

Manuscript in Progress
DRAFT

Exposed to Exposure: The Ethical Sensibility of Emmanuel Levinas

Maxim Livshetz, M.A., Psy.D.c
Antioch University- Seattle
maximlivshetz@hotmail.com

David M. Goodman, Ph.D.
Harvard Medical School/Lesley University

Introduction

Subjectivity is vulnerability. Subjectivity is sensibility.
~ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*

"Whatever else

my life is
with its poems
and its music
and its glass cities,

it is also this dazzling darkness
coming
down the mountain
breathing and tasting" ([Mary Oliver, New and Selected Poems](#))

One way to read *Otherwise than Being* is as a meditation on sensibility. According to Crichley, sensibility, preceding concept, image or perception—is the foundation of ethics in *Otherwise than Being* (cite: **Who is the subject**). In Levinas work, "sensibility"

refers to a relationship with the world that is sensory. More precisely, it is a mode of living in which concepts about sensory experience fail to impress the psyche to the point of replacing sensory experience.

Thought through to its implications, it is sensibility that becomes ethics (Otherwise than Being 14-15). By mapping the conceptual bridge in Levinas' thinking from sensibility to proximity, that which is inherently ethical in sensibility begins to emerge--the responsibility to the other that precedes every preconception, every prejudice, holding nothing back.

Contact stands at the cusp between sensibility and proximity with another person. From the beginning of Otherwise than Being, and perhaps even from the beginning of Totality and Infinity, Levinas thinks contact through to the point where concepts lose their power to dominate the idea of contact itself. At the height of sensible ethics, words open like hands that feel the skin of the person they touch. However, they can only do so as hands, and not as the idea of hands. As Levinas puts it: "Here, what is essential is a refusal to allow oneself to be domesticated by a theme." (Otherwise than Being p.100)

Sensible Hunger

The difference between ethical language in Totality and Infinity and language as contact in Otherwise than Being can be localized in the evolution of their respective meanings of hunger. In Totality and Infinity, hunger found its meaning only in its referential function. Levinas was incredibly explicit on this point: hunger was precisely suffering. (cite Totality and Infinity) No Holocaust survivor could escape this fact. However, he also saw in hunger a potential for meaning—a reference point that turned the subject toward the sensible enjoyment of food. Levinas saw this enjoyment as the prototype of all sensibility—the complete immersion in the enjoyment of sensory experience which, prefigured by food, provides perfect nourishment, satisfaction and fulfillment.

Although it referred to this total sensible enjoyment, the experience of hunger never ceased to be a form of suffering. As such, hunger revealed the need to escape the uncertainty of a sheer immersion of sensible enjoyment. However, it also made possible the recognition of the other: "To recognize the other is to recognize a hunger." (Totality and Infinity p. 73)

In Otherwise than Being, the relationship between hunger and enjoyment evolved. No longer merely referential, Levinas began to recognize an enjoyment in the

suffering that is hunger. Such a hunger allows for a description of sensibility that is not bound to enjoyment alone—it can also remain in contact with suffering, whether one's own or the other's.

Levinas locates this kind of hunger in taste. Taste is, first of all, straightforward. It is its own fulfillment: "Satisfaction satisfies itself with satisfaction." (Otherwise than Being 73) In taste there is an immersion in the sensory experience of the world so complete that it connects the subject with his essential passivity. This passivity is not the full belly numb with an ambivalent satisfaction, but the pure passivity and pleasure of taste, which satisfies even as it kindles the desire for more: he states "Before any reflection, any return upon oneself, enjoyment is an enjoying of enjoyment, always wanting with regard to itself, filling itself with these lacks for which contentment is promised... enjoying its own appetite." (p. 73) In taste, enjoyment is both infinite longing and perfect fulfillment.

In this sense, taste is more than the response to a hunger--it is the expression of an *appetite*. The appetite extends not only toward food, but also toward the taste of good food. Every instance of tasting is already a taste of the next bite. Even in the anticipation of food, we say "I can taste it already." As Levinas quips incisively in Heidegger's direction: "Dasein is never hungry" (Otherwise than Being). In other words, you can't eat an idea; it simply does not satisfy.

Even the word "appetite" signifies both hunger and a pleasure, captured in the expression "to eat with appetite." In appetite, hunger becomes ambiguous. A pleasure that suffers, it is the tongue licking honey off of the razor blade. Blood and sweetness form a single taste, and it is—all of it—good.

Thus, in taste, there is a "coiling in over itself" of the ego. (73) As the satisfaction of a hunger, it withdraws further into itself in satiety. Beyond that, as the enjoyment that is "always wanting with regard to itself," the hunger that, in appetite, feeds on its very hunger, completes this "coiling back upon itself." The self-sufficient ego, the "for-itself" is precisely this perfect self-containment, a coiling with no strands left loose. (73)

Taste, thus, refers only to taste, even in hunger, perhaps especially in hunger. The turn of phrase "I can taste it already," is no linguistic accident, but a thought that sustains the hungry person, feeding her desire in every sense of the term "feeding." Even the hunger that is felt in the concrete tasting of food, enjoyment directs itself only towards enjoyment, which is the very movement of hunger: "Winding of a skein, it is the very movement of egoism. It has to be able to be complacent in itself, as though it exhausted the eidos of sensibility, so that sensibility could, in its passivity, its patience and pain, signify for the other by unwinding its coils." (p. 73)

Finally, in a perfect assimilation into the matrix of being, the ego attains an absolute harmony with its existence. It is perfectly content. There is nothing within itself that is not amenable to enjoyment. The intentionality of enjoyment arrives at the very center of passivity, the self-sufficiency of the body, absolute *joie de vivre*.

It is this subject, utterly content, immersed in sensation, feeding on hunger and food alike, imperturbable within its own skin that finds itself utterly exposed to contact. In the passivity of the seamless pleasure of being, the surprise of contact exposes a vulnerability and unmediated exposure to the other. As Levinas would say, this exposure is incommensurable with any concept. "Enjoyment is the ability to be complacent in itself, exempt from dialectical tensions, in the condition of the for-the-other involved in sensibility, and in its vulnerability as an exposure to the other." (*Otherwise than Being* p.74) Taste cannot be collapsed into either hunger or satisfaction--it is both of them, inseparable, beyond any dialectic tension between them.

From Taste to Touch

All things become possible here: the food out of my mouth, the skin off of my bones, the word that tears the soul from my breast--the "I love you," that finds its way in. All goodness flows first from the passivity that is opened up in the utter receptivity that is sensible taste.

Although we go through these stages to understand sensibility, as it is lived, as wholehearted enjoyment, there is already an opening to the suffering of hunger so profound, that only the word "passivity" approaches its lived meaning. In this passivity of taste, there is such "complacency" that the approach of the other accomplishes the relinquishment of the very food I am savoring. Levinas elaborates:

"Sensibility can be a vulnerability, an exposedness to the other or a saying only because it is an enjoyment. The passivity that wounds, the "hemorrhage" of the for-the-other, is the tearing away of the mouthful of bread from the mouth that tastes it in full enjoyment." (p. 74)

Disruptive as the other's hunger is to my egoism, it does not disrupt my sensibility—merely extends it into a contact. If enjoyment and hunger are the prototypical forms of human happiness and suffering, and hunger is also an enjoyment, then suffering is therefore a kind of happiness. Properly speaking, in true Levinasian

fashion, suffering is passion. As such, it allows the suffering of the other to be of a single taste with my own.

The door that has been opened by this passivity, once open, cannot help but let in hunger and suffering, even when it is not my own. It is thus that the passivity realized in the appetite is revealed as a fundamental exposure to the other's hunger. The recognition of that hunger is not an observation made scientifically from the outside. Recognition, first of all, is sensibility. Transformed by contact, sensibility is proximity, closer than concepts are to my own mind.

Closer and Closer: Proximity

Even in Totality and Infinity, Levinas already recognized that "To recognize the other is to recognize a hunger." (77?) In putting the other's hunger to my own tongue, taste retains its momentum, even as it changes direction.

The other's hunger on my own tongue marks the threshold between taste and touch. The skein wound to its utmost density as pure egoism, suddenly becomes its own unwinding. Or, as Levinas says: "The neighbor assigns me before I designate him. This is a modality not of a knowing, but of an obsession, a shuddering of the human quite different from cognition." (Otherwise than Being p.87)

Egoism, prior to the arrival of the recognition of the other, is as self-contained as a black hole, assimilating every experience into itself. Contact with the other, who is infinitely outside of my power to possess, denudes egoism of a return path to itself. The other deprives my sensibility of its center—from grasping it finds itself grasped.

In this exposure, it is possible to be taken in by a piece of music, the trembling of leaves, fresh road kill—by either beauty and by ugliness—by anything that grabs. The French verb *tenir* has a meaning of both grabbing and holding; in engaging conversation, where Anglophones might preface a sentence with "Listen," the French often say, "Tient," or "Hold."

Levinas would have liked the English language notion of being grabbed in this way: sensibility transformed by contact finds itself in the grip of otherness, "like the ambiguity of a kiss." (Otherwise than Being p. 75) Tasting, without warning, reveals that I am already tasted by the other in a hunger that preceded my own. The relationship of assimilation becomes a relationship of exposure to the other, who exposes me to the very world I would have otherwise consumed. In this exposure, I find that I am called to answer for a hunger that is not my own, called to nourish it with my own enjoyment.

This call "for-the-other" is not the echo of moral code or an insight. Rather, it is simply the experience of the human as the human, as immediate as taste, but as open as the caress.

A close reading of sensibility reveals that egoism is not only the basis for the development of responsibility, but continues to constitute responsibility to the farthest reaches of the "for-the-other" in proximity and, finally, substitution. By linking sensibility and proximity, Levinas carves a pathway toward a meaningfully ethical attitude that allows the subject to retain a different kind of freedom than choice—the freedom to enjoy even as the one undergoes "for-the-other." Levinas takes tremendous pains to show us that responsibility is suffering, undergoing trauma, the condition of being hostage, the turning inside out of the skin, and all kinds of other awful things. In fact, many reasonable people who read Levinas find his non-reciprocal version of responsibility masks a form of philosophical self-flagellation. Often his text reads more like an exorcism than as an inspiration to live "otherwise."

His ethics, however, is more than a philosophy for wounded souls soothing themselves with delusions of martyrdom... "for-the-other." By foregrounding his analysis of hunger and appetite, he demonstrates the logic that allows his most radical and distressing formulations of responsibility to retain a vital pulse. His ethical subject never quits her sensibility: he elaborates that "Proximity, immediacy is to enjoy and to suffer for the other. But I can enjoy and suffer by the other only because I am-for-the-other...." (Otherwise than Being, P.90) This idea of enjoying "for-the-other" is not one that Levinas develops or explains in any depth.

However, based on what he *did* say, enjoyment-for-the-other brings clarity to the relationship between sensibility and the "for-the-other." For example, we might speculate that the reason that I give the bread out of my own mouth is precisely because in doing so I can offer my own enjoyment of that bread. In offering that enjoyment, I tear myself from it in order to make it a gift. To appreciate my own gift, I must experience the pain of losing it. And yet... it is only by still enjoying the taste, even as the bread leaves my mouth, that I can offer my enjoyment of it along with the bread itself. Besides, even on the level of the egoism, if it is a hunger that I feel when I give the bread, that hunger not only pains me but nourishes me with its absences. Even of *that* nourishment I can make a gift—a gift of the spirit in which the gift is given. My own love of life, when given freely to the other, transforms into love itself: such is the nature of the transition from sensibility to proximity.

Clinical Implications and Case Illustration

One purpose of highlighting the role of sensibility in proximity was to demonstrate the decidedly atheoretical foundation of human contact. Keeping with the spirit of this goal, I would like to offer a clinical example where such a contact occurred.

Zhana, a survivor of the Holocaust, lost her father to the Nazis while she hid, parentless, in a village school ensconced in ice. From the ages of two to six, she saw neither parent. In reuniting with her mother at the end of the war, however, she learned that her father had died.

Zhana was a good student, but as a Jew could not pursue her passion for philology. She entered an engineering program that was, for her, the most prestigious profession available--not because she had any interest in the field. However, her work brought her some prestige, including regular trips to other parts of the USSR, including an annual retreat to a city in a different republic. There she met her husband. They married quickly, and she was truly in love, but their relationship was fraught with quiet tension, until he died. Zhana still hasn't told me how. She started once, but couldn't bring herself to finish the sentence.

When I met her, it was near the second anniversary of her granddaughter Dasha's tragic accident. Dasha had just graduated from college, and it was the beginning of summer--a chance to take in a breath before her life began. In every way, this young woman was a shining star, a real, Russian, Jewish immigrant child, becoming a woman who embodied her family's and community's for a different life. It was a hope spread across generations.

An excellent student, a talented painter, full of love for her family--brimming with promise. The pressure could not have been easy for her, but she sounded like a young woman with broad shoulders and a clear head. So why Dasha got into a car with a tipsy friend to drive home from the beach was not easy for Zhana to understand. At least not after she died in the crash along the way. It did not seem fair to Zhana that her granddaughter died, while the friend who drove the car lives.

When I met her, Zhana only got out of bed for her medical appointments. She tried to socialize with friends, to let them support her for a while. Then one said that Zhana's "negative energy" was more than she could bear. Another stopped calling. Others remained, but Zhana stopped trying and, eventually, they stopped trying as well. She still had her daughter and her other granddaughter who was 12 years old, but even

seeing them had become painful. She was gripped by a terror that each visit with them might be the last.

One friend did call occasionally and took Zhana on walks. For the rest of the time, Zhana lay in bed and cried, ate and slept. That was her life--crying, eating and sleeping, broken up by occasional social calls and doctor's appointments. The only reason she avoided taking her own life was to keep her daughter from following suit. And Over the course of two years, Zhana had only come to feel worse.

When her social worker learned about a Russian psychology intern who could see Zhana for free, she urged Zhana to try. Zhana came to the appointment "because my Galina told me to." Her next sentence was: "No one can help me." We spent the first three months trying to understand why she came at all. We never got far wit that, but I think it both irritated and gratified her that I kept wanting to know.

In the fourth month, Zhana took a trip to New York, where she first immigrated after Russia, to visit some friends. Then, in the same spirit, she began going to the pool for a swim once a week, which soon became several weeks in a row. Some other Russian ladies brought crackers and tea before their water aerobics, and Zhana began to partake, to socialize with them a little. Somehow, her swimming schedule increasingly coincided with these aerobics classes and crackers. In our own sessions she began to bring Russian tea cookies--prisniki--because she got me to admit that they are my favorite. I think she found found a simple pleasure in watching me eat them, and eventually, even let me pour her a cup of tea to share with me. For some reason I did not understand, I was quite sure that was a victory. Of course, for Zhana, she simply didn't want the tea before, but wanted it now--interpretation would have been excess.

During these early months, I also learned to listen to Zhana. It turned out she had a biting humor, but hated it when I pointed out that she was starting to laugh and to smile sometimes, more and more, in fact. She had also told and retold me of her pain, of her loss, of every detail of that day, of her sense of injustice, of how truly exceptional Her granddaughter was. She needed me to believe that it wasn't just because she was her grandmother, not just because she was gone, that Dasha was exceptional. I did.

Sometimes Zhana cried as she spoke, until the words froze and only her grief poured forth. I empathized. I expressed understanding. I felt the pain, somehow, as my own. Then I went home, held my daughter a little closer than usual for a half-hour. It was so good to hold her--a happy and stressed-out intern, husband, father. Despite myself and my stresses, I felt whole. How strange it was to profit so from Zhana's pain, even as it struck the very heart of me.

I knew I did not feel her pain as she did, and I felt that she needed to hear me acknowledge that. In the first couple of months I did so several times in the same breath as I tried to convey my empathy and understanding of her experience, to clarify it for the both of us. Still, she seemed to always pull her grief away the moment it touched me.

For her, my understanding and empathy were not enough. Even my compassion seemed totally inadequate to her anguish. So as I spoke them, the words tore themselves from my mouth: "You are right--I cannot help you. No one can help this kind of pain. I just want you to know that it is my pain also."

Until I spoke those words, the knowledge that I lived in her pain felt somehow proprietary and personal, but also a secret I held from myself. To this day, no theoretical framework in which I try to place the moment comes close to the feeling of vulnerability I felt as I spoke those words, which were, of course, rather ordinary.

There was no dramatic event of healing that ensued. Zhana breathed in. She breathed out. Her tears still poured but did not seem so much to choke her. She looked at me and said "Thank you." And we just carried on in the same way.

It is also true that we began to slowly broach what it meant for her not to be entirely alone in her pain. Zhana began to tell me that Dasha's face is always before her, that sometimes she talks to her. Then, in a dream, Dasha sat on the bed next to Zhana. Zhana knew it was evening when Dasha walked to the door and turned to say goodbye.

"It is dark outside, Love. Do you want me to walk you down?"

'No grandma. I want to go alone'."

When our therapy ended because my internship ended, Zhana gave me a teacup made of fine, ruffled Russian china. If you hold it to the light and look through the inside, you can see the traces of the outside design--there is something tender about that, but I did not ask what giving it to me meant to Zhana. There was something tender about the soft touch of Zhana's skin as she hugged me goodbye, our skin meeting for the first time in all of our sessions. Walking out the door she turned to me and said, "Maybe now you can be my grandson now."

Zhana did not get well. She still is not. She has a social life now, and she continues with her swimming and her crackers. She still cries in bed every day, though not the whole day anymore. A year later, set up in my own space, she started to come visit me again. We drink our tea together. We move very slowly through therapy, but she is learning to trust the time we spend together... as am I.

When she asked me "Why did you decide to torture yourself with me again," I said, "Well, I simply love you." This time I could taste the words even as I spoke them, and they fell easily from my mouth. Then again, the way they sound in Russian with the formal version of "you," the words' meaning falls at about the half-way mark between "I love you," and "I appreciate you." But the intimacy of the language was really the acknowledgement of the moments in which contact between us had already occurred—moments that were not interpretive but real. She is still asking me why I suffer her. The question is quite touching.

There is perhaps nothing closer to sensibility than the singing of a song, where the receptivity of feeling and the intentionality of expression find no clear line of demarcation between them. A "saying" that signifies "for-the other," it is not unlike a song of devotion. Devotion to the other gives simple words wings.