
Levinasian Caregiving: Dementia and the Other-In-Between¹

Jonathan Yahalom

Duquesne University and Department of Veterans Affairs, West Los Angeles
yahalomphd@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: This article reviews the work of philosopher Emmanuel Levinas to explore caregiving for dementia. It defends a dual thesis whereby it first articulates how Levinas provides a phenomenological description to account for why caregiving is subjectively dreadful and, second, how caregiving invites a fresh re-reading of Levinasian thought. The article introduces two different forms of otherness represented by death and dementia, respectively. This re-reading shows how dementia forces us to more immediately reckon with the intensity Levinas attributes to the nature of human interaction. The article concludes with reflections about what dementia suggests about cultural attitudes towards responsibility and implications for caregiving practice.

When things go badly, remind yourself that, no matter how bad the person's memory is or how strange his behavior, he is still a unique and special human being. We can continue to love a person even after he has changed drastically and even when we are deeply troubled by his present state.

Mace & Rabins, *The 36-Hour Day* (2011, 11)

A relation whose terms do not form a totality can hence be produced... only as proceeding from the I to the other, as a face to face.

Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (1969/1992, 39)

WHY DOES CAREGIVING FOR DEMENTIA HAUNT us with such force? How are we as citizens in a capitalistic, hyper-individualized culture called upon to

¹ The author would like to thank Leswin Laubscher, Peter Atterton, Sophie Langridge, Eric Fanghanel, José-Antonio Orosco, Taine Duncan and two anonymous reviewers for contributing to this article.

care for dependent persons? And, for what reason do the decisions that caregivers make – whether or not to institutionalize, or how to simultaneously respect but allay confused persons, to name but two dilemmas – manifest as ultimately impossible ones, decisions that seem to always fall short of the intentions that underlie them?

My stance as a psychologist whose research focuses on dementia and caregiving is premised on the seriousness with which I approach these questions. This is not an intellectual matter, but an obsession. I fear the day when I am summoned to respond to the suffering of my parents and others I love. I research topics like Alzheimer's disease with dread, implicitly hoping that the knowledge I glean will somehow be put to use and mediate the severity I sincerely hope to never encounter. And yet, my practice and my research point to the futility of these efforts. Such questions cannot be resolved precisely because they inherently cannot be answered. Rather, their presence speaks to the circumstances in which we are individually summoned by such encounters and how we find ourselves haunted by them. Indeed, these issues exist in the context of a social world that invites them to be ignored, and their presence echo as if illustrating a Freudian return of the repressed. Caregiving is so threatening precisely because it reveals what we have overlooked.

Recent work from anthropology, sociology, and gerontology has called attention to this very issue. In their recent book on the anthropology of social suffering, Wilkinson and Kleinman (2016) identify caregiving as the prism for understanding social dimensions of human life and argue that the experience of caregiving reveals the dependency inherent to human interaction. They write:

[It] is through our participation in caregiving... however difficult, frustrated, and compromised, that it is possible to attain a better grasp of what is socially at stake for people in the contexts in which they are made to live. The practice of care for others [is what] we take to be a necessary part of the pursuit of understanding of how social life takes place through enactments of substantive human values (4).

In a complementary and more assertive vein, gerontologist Tom Kitwood calls for “a new ethics” that does “not accept the postulate of some that rationality and memory are the features that give rise to a person's moral standing and protection” (4). According to Kitwood, these typically celebrated features of human functioning have eclipsed others that involve dependency, human connectivity, and a type of affection that supersedes reason.

Yet whereas these and so many other authors are correct in identifying caregiving as a prism for exposing the dependency and value inherent in human interaction, these accounts are limited to the extent that they lack a philosophical foundation. The question still remains: *Why* and *from what basis* does an individual feel responsible to care for a dependent other, even when all responses inevitably seem to fall short of meeting the other's needs? In this article I turn to the work of philosopher Emmanuel Levinas to provide an answer. I defend a dual thesis whereby I, first, articulate how Levinas provides a phenomenological description to account for why caregiving is impossible as much as it is ineluctable, and, second, I reflect on how caregiving invites a fresh re-reading of Levinasian thought.

Readers of this journal are likely keen to Levinas' depiction of the other, but perhaps less to his notion of human suffering as an insurmountable and unsettling feature of existence. In contrast to most accounts of caregiving as an exercise of empathy, Levinas argues that suffering is unsettling not due to empathic resonance, or a sense of one's own vulnerability. Rather, he writes that suffering is unsettling precisely because it shakes the foundations of one's presumed security and comfort. Witnessing another suffering has no meaning and, as such, cannot be justified in pursuit of some larger end. Suffering, writes Levinas (1998), is literally "for nothing" and, as such, calls on the subject to be responsible to the sufferer alone. A witness to suffering faces the ineffable experience of being singularly accountable to respond, regardless of outcome and irrespective of utility. The injunction 'to do something' – a raw sensibility prior to any decision – constitutes the core of Levinas' work, gesturing towards an ethics where the subject is singularly held responsible.

This article will unpack the phenomenology of responsibility conferred on dementia caregivers as witnesses to human suffering. In turning to Levinas to make sense of caregiving, I at once provide a philosophical foundation for the psychological weight of caregiving while I simultaneously employ it as a means to reinterpret Levinas' philosophy. In what follows, I make a distinction between two types of encounters with the other. I argue that Levinas' writings make an implicit distinction between the subject who encounters the other that is alive and suffering, in contrast to the subject who encounters the other that has passed. I then turn to consider the demented other, who I interpret as an other in-between life and death. A review of Levinas' (1974/1998) later description of ethics is provided in terms of this encounter. I argue that dementia unquestionably represents the onset of loss and death, yet it simultaneously highlights the foundation of what it means to be human. It provides a type of transcendence over quotidian modes of experience. Although all encounters with another person are said to be constitutive of this, I argue that the caregiver's witness to a person living with dementia forces us to more immediately reckon with the intensity Levinas attributes to the nature of human interaction. I conclude with reflections about what dementia suggests about our cultural attitude toward Levinasian ethics and implications for caregiving practice.

The Other: Sentient and Deceased

Although Levinas never makes the following point explicit, I believe that his writings support a distinction between what I call the *sentient-other* and *deceased-other*. This distinction is warranted based on differences in responsibility conferred on the subject through each respective encounter with the other. I consider this distinction important because it helps clarify how Levinas conceptualizes ethical responsibility and because it separates features of his thought that often get conflated and confused. In what follows I will briefly discuss each encounter, and proceed to situate dementia within this scheme.

The subject's encounter with the sentient-other is what Levinas describes most often and is central to his work. Readers of this journal are likely well familiar with Levinas' description of the face-to-face encounter where the subject meets another

human being and discovers, beyond measure, that this person is irreducibly different. The other's gaze reveals the limitations of one's own subjectivity, signifying that the subject cannot possibly know what the other sees. The other possesses what the subject cannot have and thus issues a command over the subject. In so doing, the subject suddenly realizes that what makes the other person different cannot be understood, or else he would no longer be other. Levinas (1969/1992) writes, "The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me, [the image that I use to attempt to understand him]" (50-51).² By this account, the other's otherness ruptures all understanding – what Levinas terms "sameness" – calling everything the subject holds into question. According to Levinas, nothing about the other's otherness can be understood or, in his words, subsumed within the same.

Oona Ajzenstat (2001) helps clarify that the subject borne through this encounter is fostered through two dimensions of asymmetry in relation to the other (21-25). First, the subject encounters *asymmetry of identity* given that the other is different and cannot be made the same. And, second, the subject is also marked by an *asymmetry of responsibility* because the other's difference issues a command to be responsible for maintaining his otherness, to literally not kill the other by erasing his otherness. According to Levinas, this responsibility is immense. Levinas often describes this encounter with otherness in terms of destitution – suffering – which singles-out the subject to respond. Levinas (1969/1992) writes, "To recognize the Other is to recognize a hunger. To recognize the Other is to give" (75).³ Levinas argues that this event is the "pre-original" grounds of subjectivity (1974/1998, 10). Pre-original because one cannot make sense of an event before responsibility: the other's call singles-out and summons the subject to be ethical, to be something above an animal fulfilling basic needs, and hence birthed into a human subject.⁴

Although less often attended to in the literature, Levinas' description of the subject borne from the relationship with the deceased-other is markedly different. First, there is a major difference with regards to who the other is. With the sentient-other, the subject is summoned by another being who is cognizant, who sees the subject in a way the subject cannot see itself and who knows when the subject has failed to uphold its responsibility. None of these are the case for the deceased-other.

² In this article I assume a basic continuity between Levinas' early and later works which all focus on the irreducible and non-representational presence of otherness. In early works, Levinas describes the subject's encounter with the other in terms of the face, but he is clear that it (i.e., the face) cannot be understood, or represented through image. Even in *Totality and Infinity* the face is a metaphor that does not signify anything in actuality, but is rather an event that transcends ontology. The otherness of the other's gaze transcends understanding – and the moment his eyes are seen to be blue (or 'be' anything at all) the subject loses 'sight' of otherness. This is why some (e.g., Ajzenstat 2001, p. 339) argue against the notion that Levinas' later works represent a radical break from ontology. The language Levinas uses in his later works are "less metaphorical" (less ontological), yet Levinas was never an ontologist. The metaphors employed in *Totality and Infinity* should not be read literally, although they are commonly read in this light.

³ The two moments may appear simultaneous, yet for Levinas they represent different temporal dimensions. Recognizing hunger in the sentient-other is diachronic: it concerns ethics as the other ruptures the same. Giving to the sentient-other is synchronic, a conscious (and representational) decision that is not ethical in itself. More on this distinction will be found at the conclusion of this article.

⁴ This last point is often misinterpreted and overlooked. According to Levinas, it makes no sense to speak of a human subject prior to his encounter with the other. There rather exists is a double-play on the word "subject" in that the sense that the subject is borne at the precise moment he is subject *to* the other.

The deceased-other does not suffer and hence does not summon the subject through his suffering. In *God, Death, and Time* (1993/2000) Levinas writes that the deceased-other has a face but his face “becomes a masque” (12). The subject is still summoned to be responsible, however. In comparison to the sentient-other, the deceased-other summons the subject not through “suffering” but through another stance, what Levinas terms “the culpability of the survivor” (1993/2000, 12). Levinas uses this term only once in the text and, as far as I am aware, never returns to it again. Yet it appears deliberate and opens a new perspective on encountering the death of the other. In the same passage Levinas writes that culpability leads to specific form of responsibility. He writes, “The death of the other who dies affects me in my very identity as a responsible ‘me’... [it] is made up of an ineffable responsibility” (1993/2000, 12).

Culpability is borrowed from Latin – *culpabilis* – meaning ‘to deserve blame for a crime.’ In lieu of asymmetry, the subject is summoned to responsibility through culpability. Why is the subject culpable? And what type of responsibility does this subject have? At first glance there appear two possibilities. First, the subject might be culpable insofar as he totalizes the deceased-other, neglecting otherness by focusing on the corpse as object. Yet this is unsatisfactory. Subjectivity is premised and borne through otherness (see Note 4) and so Levinas cannot claim that the subject is a subject while simultaneously totalizing the other. The second possibility is that the subject is culpable through the specter of the other. The deceased-other haunts the subject. Through the subject’s encounter with the deceased-other, the subject is distraught, unsettled, and overcome by emotion that is nonsensical. Levinas writes, “The relation with the death of the other is not a knowledge... nor [an] experience... [D]eath is an exception... a purely emotional rapport” (1993/2000, 16).

Levinas is clear that the subject’s relationship with otherness transcends ontology.⁵ Yet he is not clear about the mechanisms by which this takes place in the encounter with death. I am not certain about Levinas’ motives for remaining ambiguous, but it seems to me that the philosophical crux stems from his notion of the *il y a* – “there is.” This concept is first introduced in *Existence and Existents* (1947/2001) and – as an illustration of haunting itself – returns throughout Levinas’ writings. The “there is” is Levinas’ term for Being in general, but, as Simon Critchley (1993) writes, it “is a contribution to ontology that ruins ontology” (111). The “there is” is often compared to one’s experience of night, where all familiar objects disappear, yet one knows with horror that something is present which is not visible. The subject has the sensation that the night is watching the subject, rather than the subject watching it. William Large (2002) writes that this radically transforms the subject, as interiority is turned inside-out like a glove.

The “there is” is inseparable from Levinas’ conception of death. Whenever Levinas mentions one concept, the other inevitably follows. For example, in *Otherwise than Being* (1974/1998), Levinas describes the scene of witnessing the

⁵ Ontology in this article is used in a Levinasian sense. It is meant as a critique against Western philosophical (especially Heideggerian) efforts that implicitly reduce human life to the physical, to being. Levinas’ point is that there is something more to human life than physical existence, something that transcends, is infinite, and otherwise than being.

other's death as "the void that hollows out [between being and non-being] is immediately filled with the mute and anonymous rustling of the *there is...*" (1974/1998, 3). He suggests that the "there is" disrupts and summons the subject to responsibility, but does so differently than the sentient-other for whom the subject is responsible to not let die. The "there is" constitutes the subject's emotional rapport with the deceased-other. The subject is culpable through memory of the other, responsible through a promise to uphold the memory of the other to the third party (the other others) with whom the subject continues to interact. As such, the subject is responsible from two directions: responsible to the third of having survived the other, and summoned by the specter of his promise to honor the deceased's memory.

While these two phenomenologies are powerful and compelling, the most common criticism levied against Levinas is that his writings seem so incongruous with real life. Perhaps the most coherent articulation of this objection comes from Alain Badiou (2001) when he argues that Levinas' thought has nothing to do with philosophy but is philosophy "annulled by theology," an enterprise that does not have any relevance to embodied real-life experience (21 – 23). In a significant way, my everyday life agrees with Badiou and others. I do not experience a radical call to responsibility each time I confront someone. And, of the people who have tragically or peacefully died in my life, the most immediate response I have had is to forge on, to pretend that I am not affected by my loss. My psychological colleagues and I can agree that these experiences are defenses, but the criticism against Levinas still stands – I do not experience his ethics. Yet instead of dismissing this objection, I want to take it seriously and question why I and so many other objectors to Levinas have experiences that are not congruent to his ethics. As I will come to argue, caregiving provides an answer and thus reintroduces the relevance of Levinas to the real world.

Dementia: The Other-in-Between

Insofar as the distinction between the sentient- and deceased-other is warranted, it is immediately blurred by the introduction of another type of other, what I call the *other-in-between*. Distinguished from the sentient-other, the other-in-between is not cognizant and so does not know when the subject fails to uphold its responsibility. Yet the other-in-between is also distinguished from the deceased-other; the subject remains responsible to not kill this other who remains alive. There exist many incarnations of the other-in-between, yet in what follows I focus on the other with dementia. Dementia blurs the distinction between life and death and, as such, challenges the dichotomy presented above. I argue that this encounter epitomizes the raw intensity attributed to ethics in Levinas' work and provides a response to the objection that quotidian experience seems to have little to do with what Levinas describes.

The horror of dementia is perhaps related to how the subject's encounter with the other conjoins the two disparate features of ethics outlined above. The anonymous and unsettling rustling of the "there is" is pronounced in the face of the other-in-between. The "there is" is inscribed through the progressive deterioration of the other with dementia, where he seems 'there' but 'not-there,' conscious yet fundamentally confused. Consider the unsettling reality of a demented father who does not recognize

his own son. This other no longer summons the subject, or identifies that the subject (his son) is singularly unique. The other's gaze is in-between, anonymous, and, above all, a challenge to ontology: the body whom the subject knows to 'be' his father no longer acts like a father.

By the same token, the dementia patient summons the subject to an asymmetrical responsibility to not kill, to preserve the other's life and dignity. That is because the dementia patient is destitute and helpless *par excellence*. Dementia is a situation that forces the subject to recognize that the subject alone is responsible for the other. Despite the anonymity of the other's gaze, the subject is singularly held responsible precisely because of the other's vulnerability. There exists no one else to alleviate the burden – no one whom the demented other can call upon. And so, the encounter with the other weaves together asymmetrical responsibility and the "there is." I imagine this to be a true scene of horror, and I experience numbness at anticipation of it.

Despite the fact that Levinas never describes any sort of in-between status of otherness, this phenomenology is accounted for in his later writings. Consider a passage from "Substitution," the central chapter of Levinas' mature work, *Otherwise than Being*. Substitution is the gravitational center around which Levinas' later thought circulates, a radicalization of earlier formulations of the subject borne from responsibility for the other.⁶ Here responsibility is not imposed by the external presence of the other. The subject is a substituted subject, hostage, one-for-the-other. Substitution is a stance where the subject puts itself in the other's place by taking responsibility for the other's responsibility. Quite literally, the substituted subject is "having-the-other-in-one's-skin" (Levinas, 1974/1998, 115). With this concept, Levinas retains rhetoric about the subject borne from other (as depicted in *Totality and Infinity*), but the description is now poignant and raw, intense beyond any account of ethics provided earlier. Levinas writes:

A subject is a hostage. Obsessed with responsibilities which did not arise in decisions taken by a subject "contemplating freely," consequently accused in its innocence, subjectivity in itself is being thrown back on itself. This means concretely: accused of what the others do or suffer, or responsible for what they do or suffer. The uniqueness of the self is the very fact of bearing the fault of another (112)

What is remarkable about this passage is, first, how the ethical subject is depicted in terms of the two facets attributed to the subject's encounter with the other-in-between. The subject is rendered between two poles: the "there is" (subjectivity "thrown back on itself") and radical responsibility (accountability for decisions that are not its own). The passage is riddled with intensity, painting the ethical subject as hostage to the other with absolute responsibility. This is, I imagine, the gnawing agony of any witness to dementia: Obsession with the right decision: *Do I institutionalize my father, or care for him in my own home?* Accused of perpetuating suffering: *There*

⁶ Robert L. Bernasconi (2002) writes that substitution is a response to three opposing notions of subjectivity represented in egoism, ontology's narrow concern with one's own existence, and the existential wave that sacrifice is possible based on the grounds of one's freedom.

must be something to make this easier. Absolute responsibility: I must assume responsibility for him whom I know cannot hold responsibility. This is the scene of dementia – as it is concurrently the phenomenology of Levinas’ ethical subject.

The subject encounters a new dimension of temporality through such agonizing passivity. *Do I want my father to pass, or continue living in this condition?* The question cannot but obsess the subject. Whether the subject does or does not take action, he remains passive to the progress of time. Levinas rather cryptically writes, “The total passivity of obsession is more passive still than the passivity of things” (1974/1998, 110). Here, the subject is passive to the course of dementia beyond his control. The subject is bound to time, like aging itself, which occurs despite what one does (Lingis, 1998, xxvi). The caregiver’s witness to dementia experiences a “surplus of responsibility,” is held hostage, and quite literally becomes “the-one-for-the-other” (Levinas, 1974/1998, 100).

Of course, the subject could enlist help, institutionalize the person, try to look past the scene of dementia. But Levinas’ contribution is that these decisions do not change the gnawing reality that, ultimately, the subject *alone* is responsible. Levinas is clear that this type of responsibility is not a choice that one makes, but what one is elected to, an “assignment of me by another” (1974/1998, 100). The son responsible for his demented father is bound without prior contract, without deliberating. Unsettling in his stomach is certitude beyond knowledge – beyond anything other than a sensibility – that he is inescapably responsible. “Nothing here resembles self-consciousness,” writes Levinas, “it has a meaning only as an upsurge in me of a responsibility prior to commitment... There I am one and irreplaceable” (1974/1998, 103).

Levinas’ rare use of metaphor in *Otherwise than Being* also provides an additional depiction of the subject’s encounter with dementia.⁷ At one point in the text Levinas compares the ethical subject to maternity itself: “The evocation of maternity... suggests to us the proper sense of the oneself. The oneself cannot form itself; it is already formed with absolute passivity” (1974/1998, 104). On one hand, Levinas employs this metaphor to reemphasize his point regarding passivity. Maternity is a condition where the subject is defined by what it is not, namely, the child. The maternal subject is not only responsible for another, but is defined by that other, where “the other-[is]-in-one’s-skin” (1974/1998, 115). Yet this metaphor is also a literal description of the caregiver. In this inversion, the son-turned-parent now assumes responsibility for the very person who once was responsible for him. So often, caretaking is likened to parenting, and dementia patients are likened to children.⁸ This helps explain another metaphor, introduced a few lines below the original text, where Levinas goes on to compare the subject to an orphan: “The oneself is a creature, but an orphan by birth or an atheist no doubt ignorant of its Creator, for if it knew it it would again be taking up its commencement” (1974/1998, 105). The witness to dementia no doubt experiences orphanhood, feels abandoned by the in-between-parent who progressively fades further away. Yet the analogy reaches its limits because the subject here knows who his parents are. And precisely because he knows

⁷ Contrary to *Totality and Infinity*, which was criticized as being too metaphorical (and ontological), metaphors are largely absent in Levinas’ later work (for more on this point see Derrida, 1967/1980).

⁸ That this reinforces ageist stereotypes is another issue, not taken up here (for more on this point see Yahalom, 2016).

– because this other is/was his father – the subject takes up his “commencement,” which must be infinite responsibility.

Conclusion

To be clear, Levinas’ ethics is not confined to the scene of dementia. His account of obsession, passivity, and radical responsibility are, for Levinas, descriptive of *all* human encounters. Ethics introduces what Levinas calls the “humanity of the human,” (1993, 43), “the signifyingness of signification” (1974/1998, 5), that which distinguishes what it means to be a person. Levinas writes: “Here the human is brought out by transcendence... a hyperbole in which it breaks up and *falls upward* into the human” (Levinas 1974/1998, 184). The overall point is that what it means to be human is contingent upon ethically responding to the other. Yet if ethics is constitutive of humanity, I return to the type of questions raised earlier: Why does Levinas’ description seem more applicable as the subject encounters the other-in-between? Why do we not experience radical responsibility in the quotidian encounter with another? And, what does dementia suggest about all other encounters? In this concluding section I take up these concerns and reflect on how caregiving provides a new perspective on Levinas’ writing and the cultural world in which he is read.

Insofar as Levinas is clear that ethics is not confined to one type of interpersonal encounter – in its non-representationality, ethics in fact does not concern ‘types’ – the task is to first address why dementia seems so pertinent to Levinasian thought. As described above, dementia represents the other-in-between, the transitory ‘event’ between sentience and death. And yet, in a “hypercognitive culture” where personhood is defined by rationality and memory, dementia is a direct threat to what it means to be a person (Post, 1995). Historian Jesse Ballanger (2006) writes dementia “haunt[s] the landscape of the self-made man” (9). Yet rather than lament this fact, we ought to consider what dementia teaches us about our autonomous lifestyle. Dementia offers a necessary perspective of the limits our cultural outlook. As Tom Kitwood (1997) so poignantly writes, “Contact with dementia can – and indeed should – take us out of our customary patterns of over-busyness, hypercognitivism and extreme talkativity, into a way of being in which emotion and feeling are given a much larger place” (5).

In this vein, one can argue that Levinas is symbolically re-introducing ‘dementia’ into philosophy – performing a sort of phenomenology of dementia, and also contributing to the erasure of dominant philosophical individualistic thinking. Levinas writes, “Western philosophy has most often been an ontology: a reduction of the other to the same by interposition of a middle and neutral term that ensures the comprehension of being” (1969/1992, 43). By premising his ethics on otherness – that which exceeds representation – Levinas challenges the canon that prioritizes knowledge over that which cannot be understood. His work gestures toward what exceeds rationality, as dementia is a reminder of the limits of rationality itself. In this way, caregiving for dementia highlights what has been implicitly absent from dominant modes of thinking and being all along, what has resided between the lines

but was never written. Dementia highlights human vulnerability and one's responsibility to ethically respond to it.

This argument does not intend to suggest that dementia constitutes or promotes a special type of ethics. Rather, the caregiver's response to dementia may disclose what has been enshrouded by the West's appraisal of rationality and ontology all along. In light of this, there is something to be gleaned in my obsession and dread about dementia. In the premonition of what *might* occur in my parents' future, I am forced to recognize that my responsibility is constitutive of the relationship I share with them now. That I obsess so much about dementia suggests what I sense but do not want to recognize lies before me. My dread is not merely confined to some unknown fate. It is present each moment of every encounter with my mother and father, of every encounter with every other. In the wake of this realization, the guise of my autonomy and my intent to live a separate life is abruptly ruptured.

Levinas is pertinent today in this cultural setting, despite the fact that his description of ethics is not realized in every face-to-face encounter. Life could not be any different. Totalization is inevitable, representation is a facet of human experience, and one must attend to all the other others. I must live a separate life; I must attend to my brother, my friend, my patient, and all the other others surrounding me. Yet this is a matter of conscious decision-making, choosing to attend to one person over another. It is the consequence of the introduction of the third, what Levinas terms "the other other." "Consciousness," writes Levinas, "is born as the presence of a third party" (1974/1998, 160).⁹ In this moment, non-representational ethics moves towards representational (conscious) action. This is the juncture where Levinas' philosophy meets traditional ethics about what 'ought' to be done, where diachronic time meets 'real' time. It is the moment the subject commits to action and leaves the radical realm of being singularly held responsible. It is embodied in the son's decision to move his demented father into a nursing home or in his decision not to take any action at all. Acts of consciousness are central to what it means to be, yet none of these actions are ethical in themselves. Ethics for Levinas is understood as radical responsibility that does not occur in real time. This does not imply that making concrete decisions denigrates ethics: responsibility (ethics) and conscious decision-making (ontology) simply occur in different realms.

Levinas' work is not a challenge to ontology nor to our everyday experience, but to their prioritization. Levinas does not deny the reality of having to make a concrete decision; he contributes by suggesting that there is something that exists in addition or beyond it. We never abstain from attending to practical real-world decisions. Ethics simply introduces a fissure into it. That fissure is found in the impossibility of caregiving, and more broadly in the insurmountability of every ethical encounter. As Oona Ajenstat puts it, the point of reading Levinas is to "totalize badly," to ensure

⁹ As the subject becomes aware of the other others, ethics moves towards justice, and Levinas equates justice with consciousness: "the foundation of consciousness is justice" (1974/1998, p. 160). Yet if consciousness is justice – and justice is an ideal that we recognize is never fully reached – then this suggests that the subject is never fully conscious, never fully aware of all the other others to whom he must attend. This is the implication of Levinas' discussion of the messiah in "Messianic Texts" where he compares the fully conscious individual to the messiah: "The Messiah is Myself; to be Myself is to be the Messiah" (1976/1990, p. 89). I take Levinas to imply that the subject's ability to attend to all the other others is messianic, a human possibility yet to be reached.

that the confidence one has in representational thought – in the array of concrete decisions one inevitably makes in the real world – remains open to further ruptures (2001, p 49-64). The imagined son who decides to institutionalize his demented father may never find peace. Now an insomniac, the son recurrently returns to his decision. Derrida (1995) rightly calls this moment “pure madness.” The son is persecuted by suffering that cannot be contained. He is obsessed with a responsibility that haunts and gnaws. There is perhaps no closure to this situation. Levinas provides an answer, explaining why caregiving is impossible and why it inescapably haunts us today; for, to have attained peace in a world of suffering is tantamount to losing all that makes one human.

Works Cited

- Ajzenstat, Oona. 2001. *Driven back to the text: The premodern sources of Levinas's postmodernism*. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.
- Badiou, Alain. 2001. *Ethics: An essay on the understanding of evil* (Hallward, Trans.). New York, NY: Verso.
- Ballenger, J. F. 2006. *Self, senility, and Alzheimer's disease in modern America: A history*. Baltimore, MA: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Bernasconi, Robert L. 2002. “What is the question to which ‘substitution’ is the answer?” in *The Cambridge companion to Levinas* (ed. Critchley & Bernasconi). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Critchley, Simon. 1993. Il ya-A dying stronger than death (Blanchot with Levinas). *Oxford Literary Review*, 15(1), 81-132.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1967/1980. *Writing and difference* (A. Bass, Trans.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1995. *The gift of death* (D. Wills, Trans.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Kitwood, Tom. 1997. *Dementia reconsidered: The person comes first*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.
- Large, William. 2002. Impersonal existence: a conceptual genealogy of the “there is” from Heidegger to Blanchot and Levinas. *ANGELAKI journal of the theoretical humanities*, 7(3), 131-142.
- Levinas Emmanuel. 1947/2001. *Existence and existents* (A. Lingis, Trans.). Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 1969/1992. *Totality and infinity: An essay on exteriority* (A. Lingis, Trans.). Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 1974/1998. *Otherwise than being: Or beyond essence* (A. Lingis, Trans.). Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 1976/1990. *Difficult freedom: Essays on Judaism* (S. Hand, Trans.). Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 1993/2000. *God, death, and time*. (B. Bergo, Trans.) Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.

- Levinas, Emmanuel. 1993. *Outside the subject* (M. Smith, Trans.). Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 1998. *Entre nous: On thinking-of-the-other* (M. Smith, & B. Harshav, Trans.). New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Lingis, Alphonso. 1998. "Translator's introduction" in *Otherwise than being: Or beyond essence*. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.
- Mace, Nancy L., & Rabins, Peter V. 2011. *The 36-hour day: A family guide to caring for people who have Alzheimer disease, related dementias, and memory loss* (5th ed.). Baltimore, MA: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Post, Stephen. 1995. *The moral challenge of Alzheimer's disease: Ethical issues from diagnosis to dying* (2nd ed.). Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Wilkinson, Iain, & Kleinman, Arthur. (2016). *A passion for society: How we think about human suffering*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Yahalom, Jonathan. 2016. *Social Dimensions of Alzheimer's Disease Among Caregivers in Oaxaca, Mexico*. (PhD), Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, PA.