sikka's words, "Far from leaving blank the space titled 'woman' and inviting her to fill it in herself, Levinas writes all over this space, inscribing it with his desires, his needs, his missions, in terms of which the feminine is never a for-the-sake-of, but always an in-order-to, a means rather than an end."²²

Tina Chanter, in her book *Time, Death, and the Feminine*, said that Levinas "seems to disqualify the feminine from ethics as such rejoining Hegel's attribution of the feminine to the private realm of the domestic, while the masculine principle is represented by the truly ethical, and therefore with the third part, the political, the public — with reason, with philosophy, with justice."²³ Thus, by assigning the feminine worth only in its capability to create an interest in the ethical, Levinas denied actual women the opportunity to participate in what has heretofore been the realm of "the masculine," such as politics, philosophy, and justice.

Levinas himself never identified "the feminine" biologically. In fact, because he was employing the trope of the feminine to identify alterity for the Self, he was not actively associating the feminine with the biological woman. The feminine was meant to be representative, a thing to show something else: in this case, for Levinas, how to reach alterity. His rhetorical use of the feminine to represent the complex idea of alterity was not meant to be literal, but metaphorical. His use of the word "feminine" as a metaphor for alterity is an example of Levinas employing the Saying and the Said.

Some authors certainly agree that the feminine is not a representation of the empirical woman. Richard Cohen, in his book *Elevations: The Height of the Good in Rosenzweig and Levinas*, said, "Identifying or specifying the particular type of personal alterity constitutive of habitation — gentle, sheltering, familiar, intimate — with the term of 'feminine,' used metaphorically, is a purely conventional gesture, like the expression 'mother nature.'"²⁴ He argued that there is nothing about Levinas' use of

21. Ibid., 103.

22. Ibid.

23. Tina Chanter, *Time, Death, and the Feminine: Levinas with Heidegger* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 73.

24. Richard A. Cohen, *Elevations: The Height of the Good in Rosenzweig and Levinas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 198.

the feminine to suggest that, unconsciously or not, the philosopher directly identified this element of alterity with the empirical woman. Similarly, author Irina Poleshchuk argued that “the feminine is not defined in terms of an opposition to the masculine, and because it is pure alterity, it presupposes a different kind of relation which cannot be disclosed in terms of the masculine and the feminine.”²⁵ In Poleshchuk’s opinion, masculinity and femininity do not have opposing definitions. The feminine is not meant to be the antithesis of the masculine, but is separate from such a relationship entirely, existing on its own. To Poleshchuk, this means that the feminine is not representative of the woman. In order to be so, the feminine would have to be the opposite of the masculine.

However, feminist authors such as Claire Katz, Tina Chanter, and Sonia Sikka have argued more effectively that Levinas’s overuse of stereotypes to describe the feminine conflates his definition of feminine with the empirical definition of the woman. Claire Katz argued that “throughout *Difficult Freedom*, just as in *Totality and Infinity*, there is an equivocation between the ‘feminine’ and ‘woman’ that would indicate that feminine is not a mere adjective for female traits but also signifies the female sex.”²⁶ These traits include domesticity, mystery, and, perhaps most significantly, eros. By eros, Levinas meant the classical notion of passionate love, the erotic relationship. Sonia Sikka believed that “metaphors matter,” stating that he made a mistake when “Levinas says ‘the feminine’ when he could say exclusively ‘the erotic relation.’”²⁷ She also pointed out that a woman would most likely not identify the erotic relation as feminine. “She would say ‘the erotic relation,’ not the ‘masculine’; she would say, ‘the object of eros,’ not ‘man.’”²⁸ Thus, unintentionally, the feminine becomes a standing word for the metaphysical woman. Levinas chose to use the word “feminine” to indicate women, not just feminine traits. Katz, Sikka, and Chanter have concluded that the traits Levinas identified as the “feminine” are patriarchal and therefore anti-feminist.

Levinas used the “feminine” to describe a complex concept in the ethical relationship. In *Time and the Other*, Levinas said, “*L’altérité s’accomplit dans le féminin*,” translated by H.M. Parshley as “Otherness reaches its full flowering in the feminine,” but which translates literally as “Alterity is accomplished in the feminine.”²⁹ The feminine helps the Self recognize alterity, but is not alterity itself. Alterity is reached in its height through the feminine, and the Self can learn about the Other through its exposure to the feminine. The feminine is a combination of multiple terms, meaning eros, fecundity, domesticity, and mystery: all of which fall within the broader category represented by the singular word. These terms all work to serve as a Said that describes the Saying, which allows the Self to

25. Irina Poleshchuk, “Unfolding Flesh towards the Other: Levinas’ Perspective of Maternity and the Feminine,” *Problemos: Mokslo Darbai* 84 (2013): 138–52.

26. Claire Elizabeth Katz, “Reinhabiting the House of Ruth: Exceeding the Limits of the Feminine in Levinas,” in *Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas*, comp. Tina Chanter (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 150.

27. Sikka, 107–108.

28. *Ibid.*, 108.

29. Tina Chanter, *Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 4.

ultimately discover the Other. Alterity is an essential piece to the puzzle of the ethical relationship, providing the Self with insight into just what the Other looks like.³⁰

By this definition, the feminine also cannot be an ethical Other. Instead, it is domesticity. The epiphany of the feminine is not the epiphany of the face. It is not the “vous that speaks and to whom one owes respect, but the intimate *tu* that is supposedly a condition for ‘the interiority of the Home’”.³¹ She is not the Other to whom there is a moral obligation, because she exists as the embodiment of the home that serves as a resting place for the unceasing mind of the man. She “creates the dwelling, the welcoming and habitation, thus providing the means of enjoyment and sensuality that are interrupted by the ethical.”³² She is not given her own space and is not allowed to work toward the ethical, instead serving her call to the Other by providing the home through which the masculine achieves transcendence. She fulfills her responsibility because she “makes possible the subject, or that man’s, participation in the ethical; however, [she] does so without participation in the ethical relation itself.”³³

While the feminine is important to Levinas’s philosophy, as without it the call to be ethical does not even exist, it still serves not for itself, but for the masculine. Its value is in serving the masculine, not, as Sikka said, for its own sake. This meaning mirrors a typical view of women in a patriarchal society. Women are not assigned value based on their own merit, but on the things they can provide for the man: children, comfort, and, in Levinas’s case, ethics. So, what if a woman is not interested in providing these sort of things? If her only value comes from her capacity to provide such things, what happens when she fails to do so? Suppose a woman whose only worth comes from her maternal capabilities in a society where children are highly desired and revered is uninterested in having children, or worse, incapable. Does this render her valueless? Levinas reduced the feminine down to one factor, which is to totalize by his own definition.

Levinas wrote *Totality and Infinity* before an important conversation in feminism had taken place. In the radical stages of early feminism, it was considered devaluing to assume that a woman would ever want to simply have children and stay at home. Levinas, however, assumed that all women want to have children and function primarily in the home. Today, feminism recognizes that there are several factors in a woman’s decision to have children and that it is not ethical to reduce the identity of the world’s female population down to a decision about children. However, because a primary form of thought about the question of children during Levinas’s lifetime was an assumption that women would want to give up their livelihoods to have children, it seems only natural that he would describe women in this way as well. This is the mistake he made with the feminine: He misunderstood the desires of women because of the world around him, and we must reinterpret his narrative in a more inclusive way.

Levinas’s portrayal of the feminine is negative in other ways as well. Assigning eros as feminine is also problematic. According to Sikka, “The erotic relation is in important respects the an-

30. This definition of the feminine is found in *Totality and Infinity*, in the section “Interiority and Economy.”

31. Sikka, 102.

32. Katz, 147.

33. *Ibid.*, 149.

tithesis of the ethical one," and is described with terms like "profanation," "animality," "violation," and "indecenty."³⁴ What sort of statement, then, was Levinas making when he believed eros to be feminine? Sikka argued that Levinas found the erotic relationship vulgar and shameful, with its only redeeming quality being the birth of a son who allows the subject (always masculine, though not always male) to achieve transcendence. Only through eros, however, can this be achieved. For Levinas, the erotic relationship is separate from the ethical one. It is selfish and shameful, and yet is given the designation of feminine. While the feminine exposes the masculine to the ethical relationship, most certainly a positive thing, it also distracts and misleads the masculine from its ethical responsibilities. It may introduce the masculine to the ethical, but it is also capable of causing a major break from the ethical. It is certainly a statement about women to assign the feminine the role of temptress.

Levinas's use of the feminine also means that the woman cannot truly be an Other. She is "described in terms of ... function in the life of a man" and is "confined to the erotic relation, a relation outside the ethical."³⁵ Thus, the feminine does not evoke the same sense of responsibility that the masculine does. Though Levinas may not have consciously realized what he was doing, he made a distinction between the masculine and the feminine that excluded the feminine from the ethical relation, other than its involvement in furthering, and sometimes distracting, the relation for the masculine. Further, because the feminine is tied inextricably to the woman, Levinas was excluding women from the opportunity to be ethical themselves.

What Levinas was actually doing, in a sense, was failing to practice his own philosophy. He was interrupting the continuity of the woman by denying her freedom – an act of violence in his own sense. "If a description of 'woman' does not acknowledge her subjectivity," Sikka argued, then "it is violent," and this is exactly what Levinas did in his writing.³⁶ He could not reach women on their own terms, and tried to define them by his own values, his own ideas. This totalization of the woman reduced identity down to one element so that it could be understood. He mistakenly reduced the empirical woman down to one category and took away her identity. He failed to see the woman outside of his use for her. By using her to provide a "break" from the primary world of philosophy, politics, and justice, he was using her as a means to an end rather than an end itself. Sikka described this process as, "how x(1) affects me; therefore, this is the nature of x as such."³⁷ Levinas was unforgiving of those who commit violence against the Other; thus, we must do the same to him when he commits violence against the feminine.

Levinas denied that the feminine exists for itself. It seems that he truly did not consider what a woman who did not exist in this relationship might look like, or what her desires might be in terms of the ethical. Katz criticized Levinas' views on their own terms by providing a Jewish counterexample: the story of daughter-in-law Ruth and mother-in-law Naomi, who live together in Moab. Ruth supports her mother-in-law even though she has no real obligation to her after the death of her hus-

34. Sikka, 101.

35. Sikka, 103; Katz, 155.

36. Sikka, 104.

37. *Ibid.*, 105.

band. Ruth goes far beyond her required duties to her mother-in-law and even leaves her homeland to help provide for Naomi. Eventually, Ruth remarries and has a son whose later descendant fathers David, a king of Israel. Katz's question to Levinas is this: Is Ruth's only positive quality her son, a distant relative to a later hero? Does Ruth not herself embody the very idea of the ethical relation, abandoning her own comforts for the call of the Other? "Ruth so fulfills the definition of hospitality that she exceeds the traditional definition of a woman and transforms her activity in the dwelling.... The feminine has no choice but to become ethical, to respond to the Other ethically."³⁸ The feminine becomes ethical in the dwelling despite her supposed disinterest in it, and Levinas unintentionally created a way to make the feminine a participant in the ethical relation in spite of the limitations he placed on it. Just as the masculine responds to the call of the Other, so must the feminine. The feminine has an active role to play in the ethical relationship, if only Levinas would allow it.

The feminist arguments explored in this essay are not used to suggest that Levinas was intentionally or insidiously misogynistic in his writings about the feminine. He did not necessarily set out to discriminate, raising the question, how can a man who sets out to end violence against the Other commit it himself? Sikka perhaps explained it best: "Levinas fails to see the feminine Other as one like him.... He fails to recognize her as a subject, and to constitute her alterity on the basis of this recognition."³⁹ He believed that the feminine is too different to be like the masculine, and to try to force it to be more like the masculine would be to commit violence. He believed that the feminine's alterity is to be cherished and honored, and did not consider that occasionally it is the similarities we share with the Other that help us avoid totalizing him. If Levinas could have seen that the feminine is not so different in its desire to explore the infinite, the realm of philosophy, politics, and justice, he might have avoided committing violence against it. While it seems a contradiction to say that Levinas overemphasized otherness, when his entire philosophy is based upon otherness, in the case of the feminine, he failed to recognize the Other as less other, and more similar, to himself. In so doing, he denied the feminine her interest in the abstract, in the realm of ethics.

Because Levinas chose to distinguish between the feminine and the masculine, he unconsciously refused the empirical woman a place in the world of ethics. He never said that the woman is forbidden to participate in ethics or that she cannot feel the call to responsibility and choose whether to respond to it. Rather, because he denied that the feminine has a desire to participate at all, he excluded her from participating fully in the world of ethics. Because the feminine is a "break" and is kept out of the realm of the infinite—being satisfied instead with the realm of the finite—it does not have the desire to work toward the ethical relationship. Because the feminine is synonymous with the empirical woman, actual women are excluded from the ethical relationship. A woman in Levinas's ethics loses her place because Levinas asserted her disinterest in it, whether that is actually the case or not. Levinas committed totalization against the woman by placing her into a preconceived category.

To be a woman and to read Levinas is to struggle against one's identity. While a woman may want to understand how to best reach the Other ethically, it becomes impossible when she is told that she represents alterity itself. How can she recognize the face of the Other when it is herself? If we are

38. Katz, 164.

39. Sikka, 105.

to buy into Levinas's argument, then women would not participate in a philosophical discussion of his work to begin with. They would not be able to, as they could never recognize what alterity is and never have a desire to understand the Other. The women who study Levinas defy his assertion that the feminine is ultimate otherness by showing an interest in philosophical work.

The Metaphor of Maternity

Levinas's metaphor for substitution, maternity, is an entirely different sort of rhetorical device. It is built on an additional essential idea that provides a safety net from the same fall into totalization. Substitution, which is central to Levinas's notion of ethics in *Otherwise than Being*, is inseparable from maternity. In the most basic sense, substitution is the one-for-the-other. In the ethical relationship, the Other gives a call. In such relationships, the Saying, the underlying message, dominates by calling the Self's attention to its responsibility to the Other. This call demands the help of the Self, demands that the Other's needs be met, and situates the Self as solely responsible for those needs. The Self has the option to respond to this call or not, though the responsibility will continue to exist either way. "Responsibility for the Other does not wait for the freedom of commitment to the Other," Levinas said.⁴⁰ The Self may be disconnected from the needs of the Other, but that does not reduce how much responsibility the Self has to satisfy the needs of the Other. I am responsible for filling all needs, even if I am in no way connected to the reason that these needs exist.

For Levinas in *Otherwise than Being*, this responsibility was prior even to the Self, making it pre-original. The Self enters into the world with the responsibility to fulfill all needs. However, in *Totality and Infinity*, he said that the Self is not responsible until it participates in discourse with the Other. In this earlier work, because the Self cannot be aware of the Other prior to discourse, it also cannot be responsible for the Other before this discourse develops. "Already the I exists in an eminent sense: for one cannot imagine it as first existing and in addition endowed with happiness as an attribute added to this existence. The I exists as separated in its enjoyment, that is, as happy; and it can sacrifice its pure and simple being to happiness. It exists in an eminent sense; it exists above being."⁴¹ However, by the time he wrote *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas's opinion had changed. Now, the subject enters the world and finds himself already responsible for the Other. In *Totality and Infinity*, the Other reveals purpose to the Self through face-to-face interaction, in initial discourse. Levinas called it "the production of meaning."⁴² In *Otherwise than Being*, the Self is given purpose through its responsibility to the Other, which does not require a prior interaction with the Other to exist. "The responsibility for the other cannot have begun in my commitment, in my decision," he said. "The unlimited responsibility in which I find myself comes from the hither side of my freedom, from a 'prior to every memory,' an 'ulterior to every accomplishment,' from the non-present par excellence, the non-original, the anarchical, prior to or beyond essence."⁴³ The responsibility for the Other in *Oth-*

40. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 89.

41. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 63.

42. *Ibid.*, 66.

43. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 10.

erwise than Being exists prior to the Self because it cannot be the self that creates needs for the Other; otherwise, the Self might somehow avoid ever truly coming into responsibility if no initial discourse ever occurred or if the Self chose to avoid this responsibility by existing outside of normal human discourse. These needs always exist, and we come into them.

Substitution, then, is the act of answering the Other. It is a giving-over of the Self to answer the call, to accept full responsibility for the Other. It is the epitome of ethics. In his essay "To Which Question Is 'Substitution' the Answer?" Robert Bernasconi said, "Substitution is not the psychological event of pity or compassion, but a putting oneself in the place of the other by taking responsibility for their responsibilities."⁴⁴ In substituting the Self for the Other, the Self agrees to take all of his needs and fulfill them. It is prior to the Self and asymmetrical, in that the Other does not substitute himself for me when I give up myself for him. Substitution is the giving-over of the Self's needs for the Other's.

In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas illustrated substitution with the trope of maternity. Actual maternity is "the complete being for the other," and ultimate vulnerability.⁴⁵ Maternity is a responsibility for others, bearing "even responsibility for the persecuting by the persecutor," the persecuting being the pregnancy and the persecutor being the child.⁴⁶ It is pre-original. The mother did not choose to be completely responsible for her child, even if she actively decided to become pregnant. She finds herself responsible for the entirety of her baby despite herself, because it would benefit her to not be solely responsible for a child. She may have accidentally become pregnant, making this illustration even more effective. In such a case, she is entirely responsible for the very life of another, without even her choice in the matter. It is "an abandon without return ... a body suffering for another."⁴⁷

For some, this responsibility seems unreasonable. Autonomy is not present in the equation of myself, the call of the Other, and my responsibility to him. For a philosopher like Immanuel Kant, it would be incorrect to assert that I can somehow be responsible without my will, because responsibility requires an active decision. For Kant, responsibility could not be forced upon me entirely, unless I decide to submit to moral and practical reason. If I want to be moral, then I will assume responsibility for others, but this is my choice. For Levinas, however, this was not the case. I experience responsibility outside of my will. The Other forces his needs upon me, and I am responsible for these needs. My autonomy lies in deciding whether or not to respond to this responsibility.

Like ethics, maternity is all-consuming. The mother is responsible for everything from the fetus's protection to its nourishment, from its warmth and comfort to its basic security. The unborn child, completely unable to provide for itself, is totally dependent on the mother. Without her, it cannot survive. This is the extreme to which the Self is responsible to the Other. The Self is not merely responsible for a few needs of the Other, but is responsible for everything. It must be able to provide anything and everything that the Other needs. As Levinas put it, "The self bears the weight of the

44. Robert Bernasconi, "To Which Question Is 'Substitution' the Answer?" In *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, ed. Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 236.

45. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 109.

46. *Ibid.*, 75.

47. *Ibid.*, 79.

world; it is responsible for everyone," involved in "a responsibility without freedom."⁴⁸ There is no limit to how much I need to give to the Other, what I must give to the Other in order to satisfy my responsibility to him. Substitution, true substitution, is the act of total satisfaction of the Other's needs. According to Levinas, this, of course, perfectly describes an ethical relationship. The practicality of such a responsibility does not exist; the reader cannot expect to fully satisfy the demands Levinas made on the perfect ethical relationship. But, in no other place can we see this need fulfilled so closely as in maternity. The mother fills literally all of her unborn child's needs.

Choice is another important aspect of maternity that resembles the notion of substitution. The mother is aware that her child is completely dependent on her. She knows that the child cannot have its needs met without her and that if she chooses not to provide for her child, there is no way for the child to provide for itself. Again, maternity is the persecuted being responsible for both the persecution and the persecutor. She therefore feels responsibility with intensity. Importantly, however, just as in the Self's interaction with the Other, there is always the option not to accept responsibility inflicted on the Self by the call of the Other. The mother always has the option to ignore her pregnancy. Nothing is forcing her to care for her child. She could always choose not to eat enough or take care of her body. She could indulge in vices she knows to be harmful to the developing child or place herself in dangerous situations that threaten the safety of the child. This is not the same as being forced into such a situation. A poor mother who cannot provide enough food for her growing child is not choosing to ignore the call of her child. But a mother who has the ability to provide for her child and chooses not to is ignoring the call of the Other. In the Self's interaction with the Other, there always exists the ability to ignore responsibility. Nothing will stop the responsibility from existing; the mother will always be responsible for the entirety of the unborn child's well-being, whether she chooses to take this task on or not. Similarly, the Self always has the option to ignore the call of the Other, to not help in whatever he needs. This does not, however, stop the responsibility from existing.

For these reasons, maternity is the clearest and best example of substitution. The mother is completely responsible, prior to herself, despite herself. She is wholly responsible, meaning she must provide everything for the child. At the same time, she has the option to ignore her responsibility, as does the Self in its interaction with the Other.

According to Jennifer Rosato, Levinas was trying "to articulate a type of experience that does not rely in part on the initiative of a conscious subject."⁴⁹ The mother, the subject, is "completely passive; the structure, content, and cause of the experience would all come from an external source."⁵⁰ The external source, in the case of maternity, is the child. The mother is responsible without being able to make a decision in the matter; she is forced to hear the call of the Other in her unborn child, even if she should choose not to respond to it. A pregnant woman is aware that the child inside her is dependent on her entirely, unable even to feed itself, and that her actions affect the child's health

48. Emmanuel Levinas, "Substitution" in *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 90-91.

49. Jennifer Rosato, "Woman as Vulnerable Self: The Trope of Maternity in Levinas's *Otherwise than Being*," *Hypatia* 27, no. 2 (2012): 348-65, 350.

50. *Ibid.*

and well-being. She decides whether or not to answer the unborn child's needs, but she does not have a choice in the matter of responsibility itself. She is responsible, even if she chooses to ignore this responsibility. Similarly, with substitution, the Self is incessantly responsible for the Other. This responsibility is also a kind of radical passivity, completely independent of the will of the Self. I cannot choose whether or not I want to be responsible for the Other; I simply am. According to Rosato, Levinas used maternity as a trope for substitution because it is a clear metaphor for this passivity with which the subject is made to be responsible. One lacks control over a strong and important duty to another.

Rosato believed that Levinas also used maternity to describe vulnerability. Vulnerability is when "the whole self enters into relation with the Other as a being 'for-the-other' – that is, a being susceptible to the Other's initiative."⁵¹ Maternity is a total being "for-the-other," and therefore, a "perfect image of vulnerability in Levinas's sense because of the physical susceptibility of a mother's body to the 'other' – that is, the child – whom she carries."⁵² The child uses her, whether or not she chooses to respond to the call.

Feminist objections to the trope of maternity are quickly directed at the mother's obligation to her child. She is told to completely sacrifice herself for the sake of the child. If she is to completely respond to the call of her child, she is completely passive, totally vulnerable to her child. Rosato, in contrast, thought that maternity found its way into Otherwise than Being precisely because it is a special, all-consuming sort of passivity and responsibility: "Here, Levinas emphasizes and develops his idea that ethical responsibility is a 'substitution' for the Other, a kenotic suffering-in-the-place-of-the-Other wherein 'the oneself' is both emptied of its egotistical spontaneity and re-established as a conscious self that is free only insofar as it directs itself toward ethical living."⁵³ Not only is the individual responsible, the Self is so entirely consumed with responsibility that no other alternative exists. To not answer the call is to still respond. The responsibility exists, regardless of one's will, and imposes on the Self at all times. If I choose not to answer, I am responding. My response is inaction. There is no way to not respond to the call. Freedom, however, comes only in actively answering the call. For Levinas, the metaphor that most clearly represents this idea is maternity. The feminist objection, then, is that not all mothers are self-sacrificing. "One initial objection," Rosato said, "is that [maternity] trades on a stereotypical portrait of the mother as passive or submissive, strong only insofar as she sacrifices herself for her children."⁵⁴ Similarly, Lisa Guenther said that this idea of sacrifice plays on stereotypes about women: "Women have long been expected to give without the expectation of return."⁵⁵ Surely, Levinas's idea of maternity to represent passivity could be problematic to his female readers, who might be mothers themselves.

51. Ibid., 352.

52. Ibid.

53. Ibid., 354.

54. Ibid., 359.

55. Lisa Guenther, "'Like a Maternal Body': Emmanuel Levinas and the Motherhood of Moses," *Hypatia* 21, no. 1 (2006): 119-36, 122.

However, maternity is successful as a trope because it is gender-neutral in a way that the feminine is not. Maternity is not reserved purely for women, the way the feminine is purely representational of the woman. According to Lisa Gunther, Levinas's use of the phrase "like a maternal body," "may or may not refer to the biological birth of the child, for I can become 'like' a maternal body whether or not I physically give birth."⁵⁶ The trope is also capable of representing a man. Levinas referred to the book of Numbers 11:12, the story of Moses, who is responsible for the people "I have neither conceived nor given birth to." Anyone can be "like" a mother, even men. While Levinas designated the feminine as a trait reserved for women, he avoided this problem in the maternal. A man can practice this perfect form of substitution, but only if he becomes like the maternal body. By contrast, a man cannot be like the feminine because the masculine holds a much different place than the feminine and exists in opposition to the feminine. If the feminine is the empirical woman, then the masculine must be the empirical man.

Rosato asserted that what allows the rhetoric of maternity to exist comfortably outside of this criticism is that Levinas offered a metaphor that is in some ways more perfect in its exact execution than is normally possible. Levinas emphasized that people are supposed to be a certain way, to hold ethics as the ultimate goal, but that it is impossible to ever completely fulfill the responsibility of responding to the call of the Other. No one is ever able to actually fulfill their responsibility completely. This does not mean that a person should not try, however. According to Lisa Guenther, "Ethics is not a matter of what I can do, but rather what I ought to do."⁵⁷ The self-sacrificing mother is a good metaphor for substitution in that she is radically passive and chooses to respond. She is radically passive not because she does not respond, but because she allows her needs to be substituted for the needs of her unborn child. It is her submission to the needs of the Other that makes her passive. The mother who gives up herself for the sake of her unborn child resembles the ideal ethical relationship, turning herself fully over to answer the call of the Other. This does not mean that it can always happen or that anyone can actually satisfy the requirements of the call. It means only that one must try to achieve such a goal. The self-sacrificing mother is not what Levinas expected every mother to be any more than he expected every ordinary, but ethical, person to become saint-like. He recognized its rarity and therefore did not hold mothers who are unable to achieve this goal as anything less than incomplete in their response to the call, just like the rest of humanity. The metaphor of maternity for substitution satisfies both of the legitimate feminist criticisms against it. It is a critical action that is an important step in every person's journey toward being ethical. Unlike the feminine, it is not exclusive. If one is to be ethical, one must attempt the task of substitution, and no one is excluded from this responsibility. Anyone can, and in fact, should, strive for substitution and work to become ethical. Women are allowed to participate in the ethical.

At the same time, substitution is not a goal that can be achieved. One cannot ever completely substitute oneself for another Self. I can never satisfy the entirety of someone else's needs, and so the mother cannot perfectly fulfill the needs of her fetus. She does not have to try to fill these needs, but nevertheless, they exist; if she fails to answer the call of her baby, she is failing in her ethical role.

56. *Ibid.*, 119.

57. *Ibid.*, 121.

Maternity is a successful metaphor despite this implication because Levinas did not believe it is possible to completely satisfy the call to the Other, and thus, a mother who is not totally ethical by this definition is not necessarily a “bad mother.” She is simply human, and though she will fail, she must continue to strive to be the closest to perfectly ethical that she can be.

The feminine, in contrast, is unable to satisfy its role as a trope. Levinas got caught up in the failings of language in his use of the feminine as a metaphor. Unintentionally, Levinas committed totalization against the empirical woman with his use of the feminine as a metaphor for understanding alterity. He inadvertently committed violence against the empirical woman and thus failed women in his work. One could argue that the entire purpose of ethics as first philosophy is to avoid totalization and violence, and yet Levinas inadvertently committed his own cardinal sin. Levinas’s use of the trope of maternity, on the other hand, undermines this framework.

As gender roles have changed and become more fluid, simply imagining alterity as the other gender has become inadequate. The only group of people capable of seeing total alterity as female is straight, traditionally masculine men who identify as their sex for their entire lives. Should the homosexual, androgynous human imagine the feminine as alterity, or would it not be more appropriate for them to see Levinas’s target group as ultimately other? Could the metaphor be stretched enough to accomplish the same goals? The answer is no, especially given the importance of gender in Levinas’s understanding of eros and the idea of the birth of a male child as a pivotal event in the Self’s development.

The implications for any woman or gender-fluid individual reading Levinas is that they must somehow totally suspend their understanding of the world, try to imagine being a straight male and to envision alterity as if they were this person. Then, maybe the Other can be recognized as it fits with one’s specific gender identity. Otherwise, we must ignore this entire piece of the ethical relationship and hope the other parts of the texts will suffice in attempting to replicate Levinas’s ethics. The metaphor of maternity does include women in the ethical relationship, but one must wonder if a woman could even get this far in the system. If she hits a brick wall at the beginning of her understanding with alterity, she is unlikely to participate in Levinas’s world of ethics. Perhaps today’s feminist philosophers will take on the task of creating a new metaphor for alterity that can be understood by other gender identities. Levinas’s argument could be expanded to be more inclusive, allowing all people to adopt his system. Levinas’s philosophy has the potential to positively impact the world, if only all people can participate and hear the call of the Other.

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