



The primacy of ethics: Hobbes and Levinas

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At several points in his writings, Levinas is implicitly critical of Hobbes's view that the political order is required to restrict human bestiality and make morality possible. In his radio interviews with Philippe Nemo, for example, Levinas includes this suggestive comment:

It is extremely important to know if society in the current sense of the term is the result of a limitation of the principle that men are predators of one another, or if to the contrary it results from the limitation of the principle that men are *for* one another. Does the social, with its institutions, universal forms and laws, result from limiting the consequences of the war between men, or from limiting the infinity which opens in the ethical relationship of man to man? (EI 80)¹

What is only implied in this quote can be developed into explicit criticisms of Hobbes's descriptions of the hypothetical state of nature as a state of war and his claim that morality depends on the establishment of a political order. In this essay, I compare Hobbes's view of human nature and human relations with Levinas's radically different description of the fundamental conditions of human subjectivity. In contrast to Hobbes, I present Levinas's claim that the ethical relation of responsibility is prior to and takes priority over self-interest, self-preservation, and relations of conflict and competition. As Levinas describes it, ethical responsibility implies a fundamental connection between oneself and others, and this means that community is not properly understood as an implicit contract among self-interested rational agents. Rather the human community is best understood as a kinship built up by multiplying what Levinas describes as the face to face relation and the responsibility of one for another. I also compare Hobbes's account of the minimal moral laws that can only be instituted under the security of a political order with Levinas's insistence that ethics cannot be reduced to politics – that

infinite responsibility is prior to any considerations of prudential reason and does not depend on any social conventions or political institutions. I conclude by arguing that Levinas's emphasis on the primacy of ethical responsibility provides a more adequate description of human relations and justice in the human community.

I. Thomas Hobbes: The war of all against all

Hobbes wrote *Leviathan* in 17th century England during a time of rapid social, religious, and political change punctuated by civil war. As his subtitle indicates, he was most concerned with political arguments aimed at restoring and maintaining order, peace, and security in the commonwealth.² He asks his reader to imagine what it would be like to strip away civil society so that we could observe human beings in the hypothetical state of nature. Hobbes assumes fundamental scarcity of resources; he argues for relative equality of needs and desires and relative equality of strength and ability so that the state of nature is characterized by competition, conflict, the threat of violence, and a general insecurity of life and the means to live well. Under these conditions, Hobbes claims that human beings would be self-interested and selfishly motivated. He says for example, that "of all voluntary acts, the object is to every man his own good" (L 118); and that "every man by nature seeketh his own benefit, and promotion" (L 145). Furthermore, according to Hobbes, in the hypothetical state of nature, the principal end and motive of all human beings is self-preservation. It is therefore a natural right to use whatever means each person judges will best preserve his life; thus "every man has a right to every thing; even to one another's body" (L 103). Unrestrained self-interest, unlimited natural rights, and "a restless desire of power in all men" (L 80) lead to diffidence – distrust and dread – and a constant disposition to war. Thus we come to the famous passage where Hobbes describes the state of nature as the condition in which "every man is enemy to every man . . . and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (L 100).

Hobbes ignores any natural connections between individuals, and he denies any fundamental interest in the welfare of others. The preservation of life, one's own life, is the first and fundamental duty and all moral and political obligations are founded on the desire for self-preservation. According to Hobbes, there are laws of nature, which he also refers to as moral virtues; but it is clear from his definition that the laws of nature merely dictate the rational means to preserve one's life.³ In the context of life-threatening conflict and competition, reason leads men to see the necessity for moral rules (the laws of nature) that might permit human beings to live together peacefully. Thus the fundamental law of nature is to seek peace, and derivative laws include

keeping one's covenants, mutual accommodation, gratitude, modesty, equity, and mercy – the moral virtues that would make social life possible.

Although these laws of nature are immutable and eternal, Hobbes claims that they do not always bind us to action. He explicitly argues that where life is not secure, it is contrary to one's self-interest and self-preservation to fulfill moral obligations. Thus Hobbes says,

The laws of nature oblige *in foro interno*; that is to say, they bind to a desire they should take place: but *in foro externo*; this is, to the putting them in act, not always. For he that should be modest, and tractable, and perform all he promises, in such time, and place, where no man else should do so, should but make himself a prey to others, and procure his own certain ruin, contrary to the ground of all laws of nature. . . . (L 123)

In other words, the natural laws or moral virtues cannot be effective without the laws and conventions of civil society that guarantee reciprocity. Thus according to Hobbes, self-interested inclinations and aversions are primary, attention to moral obligations is secondary and dependent on the fact that I cannot meet my own needs without the help (or at least the non-interference) of others. Ethical life depends on political order and the security of a common public authority. If we strip away the laws and conventions of civil society, we might still have the inclination to seek peace and the desire to be kind, generous, and merciful, but acting on such desires would be contrary to self-preservation. And since one never gives up the right to self-preservation, the fundamental conditions of the state of nature remain just beneath the surface of civil relations, and it is always possible to revert to the brutality, amorality, and isolation of the natural condition.

Of course, Hobbes insists that he is not giving a historical account of the natural condition or the actual cause of civil society. Rather he is using a thought experiment to uncover the defining properties of human nature and the rational means for maintaining a peaceful, productive, and just society. His most sympathetic interpreters claim that he is using the hypothetical state of nature as a warning against the dissolution of political order and authority; he is describing the inevitable reality of human conflict and mistrust and the inevitable necessity for political authority to mediate conflict and maintain civil society.⁴ But does Hobbes's thought experiment adequately describe the fundamental conditions of human existence? Is self-interest the primary motive and self-preservation the primary aim of human beings? Are reciprocity and social conventions the necessary conditions for moral responsibility? Are conflict, competition, and mistrust the only aspects of human relations that must be taken into account in the constitution of the political order? Does

an implicit social contract adequately describe the just society? These are some of the critical questions that can be addressed through a comparison of Hobbes with Levinas.

II. Emmanuel Levinas: The responsibility of the one for all

As a Lithuanian Jew who emigrated to France in 1923, Levinas witnessed the horrors of fascism, war, and the Holocaust. Thus although he lacks the explicit political agenda of Hobbes, he is nevertheless concerned over analogous problems of war, peace, justice, and the relation between ethics and politics. These themes are clearly announced in the Preface to *Totality and Infinity* where the question of ethics is raised in the light of the violence of modern politics and war.⁵ But Levinas does not provide an argument from experience or an analysis of the tensions between ethics and politics. Like Hobbes in a sense, Levinas asks us to penetrate beneath our everyday experience to undertake a complex meditation on the conditions of primordial human existence. But whereas Hobbes uses a thought experiment to arrive at the necessary conditions for order and security in civil society, Levinas uses phenomenological descriptions as part of his effort to uncover the meaning of human ethical experience in primordial human relations.

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas begins his descriptions of human existence with what he refers to as “separated being” or self-sufficient egoism. And the first moment of this egoism, the upsurge of the self, occurs in enjoyment. According to Levinas, enjoyment is an elemental condition of human being in a world of plenitude. Every thing I encounter offers itself to enjoyment, and enjoyment accompanies every use of things. This enjoyment is naive, carefree and playful, not bound up with any struggle for existence: “. . . it consists in sinking one’s teeth fully into the nutriments of the world, agreeing to the world as wealth, releasing its elemental essence” (TI 134). The separated being is first simply a hungry stomach enjoying the wealth of nutriments that satisfy hunger.

Although we can imagine hunger in Hobbes’s state of nature, he makes no mention of enjoyment, nourishment, or satisfaction. By contrast, Levinas begins with the “animal complacency” of enjoyment, but he is not naive about plenitude in the world of nourishments. According to Levinas, enjoyment has no security; and the uncertainties of the future remind the separated being of its dependence on the things in the world. Levinas says, “The happiness of enjoyment is stronger than every disquietude, but disquietude can trouble it; here lies the gap between the animal and the human” (TI 149). The pain of need, although it refers to the happiness of satisfaction, reminds the separated

being that the freedom of enjoyment is limited. Thus the analysis expands to include the necessity of economic existence.

Economic existence requires labor and possession to master the uncertainty of future needs. And these activities are made possible, according to Levinas, by habitation, by dwelling in a home. Levinas describes the home as a retreat and a refuge, a place of inwardness and intimacy that provides rest from labor in the world; the separated being dwells in the familiarity of nourishments that conform to its needs. But according to Levinas, dwelling is also characterized by the intimacy and familiarity of a human welcome. This intimate welcome in the home is produced as gentleness and warmth; it is not a confrontation but an acceptance and sharing of enjoyment which Levinas characterizes as discretion. He describes this situation carefully:

And the other whose presence is discreetly an absence, with which is accomplished the primary hospitable welcome which describes the field of intimacy, is the Woman. The woman is the condition for recollection, the interiority of the Home and inhabitation. . . . The Other who welcomes in intimacy is not the you [vous] of the face that reveals itself in a dimension of height, but precisely the thou [tu] of familiarity. . . . This alterity is situated on another plane than language and nowise represents a truncated, stammering, still elementary language. On the contrary, the discretion of this presence includes all the possibilities of the transcendent relationship with the Other. It is comprehensible . . . only on the ground of the full human personality, which, however, in the woman, can be reserved so as to open up the dimension of interiority. (TI 155)

Discretion is thus an attribute of “feminine alterity;” it is produced as the cautious reserve of gentle familiarity rather than as a confrontation or challenge. In the home, the intimate and discrete Other is part of the solitude of egoist existence.

Of course, there have been some objections to this interpretation of welcome in the dwelling as the dimension of the feminine.⁶ Perhaps in anticipation of these objections, Levinas says,

The feminine has been encountered in this analysis as one of the cardinal points of the horizon in which the inner life takes place – and the empirical absence of the human being of “feminine sex” in a dwelling nowise affects the dimension of femininity which remains open there, as the very welcome of the dwelling. (TI 158)

Levinas does not mean to reduce the human status of women but only to use femininity as one human quality that brings to light the human intimacy, comfort, and respite from competition which do not appear in Hobbes's analysis. The human relation in the intimacy of the home includes all of the possibilities of equality and even conflict; but it is the possibility of welcome rather than challenge that makes this relation a significant part of dwelling in the home. Thus femininity is the attribute of the human being (whether man or woman) who provides the first welcome, warmth, gentleness, and intimacy that transform the dwelling into a home.⁷

The separated being may now move out into the world of plenitude and labor: grasp, seize, and take away elements to put them in reserve in the home. By taking possession, by seizing and depositing elements in the home, labor suspends the uncertain future. As property, elements lose their independence and become things. But just as intimacy in the home remains part of the domain of separated being, so also labor and possession are still part of self-sufficient egoism. The resistance of matter, of the non-I, is already broken as I labor to relate the element to my own need. In consuming the non-I, I clearly overcome the resistance of matter as other; but even placing a thing in my home as a possession defines that thing as mine and as part of my egoist existing.

So now we have Levinas's picture of the primordial solitude of the isolated ego, enjoying the plenitude, laboring to provide some security for enjoyment, resting in the welcome of the home, but still wholly caught up in egoist existence. In these first moments of existence, the ego is enchained to itself in solitude, locked into self-reference in the monotonous series of instants that make up the present of economic time, and related to a world that is merely part of that solitude. The solitude of material existence is a circle of desire, labor, possession, consumption, and new desire. But Levinas insists that this solitude is a problem. The solitary existent is a burden to itself, occupied with itself, responsible for itself; it is master of its existing but it remains closed upon itself in solitude.

Levinas uses the term salvation to refer to an escape from this initial self-absorption; but according to Levinas, the only true salvation from this enchainment to oneself occurs in relation to the "indiscreet" Other, in the face to face relation. Face to face with an other that is absolutely other, an unknowable mystery, something I cannot grasp, consume, or possess, my solitude is broken. This Other is not part of my familiar world and does not share my home. This indiscreet Other calls into question my naive enjoyment and possession; and this calling into question is manifested in language. The Other breaks into the closed circle of solitude by speaking to me, by calling my solitary existence into question. The Other speaks to me from outside

my material existence, speaks from a transcendent exteriority that Levinas describes with the terms “height” and “mastery”. Speaking is a generalization that offers the world to the Other and therefore language is “a primordial dispossession, a first donation” (a first giving of the world to the Other) (TI 173). Language transforms a world that was wholly mine into a common world, a world in which things receive a name.

But the constitution of a shared world through language is not the only outcome of this encounter with the face of the Other. According to Levinas, it is only in approaching the Other that I attend to myself; it is only in being attentive to the call of the Other that I can become conscious of myself. Commanded by the Other, called to respond, I am conscious of myself as subject to the Other. In speaking to the Other, in responding to the challenge of the Other, I express myself, reveal myself, and thereby become conscious of myself. Self-conscious subjectivity can only occur when the solitude of separated being is broken by the indiscreet Other. The call of the Other brings the separated being out of egoist solitude and contentment, evokes desire for transcendence, and gives rise to responsibility. The relationship with the Other is desire for the Other; and to speak face to face is to offer one’s being to the Other. Thus Levinas says,

The surpassing of phenomenal or inward existence does not consist in receiving the recognition of the Other, but in offering him one’s being. To be in oneself is to express oneself, that is, already to serve the Other. The ground of expression is goodness. (TI 183)

This is the ethical relation, the relation that breaks through the solitude of spontaneous egoism and permits self-conscious subjectivity.

Levinas uses the term epiphany to capture the claim that the face is neither simply seen nor touched, that the face refuses to be comprehended or contained in my sense experience. Epiphany also describes the situation of speech, where speaking to one another is a *relation* that maintains absolute *difference* and separation. As an interlocutor, the Other is free from any theme and contests any meaning I ascribe to him. The face resists possession, resists both enjoyment and knowledge. Levinas says, “The expressions the face introduces into the world does not defy the feebleness of my powers, but my ability for power [Mon pouvoir de pouvoir]” (TI 198). The Other, facing me, opposes my power to take or consume or comprehend; the Other opposes my power to kill. But the face of the Other only resists me with what Levinas calls ethical resistance: “This infinity, stronger than murder, already resists us in his face, is his face, is the primordial expression, is the first word: ‘you shall not commit murder’ ” (TI 199). The face presents a purely ethical resistance

because it is not a matter of perception or of conscious struggle but of a transcendence, a relation with what is beyond my own material existence.

And this ethical resistance is not merely negative; the Other presents itself in expression, speaks to me with both height and humility, surprises me, appeals to me and solicits my response:

To manifest oneself as a face is to *impose oneself* above and beyond the manifested and purely phenomenal form. . . . The being that expresses itself imposes itself, but does so precisely by appealing to me with its destitution and nudity – its hunger – without my being able to be deaf to that appeal. (TI 200)

The face of the Other is naked before me. There is both “mastery” and “poverty” in the face of the Other that evokes “Desire” in me. My desire for transcendence, desire for something I cannot find in myself, characterizes my response to the face as transcendent mastery. And desire to give of myself and my wealth characterizes my response to the face as destitute, as exposed to me without defense and yet questioning my naive enjoyment. The Other is the one to whom I owe everything, even my self-conscious subjectivity; and the face of the Other evokes both submission and generosity in me. Whatever the possibilities for violence or disregard in relation to the Other, Levinas insists that this analysis of the ethical relation with the face is primary. The face speaks, and face to face with the Other, I do not simply contemplate in silence, I respond.

Confronted by the Other, I come to see my egoism as contingent, my solitary and spontaneous freedom as arbitrary, and I become a self-conscious self only in my response to the Other, as subject to the Other in an asymmetrical relation of infinite responsibility. My self-conscious subjectivity is thus constituted as one-for-another. Responsibility is an essential structure of human subjectivity. I do not assume or take up this responsibility for another; it does not depend on any act of my will and it is not the result of any rational argument or implicit contract. I am first responsible for the Other before I am for myself. The human being does not simply live life satisfied with spontaneous natural existence; the human being is awakened by the Other and called to justify its spontaneous consuming and possessing and its natural compulsion to survive.

It might be objected at this point in my presentation of Levinas, that he is offering a description of human existence that is merely an alternative to Hobbes’s description. Levinas’s claims regarding human intimacy and infinite responsibility for the Other must still be reconciled with the real experiences of conflict, competition, violence, and mistrust that concern Hobbes. Perhaps

Hobbes is simply being realistic in his emphasis on the need for a common power to mediate conflict and enforce moral obligations. But is Hobbes as realistic in his talk of a covenant or social contract that transfers natural rights to the sovereign power? How could Hobbes's self-interested, rational calculators in a natural condition of diffidence ever come together in the mutual trust required to make a covenant? Given Hobbes's description of human nature, if the implicit social contract were ever dissolved, how could it be re-established? Someone would have to take the risk of acting first, the risk of sacrifice for another. Levinas's description of the face to face relation and asymmetrical responsibility for the Other is such a moment of generosity. Responding to the Other without any guarantee of reciprocity makes it possible to initiate a covenant.⁸

But this points to a deeper disagreement between Hobbes and Levinas since Levinas's appeal to generosity involves an implicit rejection of Hobbes's account of human nature and human relations in the state of nature. Hobbes claims that we are individuals first and social creatures second, that all of the basic qualities and abilities that define us as human are intrinsic to individuals, and that social interactions do not play any essential or necessary role in forming us as human beings. David Gauthier summarizes these commitments in his description of Hobbes's individualism,

. . . individual human beings not only can, but must, be understood apart from society. The fundamental characteristics of men are not products of their social existence . . . man is social because he is human, not human because he is social. In particular, self-consciousness and language must be taken as conditions, not products of society. (Gauthier 138)⁹

According to this reading of Hobbes, society has instrumental value for individuals, but cooperative interactions are always primarily based on self interest and it is irrational to make oneself vulnerable to others. By contrast, according to Levinas, one is not yet a self-conscious human subject in the egoistic solitude of material existence; responding to the face of an Other, speaking face to face, is the only way to become conscious of oneself. There is not yet any question of prudential reason in one's vulnerability to the Other; entrance into self-conscious subjectivity is by way of subjection to the Other – by way of responding, “*Here I am*” [*me voici*]. And there is no question of avoiding sociality; one's being human is commanded by the other; the situation of speaking face to face constitutes a shared world and marks one's entry into the human community.

In addition, Levinas insists that the relation of responsibility for the Other is fundamental and inescapable. As an essential structure of human subjec-

tivity, responsibility is prior to any rational calculation and it must be presupposed even when we emphasize the realities of conflict and violence among human beings. He explicitly treats this issue in an essay titled “Ideology and Idealism” where he says:

I have been speaking about that which stands behind practical morality; about the extraordinary relation between a man and his neighbor, a relation that continues to exist even when it is severely damaged. Of course we have the power to relate ourselves to the other as to an object, to oppress and exploit him; nevertheless the relation to the other, as a relation of responsibility, cannot be totally suppressed, even when it takes the form of politics or warfare. Here it is impossible to free myself by saying, “It’s not my concern.” There is no choice, for it is always and inescapably my concern.¹⁰

Hobbes admits that the moral virtues are always present as rational inclinations, but he claims that we cannot risk our lives by acting on these inclinations in the natural condition. Levinas insists that the relation of responsibility for the Other means that we must act on these moral virtues even under conditions of war. Even when the laws and conventions of civil society cannot provide security or promise reciprocity, we remain responsible.¹¹

But how do we move from this face to face relation to the multiplicity of social relations that constitute the human community? We cannot be infinitely responsible for everyone or subject to everyone; nor could we accept that ethical responsibility was infinitely directed to one Other without regard for the broader responsibilities to a plurality of others including oneself. Levinas answers that the face to face relation is not exclusive, never closed to all the Others. Instead, he claims,

Language as the presence of the face does not invite complicity with the preferred being, the self-sufficient “I-Thou” forgetful of the universe. . . The third party looks at me in the eyes of the Other – language is justice . . . the epiphany of the face qua face opens humanity. (TI 213)

The face of the Other who regards me is first a challenge and an infinite demand, but also and at the same time, the revelation of any possible human being. The Other is not my beloved or my friend but the revelation of any Other. This third party, always present in the face, does not have any specific feature but remains simply the poor one, the stranger, destitute and naked and equal because what is revealed in the face is otherness. And here Levinas points to the fact that the Other who faces me is also the servant of an Other. If

the Other who faces me is already obliged by another, then I am commanded to join in this obligation to the third and thereby join in a whole network of relations to Others. The fact of the third party does not diminish my responsibility to the Other but multiplies it so that my ethical responsibility is extended to concern for the needs of all the Others. As Levinas says in his later work, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*,

In no way is justice . . . a degeneration of the for-the-other, a diminution, a limitation of anarchic responsibility . . . justice remains justice only in a society where there is no distinction between those close and those far off, but in which there also remains the impossibility of passing by the closest. The equality of all is borne by my inequality, the surplus of my duties over my rights. The forgetting of self moves justice. (OTB 159)¹²

I am thus answerable for all. And Levinas offers a second formulation of his implicit criticism of Hobbes: “It is then not without importance to know if the egalitarian and just State in which man is fulfilled (and which is to be set up, and especially to be maintained) proceeds from a war of all against all, or from the irreducible responsibility of the one for all, and if it can do without friendships and faces” (OTB 159–160).

Thus the face to face relation is not only the putting in question of my naive enjoyment or the call to responsibility; it is also the institution of human community and the call to justice. Levinas insists that the human community instituted by language, must be understood as a kinship, a community built up from the face to face relation. It is infinite responsibility rather than unlimited natural rights that must be modified by the just institutions, conventions, and laws of society. Based on the priority of responsibility, justice involves the attempt to address the needs and define the responsibilities of each person.

And justice is not the last word. Again in implicit rejection of Hobbes, Levinas claims that the political order is not enough to secure morality. There is a violence in all our efforts to institute justice, a violence that must be modified by charity, apology, and mercy. Ethics must retain the role of challenging the universal laws and institutions of the political order, maintaining the human faces and the proximity that permits human beings to constantly seek a better justice. Levinas’s view of human society is that of a community peopled by men, women, and children, lovers, friends, neighbors, and strangers who are not only and not primarily involved in relations of conflict but are primarily involved in the extended kinship of responsibility for one another.

III. Conclusion

Thus we can see the radical reversal of priority and vision between Hobbes and Levinas. Hobbes's materialism leads him to present human beings as self-interested, autonomous individuals who are primarily motivated by the desire to preserve their lives. Hobbes emphasizes scarcity, violent competition, and constant insecurity as the natural human condition. The desire for self-preservation under such conditions leads human beings to enter into a self-interested agreement that institutes an absolute sovereign with the power to mediate conflict and make contracts and cooperation possible. In Hobbes's account of the state of nature, there is no natural ground for cooperation other than fear of death; there is no ground for responsiveness to others since this sets up an irrational vulnerability; and there is no ground for moral responsibility since this is also irrational and impractical until there is a coercive political order with the power to enforce contracts.

By contrast, according to Levinas, the primordial relations between human beings are not material relations of conflict and competition. Levinas claims that we are not 'allergic egoisms' competing for scarce resources and intent on preserving our lives and freedom against hostile others. Although it may be true that human beings have a strong desire to preserve their lives, it is crude and simplistic to claim that this desire is prior to all other desires in everyone. Levinas provides a more adequate account of material existence and human relations – an account that includes both human intimacy and human conflict. He describes a fundamental generosity and responsiveness to others that provides the ground for human sociality and cooperation. He claims that the possibility of ethical responsibility implies a primordial connection between oneself and others, and he traces this connection to a description of individuals who are constituted as self-conscious subjects in relation to one another, in the face to face relation of responsibility. We are not first autonomous, rational, self-interested individuals; we are social creatures who only become self-conscious individuals in relation to others. Responsiveness and responsibility are constitutive of human subjectivity and are therefore always present even under the worst conditions of conflict and competition.

According to Levinas, again in implicit opposition to Hobbes, ethics cannot be reduced to politics; ethical responsibility cannot depend upon social conventions or the security of a political order. One of the real problems for Hobbes's political theory is the initial covenant that institutes the political order; people who are incapable of keeping their promises and contracts in the state of nature must somehow make a covenant to escape the state of nature. If this problem is solved by a strictly self-interested agreement to institute a sovereign, then the resulting moral and political order depends solely on maintaining an external coercive power. Any breakdown of the political order

– in war, for example – implies that moral responsibility is suspended in favor of self-interested self-preservation. Thus, despite his claims that the moral laws are eternal and immutable, Hobbes makes morality dependent on social conventions and political institutions; he makes it irrational to demand moral behavior apart from the security of a well-policed civil society.

By contrast, according to Levinas, responsibility for others is prior to the security of civil society. Properly understood, the ethical relation of infinite responsibility is entirely outside experience and prior to self-conscious subjectivity.¹³ Only the traces of this prereflective and primordial human condition are available to us. We can imagine a solitude prior to the origin of self-consciousness because we can be wholly absorbed in momentary enjoyments. The trace of the insecurity that troubles this solitary enjoyment remains in everyday hunger pangs. In moments of illness, physical pain or pleasure, moments when we are wholly absorbed in corporeal sensible existence, we experience the trace of the enchainment to oneself that Levinas ascribes to egoist solitude. There are traces of the familiarity of a human welcome in a shared home; and there are traces of the absolute alterity of the Other in the face of a stranger, traces of an otherness that escapes the human effort to comprehend. Our everyday relations with one another, including simply speaking to one another, bear witness to the face to face relation. Responsibility for the Other is a goodness we do not always find in ourselves; and yet we find the desire for this goodness and the traces of this goodness in our compassion, generosity, charity, and occasional self-sacrifice. Utopian concern for the Other is “out of place in this world” and yet it manifests itself in conscience, cutting through rational self-interest. The cry of the Other opens the self to the interhuman order and interrupts complacent and self-satisfied existence. As a condition of human subjectivity, moral responsibility for others cannot be set aside; it precedes the political order and remains in force even when there is no external coercion to guarantee one’s contracts or preserve one’s life. Thus even under the brutal conditions of war, outside of any political order, and before any considerations of prudential egoism or practical reason, we remain responsible.

Finally, even though Levinas does not offer a complete social philosophy, his work provides a more adequate conception of justice within the social and political institutions of the human community. As in all social contract theories, Hobbes presents a rational reconstruction of the state as an entity that is created and maintained by human beings in order to provide order and justice. But under Hobbes’s account of human nature and human psychology, the state is most needed to mediate conflict and make contracts and cooperation possible. If we are naturally self-interested and violently competitive, then the just society can only place minimal but necessary limitations on our

self-interested competition and protect some set of individual rights based on an abstract equality. But I have used Levinas's account to argue that human beings are not primarily violent or self-interested. Outside of any political order, we are still interdependent and capable of generosity and cooperation with one another. The human community is not merely a voluntary association of individuals who agree to non-interference and limited cooperation for common goals. The human community is constituted by language, by speaking to one another in the face to face relation that maintains responsibility and respects difference. No social contract is necessary to construct the human community. But social and political institutions are still needed to realize the equality and distribute the infinite responsibilities that arise in the face-to-face relation. An adequate conception of justice, therefore, involves more than a judgment between the conflicting rights of anonymous and faceless citizens. Justice must be rooted in the necessary responsibility of the face-to-face relation; it must include social, economic, and political institutions that attempt to address the needs of each person. Equality and universal justice must be realized without ignoring differences, and this means that the institutions of the political order must be held in check by the responsibility of a unique I to a unique Other – a responsibility that might call for something other than universality would demand. Thus even in the necessary administration of just laws and social institutions, the face-to-face relation, the ethical relation of responsibility has a primacy and priority that cannot be effaced.

Notes

1. Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985). Cited as EI.
2. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan, Or the Matter, Forme and Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiasticall and Civil* (New York: Macmillan, 1962). Cited as L.
3. Hobbes defines a law of nature as "a precept or general rule, found out by reason, by which a man is forbidden to do that, which is destructive of his life, or taketh away the means of preserving the same; and to omit that, by which he thinketh it may be best preserved" (L 103).
4. Two recent sources for interesting interpretations of Hobbes's moral philosophy are George Shelton, *Morality and Sovereignty in the Philosophy of Hobbes* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992) and R.E. Ewin, *Virtues and Rights: The Moral Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991).
5. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969). Cited as TI.
6. Simone de Beauvoir, for example, objects that Levinas deliberately takes a man's point of view and asserts the traditional male privilege that regards man as the rational Subject and woman as the Other, defined relative to man and therefore denied her own subjectivity and freedom [*The Second Sex* (New York: Knopf, 1952)]. And Tina Chanter has summarized possible feminist objections to this description of the feminine including the fact that the

woman first appears in the serene abode of the home, that the feminine is characterized by gentleness and intimacy and therefore deprived of authority and self-assertion, and that the equation of femininity with discretion exemplifies the historical invisibility of the woman behind the scenes [“Feminism and the Other” in *The Provocation of Levinas*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (New York: Routledge, 1988)].

7. The issue of Levinas’s relation to feminism deserves more attention than I can provide in this essay, but there is support among some feminists for Levinas’s fairly traditional treatment of femininity. Many feminists have embraced traditional feminine qualities as positive and valuable characteristics of women, to be celebrated as fundamental human qualities and used to promote social change. There is a growing body of literature in feminist ethics, for example, that resists the patriarchal devaluation of the feminine and attempts to develop alternative ethical theories based on women’s experiences. See Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982). Nel Noddings, *Caring* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). Eva Feder Kittay and Diana T. Meyers (eds.), *Women and Moral Theory* (Savage, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1987). And Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).
8. Many of Hobbes’s contemporary critics and more recent scholars, such as Jean Hampton, have pointed to the problem of trust in the initial covenant that institutes a sovereign. In her book, *Hobbes and the Social Contract Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 1986), Hampton uses modern game theory to argue that instead of a contract or covenant based on trust, persons in the state of nature would only need to make a “self-interested agreement” to institute a sovereign. Self-interested rational calculation is the only motive needed to perform such an agreement and the agreement cannot be disrupted by distrust because each party has a clear self-interest in acting on the agreement. [See Hampton, Chapter 6] This solution to the problem of instituting the sovereign, however, actually purges Hobbes’s theory of any literal human covenant or social contract [Hampton, 187]. It therefore reinforces my claim that certain ethical behaviors, especially responsiveness to others and responsibility for others, have no ground in Hobbes’s account and remain wholly dependent on self-interested motives or external coercion.
9. David Gauthier, “The Social Contract as Ideology” in *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 6, no. 2 (1977), pp. 130–164.
10. Emmanuel Levinas, “Ideology and Idealism” in *Modern Jewish Ethics*, ed. Marvin Fox (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1975), 137.
11. In this description of responsibility as fundamental and inescapable, Levinas goes against the traditional Western philosophical understanding of responsibility as originating with the free actions of a subject. Infinite responsibility is prior to freedom because responsibility is constitutive of subjectivity; it constitutes an unmediated obligation that binds us to the Other before understanding or decision. We do not *have* responsibility for the other; rather subjectivity *is* initially *one-for-another*. Levinas claims that his entire philosophy depends on the idea that with the appearance of the human there is something more important than one’s own continued existence and that is the life of the Other. But he also makes a careful distinction between this ideal of infinite responsibility and the morality of everyday life. He refers to infinite responsibility as an “ideal of saintliness,” a utopian ideal that cannot be fully realized but that provides a first and undeniable value. Thus according to Levinas, the ethical responsibility of the face to face relation must inspire and direct the moral and political order, but it cannot be universalized or legislated.
12. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981). Cited as OTB.

13. Levinas carefully describes the face to face ethical relation as “pre-original.” This relation is prior to experience, prior to thought, prior to critical consciousness. These claims are perhaps most clearly stated in an early essay, “The Ego and the Totality” in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987). In that essay, Levinas refers to solitary enjoyment as “biological consciousness,” a consciousness without problems, “a purely inner world . . . to which the term unconscious or instinct corresponds” (26). And he claims that thought can only begin when this vital consciousness becomes conscious of exteriority and therefore self-conscious:

For exteriority to be able to present itself to me, it, as exteriority, must overflow the “terms” of vital consciousness, but at the same time, as present, it must not be fatal to consciousness. This penetration of a total system into a partial system which cannot assimilate it is a miracle. The possibility of thought is the consciousness of a miracle, or wonder. . . . Thought begins with the possibility of conceiving a freedom external to my own. (27–28)

But because this ethical relation is prior to experience, it is not itself an origin but “pre-original;” It is not itself a foundation for experience but remains outside experience, “otherwise than Being,” prior to representation and therefore misrepresented in any description. We can only uncover the traces of this paradoxical past “experience” that is beyond the limits of knowledge or memory.