In 1983, describing his earlier work in *Totality and Infinity* on the ethical notion of the face, Emmanuel Levinas asserts that he was once able to write that the face is for an I — that the face is for me — at once the temptation to kill and the “Thou shalt not kill” which already accuses it, suspects me, and forbids it, but already claims me and demands me. (Entre Nous 186)

Reiterating his present ethical commitment to the “[s]ignifyingness of the face,” which reminds the subject of personal responsibility “by the face that summons it” (ibid.), Levinas embeds ethical responsibility in an expression: “All men are responsible for one another, and ‘I more than anyone else’” (107). The self, then, is always responsible for the other, defying symmetrical relations, because every “I” is paradoxically more responsible than every other “I.”

While Levinas invokes justice as a check on a potentially limitless duty to the other, justice as a limit derives from love and falters in totalitarian states in which “the interpersonal relationship” of love is absent (105). This invocation creates a problem that Levinas has trouble resolving. A totalitarian state suspends the justice that constitutes the check on ethical responsibility, thereby annulling the condition of the face’s emergence. Conversely, a non-totalitarian state couples justice to “the defense of the other” (ibid.) but never comes to grips with why we should carry the burden of obligation and responsibility continuously for all others, if justice, as the limiting third party, is a legitimate way of redressing the wrongdoings of citizens. What, then, is the ethical practicability of the face? This question arises from the exclusion of a crucial temporality: a situation in which justice is not the third party that limits and frames the subject’s responsibility but rather an active participant in the subject’s oppression. This subject, a survivor of physical violence, would face subsequent epistemic violence in the modality of the face, with its insistence on asymmetrical obligation and tacit invitation to passivity. Additionally, the subject might well refuse to accept a model of ethics as persecution — that is, as a persistent, impinging presence that runs the risk of erasing the difference between perpetrators of violence and survivors of violence in daily life. This subject has no discursive space within the Levinasian ethic. It therefore becomes imperative to interrogate
the terms by which the face comes into being as a universal principle.

In this article, I argue that the relationship of the Levinasian subject to the face and the beloved creates an unbearable burden of boundless responsibility for all others, a responsibility that is unsustainable as an applied ethical principle for survivors of violence, particularly survivors in areas where ongoing physical and psychic trauma is a daily reality. Levinas’s treatment of persecution as the inaugural basis of ethical responsibility tacitly relies on the ethical subject’s availability for seduction through an invitation to profane the beloved that is the obverse of the face. Using Jean Laplanche’s psychoanalytic conception of the enigmatic signifier, I interpret the face–beloved dyad as a pathological response to the primary, overwhelming, and persecutory demand of the breast on the infant. Furthermore, I suggest that Levinas refuses to acknowledge what precedes the anxiety of the enigmatic signifier—the encounter with spacing and temporality that announces the subject into the world. This refusal problematizes Levinas’s ethical framework as an applied principle for subjects whose material specificity in space and time cannot be reduced simply to the atemporal abstraction of the face. Finally, I challenge the Levinasian ethical imperative is the idea that the target of violence is, to some degree, responsible for the crimes of the perpetrators, evidenced in his declaration that the subject is “responsible for the other even when he or she commits crimes, even when others commit crimes” (Entre Nous 107). We should not, as Judith Butler notes, take this to mean that “I can trace the acts of persecution I have suffered to deeds I have performed, that it therefore follows that I have brought persecution on myself” (85). Levinas is not arguing that the condition of one’s suffering is directly or even indirectly the result of one’s own actions. Instead, Levinas notes that “to a certain extent (may God keep me from being reduced to it as a rule of daily usage) I am responsible for the other even when he bothers me, even when he persecutes me” (Entre Nous 106). Here, Levinas is able to invoke the principle of responsibility through persecution without taking leave of the distinction between principle and daily usage that would “reduce” the individual to continuous undifferentiated guilt, almost to non-subjectivity. I ask the reader to defer this seemingly off-hand remark concerning “daily usage” for later consideration. At the moment I am interested in investigating how the passivity (the unwillingness, the helplessness, the persecution) of this ethical relation might have its foundation in seduction.

When Levinas implicates the self in the crimes of others, he gestures towards a web of ethical relations that precedes and introduces any sense of oneself:

Persecution is what happens without the warrant of any deed of my own. And it returns us not to our acts and choices but to the region of existence that is radically unwilled, the primary, inaugurating impingement on me by the Other, one that happens to me, paradoxically, in advance of my formation as a “me” or, rather, as the instrument of that first formation of myself in the accusative case. (Butler 85)

Unwillingness is inextricable from lived experience, but also from the ethical experience within life. There is a passivity to the Levinasian formulation as Butler reads it, a sense in which I receive a call which I can neither ignore nor refuse; it is something “that happens to me,” or rather, to what will come to be “me” through the affective charge of the call. The disclosure of responsibility simultaneously begins and ends in the space of a moment whose temporality I can never know or quantify. As a result of this call, I am always already implicated in the totality of all suffering. Under threat of persecution, one must passively wait, and it is here that we seduction, persecution, profanation

One of the most contentious aspects of Levinas’s ethical imperative is the idea that the target of violence is, to some degree, responsible for the crimes of the perpetrators, evidenced in his declaration that the subject is “responsible for the other even when he or she commits crimes, even when others commit crimes” (Entre Nous 107). We should not, as Judith Butler notes, take this to mean that “I can trace the acts of persecution I have suffered to deeds I have performed, that it therefore follows that I have brought persecution on
encounter the figure of the beloved (l’Aimée) in the earlier Levinas of *Totality and Infinity*. Despite the lapse in time, there is a persistent connection between the beloved, whose vulnerability inaugurates the ethical subject by offering an injunction against the very violence one wants to inflict, and the face, the absolute exteriority of the other whose agonized staging of suffering produces the inexorable call to ethical responsibility.

The beloved personifies the “original phenomena of immodesty and profanation” (Levinas, *Totality* 257), not merely inert matter but the demuring of the body and the evacuation of any traces of agency, calendrical time, reason, subjectivity (through duty) and intentionality:

> The Beloved, at once graspable but intact in her nudity, beyond object and face and thus beyond the existent, abides in virginity. The feminine essentially violable and inviolable, the “Eternal Feminine,” is the virgin or an incessant recommencement of virginity, the untouchable in the very contact of voluptuosity, future in the present […] Alongside of the night as anonymous rustling of the *there is* extends the night of the erotic […] simultaneously uncovered by Eros and refusing Eros – another way of saying: profanation. (258)

Endlessly available for violation, the beloved has neither agency nor the discursive possibility of agency, since she is always “dying without murder” (ibid.), perpetually reincarnated before the masculine gaze. Through exposure and refusal, she both defines and defies profanation; as Derrida notes in his critique of the beloved-figure, the subject “can indeed violate her but only to run aground before her inviolability” (*Touching* 86). The beloved incorporates future into present, outside of space and time. Immune to temporal violations that only ever touch a part of her, she withdraws to an inaccessible future of bodily integrity. Virginity is both an abiding state, because the beloved is “the virgin,” and the infinity of a process of “recommencement” of virginity. Atemporal, encoding nothing of the past, she bears no trace of ethical record, and refutes the conceptual intelligibility of violation. Each descriptor, each state, announces its opposite: violable–inviolable, touchable–untouchable, modesty “in the guise of immodesty,” each preparing the way for the subject’s “profanation–discovery” of the Beloved, the “shame” of which causes the subject to avert his gaze from the “uncovered” (Levinas, *Totality* 260). Discovery is coextensive with violation, but not in secret. The discovery of modesty in oneself announces the immodesty of the naked beloved, the presence of voluptuosity, “which does not come to gratify desire; it is this desire itself” (259–60). Levinas slips in “shame” and “audacity” through the analytical screen: the subject reacts to the perception of the beloved because he has already subscribed, in advance of perception, to the concept that the denuded feminine is a priori immodest when beheld.

Profanation, therefore, depends upon the subject’s complicity in a framework that negotiates the exposure of the beloved – of nudity – to the stranger who sees what he believes he is not meant to see. Beholding the feminine is a violation that does not trigger disgrace (a need to keep secret) or any signification of the beloved as a willed subject:

> Here lies the very lasciviousness of erotic nudity […] beyond the decency of words, as the absence of all seriousness, of all possibility for speech […] The beloved, returned to the stage of infancy without responsibility – this coquettish head, this youth, this pure life “a bit silly” – has quit her status as a person. (263)

The beloved regresses to infancy, abdicates her selfhood, below the bar of speech, “seriousness,” and reason, reifying “an implacable configuration” of “femininity, infancy, animality, and irresponsibility” (*Derrida, Touching* 87). Supposedly atemporal, beyond past and future, the beloved “has quit her status as a person,” but such an exit from personhood demands a prior state of being from which she emerges to become pure exteriority. Who assists, permits, and demands such an emergence? The beloved’s exile from temporality
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eclipses the subject’s pronouncement of exile and erasure of the act of pronouncement.

In Levinasian thought, then, the beloved comes into being through the conflation of beyond-signification with the feminine as object of desire. Through this conflation, the infant quietly becomes the ward of the masculine speaking subject, positioning the irreverence of silence as the obverse of speech-as-signification; Levinas presents this conflation without attempting to justify the rhetorical moves that permit his concept of the beloved to function. The cumulative weight of tethering gendered language to the terms of atemporality thus obscures an earlier discursive stage, in which the feminine is excluded from signification. This exclusion gives us reason to distrust the process by which the face comes into being, since its validity as an ethical trope arises from the beloved as beyond signification.

With signification emptied from the register, we are left with the simultaneity of the face shining through the “wantonness” of the beloved. Again, Levinas rejects temporality, asserting that “[t]he non-signifyingness of erotic nudity does not precede the signifyingness of the face as the obscuring of formless matter precedes the artist’s forms”; instead, he locates revelation in the “wanton,” whose ethical inertness paradoxically indicates the “frankness” of the face (Totality 261). Discovery is, without explanation, not a violation but rather the revelation of a facial “frankness” that will hereafter become the ultimate injunction to murder. This discovery supersedes or negates sequential time, since for Levinas “[i]t is necessary that the face have been apperceived for nudity to be able to acquire the non-signifyingness of the lustful” (262; emphasis added). Without linearity, we have a conception of time that borders on messianic, with the participants in this scene – subject and face/beloved – dramatizing a return to ethics that has actually never ceased to be eternal, even during the “time” of the possibility of violating the beloved. Furthermore, the face, in its manifestation of the ethical principle, is also nude, “not resplendent as a form clothing a content, as an image, but as the nudity of the principle, behind which there is nothing further” (ibid.). The move from denuded beloved to denuded face introduces temporality, only to foreclose it, as if the philosophical principle is reluctant to dwell in the vanishing seconds of a moment that is about to become unavailing for further scrutiny.

Levinas’s own philosophy, in sum, evacuates the conscious subject of self-reflexivity at precisely the moment when self-reflexivity is necessary to interrogate the terms and tropes of this ethical “scene.” We are thus left with a series of paradoxes: discovery of the beloved is a violation that does not violate; discovery of the beloved occurs outside sequential time, anticipating and following the face; and discovery introduces the dialectic of two nudities, “absolutely heterogeneous, and one being the reverse of the other, yet both and each announcing the one through the other and the one beyond the other” (Derrida, Touching 89). How do I discover a thing without reference to time, when there must be a state prior to discovery that indicates time’s progression? The terms of each paradox strip the act of discovery of the temporal signification, eliminating incremental time in a space where the ethical might still be in flux. This temporal elimination prevents me, as an embodied subject constrained by a specific set of political and social factors, from challenging how and why a principle of endless, universal responsibility comes to compel me to act. If I receive an ethical call that announces both my responsibility and my agency, such a call emerges within a gendered set of tropes whose apparent timelessness effaces gendering as a discursive move, with its own particular matrix of implications and exclusions.

As the “inversion of the face in femininity” (Levinas, Totality 262), the beloved is the staging-ground for ethical responsibility only insofar as her vulnerability permits the subject to explore the limits of his agency. One beholds the face, becoming alive to the suffering of the other, at the moment one rejects the invitation to profane the passive beloved:

[T]he relation to the Face is both the relation to the absolutely weak – to what is absolutely
exposed, what is bare and destitute, the relation with bareness and consequently with what is alone and can undergo the supreme isolation we call death—there is, consequently, in the Face of the Other always the death of the Other and thus, in some way, an incitement to murder, the temptation to go to the extreme, to completely neglect the other—and at the same time (and this is the paradoxical thing) the Face is also the “Thou Shalt Not Kill.”

By 1982, when “Philosophy, Justice, and Love” (from which the above passage is taken) first appears, Levinas no longer mentions the beloved by name, yet the word hovers in the margins of the description of “what is absolutely exposed, what is bare and destitute,” which corresponds to an isolation that eventually precipitates death. In this very isolation, one is supposed to hear the call of “Thou Shalt Not Kill.” But why should one respect the call instead of succumbing to the seduction of profanation? We can hardly fail to notice the provocative quality of the language that (is and) surrounds the issue. We witness the erotic in its nudity, hinting at a forbidden secret, lascivious, eternally feminine, the virgin to be violated, coquettish, “already laughter and raillery” (Totality 260), using the tenderness of the caress to signal voluptuosity which “begins already in erotic desire and remains desire at each instant” (259). Discursively, Levinas tethers the feminine to an almost pornographic scene of seduction; we are suffocated by the gendered language of seduction, and of violation (persecution) embedded in seduction. At the site of the beloved seducing the masculine subject we can sense Levinas, in his turn, attempting to seduce the (masculine) reader. But through seduction emerges the face, and tautologically, all ethical responsibility, because “only the face in its morality is exterior” (262). Exteriority becomes the realm of ethical signification from which the beloved is constitutively banished.

Rejecting psychoanalysis, Levinas wants to retain the concept of the feminine as otherness to negotiate the problem of desire, which “is philosophical and concerns otherness” (Entre Nous 113), but this rejection is merely a discursive foreclosure, another tautology. If Levinas is so insistent on expropriating this idea of the feminine from psychoanalysis it is only because his philosophy cannot accept the existence of a developmental stage in which “the ‘I’ finds itself disarmed and passive in its relation to the message from the other” (Butler 76). Correspondingly, the face only coalesces in what Butler characterizes as “an idealized dyadic structure of social life” (91), sidestepping the question of why the atemporal feminine is retained in the defining ethical encounter with the face. Why do we speak of the obverse of the ethical face as “she,” and why is “she” not situated in a given space, proceeding through any kind of sequential time? Why does Levinas move so swiftly and so polemically from the excruciatingly gendered language of seduction (the excessive affect of desire) to the tacitly masculine austerity of the face, whose exteriority in suffering becomes the supreme ethical call, the unbearable burden of responsibility? This move betrays a compulsion in the subject, an anxiety to escape an earlier engagement or originary persecution and seduction that psychoanalysis could interrogate. In the following section I set the terms of this engagement by placing the subject, persecuted through seduction, in a very specific location: at the mother’s breast.

the face at the breast

If the unrelieved interiority of the Levinasian beloved evokes a sense of flight from a more primal scene that Levinas cannot acknowledge, Jean Laplanche’s theory of the enigmatic signifier, “the residue of a primary situation of being overwhelmed that precedes the formation of the unconscious and the drives” (Butler 71), returns us to this scene to ground the ethical imperative in a developmental narrative of subject formation. Butler writes that “for Laplanche it would seem that the primary experience for the infant is invariably that of being overwhelmed, not only ‘helpless’ by virtue of overwhelmingly
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clueless about the impingements of the adult world” (70–71). This “clueless” state finds its most profound signification in the adult desire that confronts the infant, who, lacking language or even refined cognition, cannot understand what this other person wants of him or her. To fill the role of this other person, Laplanche uses the mother primarily, but in a slippage which I will subsequently show is not as accidental as it seems, also posits his indifference to the specific figure of this scene, asserting that “there is no reason to assume that these caregivers must be oedipally organized as ‘father’ and ‘mother’” (70).

The infant is overwhelmed by the other’s desire, which is only intelligible in a linguistic and social order into which he has not yet been inaugurated. Laplanche crystallizes the infantile feeling of being overwhelmed in the following question:

Can analytic theory afford to go on neglecting the extent to which women unconsciously and sexually cathect the breast, which appears to be a natural organ for lactation? [...] It is impossible to imagine that the infant does not suspect that this cathexis is the source of a nagging question: what does the breast want from me, apart from wanting to suckle me, and, come to that why does it want to suckle me? (Qtd in Santner 34)

The sexual cathecting of the breast in adult women conflates the lactating organ with sexual pleasure, impinging on the infant with a series of demands framed as questions. How can I make sense of what this other person or thing desires, and why am I the unwilling target of this desire? Why am I helpless? Why does she have control? Why am I forced into a relation with this breast? Why does she find pleasure in the act? And how do I constitute a part of that pleasure? A crucial part of Laplanche’s argument is that the infant can never resolve these questions, which are “imposed upon the child from this environment and [which] produce overwhelming and unmasterable primary impressions for which no ready adaptation is possible” (Butler 71). The process of repressing these impressions becomes the drive, passing this alien code of desire and sexuality into the world of the symbolic, where the introjective “attack” of repressed “enigmatic signifiers” goes on to shape adult sexuality (73). We cannot fail to note the profound sense of persecution in the description of primal childhood trauma, of the subject violated by alien hands, breasts, and desires, at a specific moment in time when he is unable to speak or act in response. However, converging with Levinas, we encounter the opacity of feminine desire, which precipitates a complication of Laplanche’s seemingly innocuous lack of concern for who exactly fills the role of the caregiver.

Via the interpretive work of John Fletcher, Butler tracks Laplanche’s theory as an alternative model to the Lacanian symbolic, noting that Laplanche’s “recourse to the ‘adult world’ as the source of sexual messages is a significant departure from psychoanalytic accounts that assume an Oedipal scene with Mother and Father structuring desire at a primary level” (142). Of profound interest, though, is how the Oedipal model becomes the method of banishing all specific discussion of why female desire is impenetrable even in psychoanalytic and ethical models that rather too vehemently profess to dispense with the Oedipal scene as such.4 Though Laplanche does not appear to care who the caregiver is (unsofar as this caregiver is an adult who impinges on the infant, nothing else really matters), his most specific and memorable example of the enigmatic signifier is the breast-feeding woman whose sexual cathecting of her breast initiates an unmasterable process in the child that will quietly begin to contaminate his drives, later resulting in the adult’s sexual self-alienation. It is the mother who brings about this self-alienation, the woman bare-breasted, exposed, and immodest in her nudity. Ostensibly concerned with challenging the primacy of Lacanian psychoanalysis, and equally critical of Levinas for the latter’s failure to “decenter adult experience” (Butler 76), Laplanche tacitly reintroduces the female as the source of an originary psychic trauma, just as Levinas slips feminine desire into the foundation of his ethical model through the figure of the beloved.
In Laplanche’s formulation, we witness the female other exposed, but active in her desire, which threatens to overwhelm the infant. However, unlike the Levinasian subject encountering the beloved, the stranger here is not a stranger in the proper sense, but the child of the mother: stranger to the symbolic order, stranger in the proper sense, but the child of the beloved, the stranger here is not a female other exposed, but active in her desire, the child of the beloved, the stranger here is not a stranger to the symbolic order, but the child of the beloved, the stranger here is not a stranger in a proper sense, but the child of the beloved.

This is the scene from which the Levinasian subject retreats, against which he will later invert the relations of power: he must regain control, profane her in full awareness of his profanation, and give her over to violence of profanation itself. To the extent that the beloved is the inversion of the infant’s helplessness before the alien desire of the mother, it is also the ominous harbinger of a certain response to that desire, which is to deny the unconscious, recenter the subject, and so make the adult in question more vulnerable to acting out sadistic impulses that it refuses to understand as its own constitutive potential” (Butler 77). The chasm that Levinas asks us to negotiate – between the urge to profane the beloved and the absolute prohibition against violence of the face – may well be unbridgeable; it may be all too easy to stop short of the face, substituting brutality in “this violence inviting the profanation, in this violence of profanation itself” (Derrida, Touching 88). Seduction, as the repressed residue of persecution, returns to undermine the ethical terrain of the face by reinserting itself into the realm of the ethical:

What if the “profanation,” the “beyond the face” (of which Levinas so often recalls that it already presupposes the face) already pertained to the ethical, at the point where one “beyond the possible” stays at a tangent to the other, one in contact with the other, in what remains, as an impossibility, the same impossible? And the same “desire”? (91)

For Derrida, profanation of the beloved is not prior to or other than the ethical principle, but is rather already implicated in the ethical, driven by an identical desire. The very act of positioning profanation as the dialectic of the face (presupposing and presupposed by the face, unavailable to the ethical register) has profound consequences for ethics itself: defining femininity as pure otherness (in a sense the other of the other, since the beloved is the obverse of the other, since the beloved is the obverse of the other, since the beloved is the obverse of the other, since the beloved is the obverse of the other) necessarily involves an ethical eradication.

Levinas convulsively pushes the inaugural ethical moment of the subject beyond the feminine to cover the traces of a foundational trauma, a push that is not the commencement of ethics but rather a retreat from an “uncanny vitality – this ‘too much’ of pressure – as well as the urge to put an end to it” (Santner 37). This vitality is not necessarily restricted to the violence of profanation that I may choose instead of the ethical imperative of the face; it also manifests in adherence to the face as an ethical standard, to Dostoyevsky’s principle that “all men are responsible for one another, and I more than anyone else” (Levinas, Entre Nous 107). Based on an unending series of ethical obligations, the Levinasian ethic obliterates the magnitude of individual ethical encounters through an unwavering commitment to responsibility at all times, to all people, regardless of who they may happen to be, or what crimes they or I have committed. In my very adoption of the ethical standard of the face I may well convert the sadistic impulse to profane the beloved into a kind of masochism, a self-scourging for crimes that will remain irreparable (because unspecified), but for which I am nonetheless, like Dostoyevsky’s characters, always already responsible. On the subject of the beloved as a formulation, Derrida offers a key insight: “There is – let us use a word that is not Levinas’s – a perversity here” (Touching 88). The choice of the word “perversion,” alien to Levinas’s discursive register, identifies the
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face–beloved dyad as a pathology that compulsively subordinates the specificity of individual acts to an impossible standard. Though Levinas is quick to invoke justice as the third, he never traces the limit at which we can invoke justice without forsaking ethical obligations, an omission that is all the more troubling given his unmistakable concern for coming to terms with the extreme violence of the Holocaust. What are the parameters by which a survivor of violence makes sense of guilt and responsibility to all, every day, and that person more than anyone else?

spacings, temporality, and the responsibility of the survivor

If we categorize Levinas’s ethics as the concern for establishing interpersonal relations that do not oppress, victimize, or violate the participants, it is troubling that the encounter with the face takes place in an atemporal context, without reference to material spaces and prior to beings who exist in the world, leaving us with no clear idea of the distance between ourselves and the others we encounter. I know, if nothing else, that I am close enough to the face to perceive the agony of the face: the other’s performance of the suffering in which I discern my ethical responsibility. But what is the nature of that distance? Do we speak only of physical distance in a concrete encounter? Does that distance allow us to speak, in turn, of distance as an ethical measure? Physical and psychological proximity are at risk of becoming indistinguishable in this equation. The encounter employs a bodily trope, the face, to visualize an encounter that implies an ethical sequence (the urge to violate the beloved, subsequently recognizing the ethical in the face) without acknowledging this sequence as a temporal operation. Time folds back in on itself, collapsing forms of distance and thereby erasing the possibility of challenging the universality of the ethical scene. There is a discrepancy between the universality of the face to which Levinas asks us to subscribe and the specificity of location that betrays itself in the very metaphor of the face: a metonymy for the body that suffers, the face must, in order to retain relevance as a trope, reject the universality of a discourse that asks me to hold myself responsible for everyone else, at all times, whether they are out of sight, earshot, or touch. Otherwise, the ethical abstraction of the face would dissolve into unintelligibility, a trope shorn of the sensory context that makes it intelligible as a trope. No longer an ethical move, the face would then signal a withdrawal into abstraction before the enigmatic signifier of the breast, making it virtually impossible to distinguish my ethical responsibility in specific moments from the totalizing and pathological guilt that the face, by definition, compels me to feel. However, Levinas disavows the importance of exactly where the subject is situated in relation to the beloved/face. Why? I argue here that the importance of spacing and temporality signals a radical destabilization of the foundation of Levinas’s argument, casting us back to something more embodied than the face (at the breast) – the mouth that screams before it speaks.

Writing on the philosophy of touch, Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy both agree that the opening of the mouth signals the formation of the subject: one screams, or opens the mouth to emit a sound, and in so doing one forms the spacing with one’s lips before nourishment or speech. At issue is the mouth as spacing as well as space: the lips, the cavernous interior of the mouth, certainly, but also the spacing that precedes the scream, the paradox of the bounded nothing, the signifying absence preceding the sound:

The mouth is at the same time place and non-place, it is the locus of a dis-location, the gaping place of the “quasi permixtio” between soul and body, which is to say the incommensurable extension between them and common to both, since the mouth – any mouth, before any orality – opens an opening. (Derrida, Touching 28–29)

Phenomenologically speaking, the mouth is originary, before breast, beloved, and face, metonymizing the incommensurability of soul and body in the gap that is also spacing. When Nancy translates the “quasi permixtio” of Descartes’s Sixth Meditation as “comme un seul
makes or makes itself exteriority, spacing of places, distancing and strangeness that make up place, and thus space itself, first spatiality of the tracings of a veritable outline in which – as in no other – ego may come forth, trace itself out, and think itself. (Nancy qtd in Derrida, Touching 27)

The ego’s gift of exteriority is itself an awareness of the unsettling quality of specific places, and thus of all space. Through the mouth, the ego forms by disclosing spacing as the subject’s existential foundation.

Temporalit – living in a given space, through ungraspable moments of time – is the ineluctable consequence of being born, without which there is no basis for ethical relations, because there is no life. Characterizing the mother as the “noun and name Nancy never pronounces,” Derrida connects the spacing between the lips of the mouth to the opening of childbirth, noting that “this happens before any figure – not before any identification, but before any ‘identification with a face’” (Touching 28). Temporality is what the mouth vocalizes through a spacing that forms its ego, before face or beloved. Conversely, the concept of an atemporal beloved is a retreat from the phenomenuality of ethical relations, analogous to what Luce Irigaray describes as the retreat from ethically attentive perception into atemporal sensation:

At that point, perception is supplanted by sensation [ ... ] [B]ut it is still passive, artificial, and outside the constitution of a temporality which does not involve the exercise of one’s power over the other. (Irigaray 45)

Irigaray notes the passivity of the sensual (sensation), but rightly rejects the Levinasian compulsion to map the sensual (beloved) onto an absolutely feminine interiority that invites the brutal exercise of power, because for her, “[o]ne way of being is not enough to constitute an identity” (35). Here, Irigaray traces the beginning of a more recuperative ideology, acknowledging that, in order to sidestep the “impossibility” of the gap between self and other, “men have created an absolute which is inaccessible, which is completely other with respect to [women]” (43). Obverse to the face, the beloved sublates ethical responsibility to the Same, not only by constructing the feminine as seductive otherness, thereby consigning it to “a blindspot in their minds” (45) but also by erasing the discursive traces of the corporeal foundation, the lived and embodied experiences that might complicate the task of engaging in an ethical relation with the other. In a sense, the ethic of the face is the denial of the unpresentability, in the living world, of death, “the absolute signified, the sealing off of sense” which defines mourning’ (Nancy qtd in Derrida, Touching 32).

We can now return to a telling moment in “Philosophy, Justice, and Love” that finds Levinas trying to foreclose a tendency towards ethical rigidity, based on what at first appears to be nothing more innocuous than common sense: “[T]o a certain extent (may God keep me from being reduced to it as a rule of daily usage) I am responsible for the other even when he bothers me, even when he persecutes me” (Entre Nous 106). Levinas’s failure (or inability) to elaborate on what precisely prevents us “from being reduced to” endless responsibility “as a rule of daily usage” (ibid.) enframes ethics as a relational task rather than an atemporal principle – ethics as a sustainable model of intersubjective engagement. But what holds me back from endless responsibility, and, furthermore, what if that “I” is a survivor of violence, a Holocaust survivor or a Palestinian whose daily reality would not suffer the indignity of even a single usage of the Levinasian principle? Levinas wants to ward off the difficulties of practical application with an ad hoc deferral, but the “accusative inauguration of the moi – the ‘me’” (Butler 85) cannot quietly recede into the speculative confines of a “may God keep me from” because its very facticity
of asymmetry only mirrors the survivor procity as an applied ethical principle: an ethics cannot, then, escape the problematic of non-reciprocity in a privileged time and place. We summation that is intelligible only to a privileged a check on responsibility also presupposes juridical structure. Essentially, Levinas asks us to subscribe to an ethical standard whose geometry may well be living death to many or, at the very least, a re-triggering of past trauma.

If spacing and distance are antithetical to the face, which veils the trauma of the first opening of the mouth with the figure of the beloved, then the face is never alive to the temporality of its beholders, to the concrete material specificities of subjects whose degrees of responsibility must differ according to the positions they occupy in space and time relative to the face. In the figure of the beloved, whom one caresses in a gesture that “carries beyond phenomenality” (Derrida, Touching 77), Levinas does not merely obviate the hegemony of temporality, he subverts the order of the face itself (79). The beloved is the repressed other of the face, the spectral residue of the traumatic encounter with the enigmatic signifier of the breast that generates to the anxiety of spacing and temporality – to the anxiety of being in the world, of death that ends being. In an ethical sense, the impulse to dispense with “the order of power, of knowledge, of temporality” (ibid.) is not unwelcome, since, as Irigaray notes, any encounter between self and other “along a path which is solely phenomenal is not enough to establish an ethical relationship between us” (Irigaray 46). For Irigaray, the phenomenal, on its own, too easily sediments into the narcissism of introjection. Consequently, this impulse undoes itself in the very figure of the beloved, whose non-reciprocity to the subject and to the face invites a descent into an “economy of sensation” in which “feeling always wants to grow in intensity and continues along this path until death due to the lack of any controls” (41). The injunction against violation that Levinas conceives as the supreme instant of ethical choice before the beloved shining through the face only signifies if I accede to the face as ethical masochism, consigning myself to a grossly asymmetrical relation to the other.

The Levinasian axiom, in its tacit religiosity, has two problems: it asks all subjects, irrespective of temporality, to subscribe to an ethics that is actually “a category of pious discourse” (Badiou 23), and grounds that discourse in a tradition that is monotheistic, Western, and transparently Judeo-Christian. Levinas asserts that “to deserve the help of God, it is necessary to want to do what must be done without his help,” but refuses to “get into that question theologically” because for him the issue centers on

underlines the casual ease by which such a recession is effectuated by someone who does not suffer. Levinas calls for a passivity that is the passivity of death to the survivor of collective violence, for whom death becomes a real possibility precisely by virtue of physical and ethical passivity, an inability to act, an acceptance of impinging calls of all sorts, from the state, from other individuals, from the daily encounter with structural trauma. The survivor of such a temporal specificity, caught in a zone of extreme violence and suffering, cannot embrace the impingement of passivity; the embrace would be deathly, destroying as (and because) it silenced.

Accepting the passivity of an ethical call repeatedly, through sequential time, transforms the suffering of the moment into sustained trauma for this particular subject. The other’s death, in this example, illuminates the expectation of non-reciprocity that Levinas explicitly positions as the cornerstone of his theoretical framework, the “asymmetry of intersubjectivity” and “the exceptional situation of the I” (Entre Nous 105). In this ethical calculus, what I give and what I receive are not and never equal, despite the mitigating presence of justice, which for Levinas is the arbiter of responsibility. But while justice as a concept works adequately to describe the legal process of accountability, it nonetheless consigns the Palestinian refugee to non-presence outside justice, within the prison of the “asymmetry of intersubjectivity” (ibid.): she, and anyone in her subject position, are excluded in toto. Attentiveness to justice as a check on responsibility also presupposes juridical legality as the enforcement of just laws, a presumption that is intelligible only to a privileged subject in a privileged time and place. We cannot, then, escape the problematic of non-reciprocity as an applied ethical principle: an ethics of asymmetry only mirrors the survivor’s trauma, which also partakes of an asymmetrical structure. Essentially, Levinas asks us to subscribe to an ethical standard whose geometry may well be living death to many or, at the very least, a re-triggering of past trauma.
the human (Entre Nous 109). Shortly thereafter, though, he tethers the question of the relation to the other inextricably to God:

I cannot describe the relation to God without speaking of my concern for the other [... ] In my relation to the other, I hear the Word of God. It is not a metaphor; it is not only extremely important, it is literally true. I’m not saying that the other is God, but that in his or her Face I hear the Word of God. (109–10)

Though Levinas insists on a distinction between an other in whom we hear the Word of God and an other who is God, where would the relevance of such a distinction lie? What speaks to me right through from God is itself divine, and consequently my relationship to this other will never be able to partake of any semblance of reciprocity. The relationship is always unequal: myself, an embodied finite creature, before that which announces the holiest of holies. By invoking responsibility to the other as that which speaks as the Word of God, Levinas cannot help embedding the issue in theology, leading to the possibility that what he proposes as an ethics of difference is actually a kind of deism:

In Levinas’s enterprise, the ethical dominance of the Other over the theoretical ontology of the Same is entirely bound up with a religious axiom [...] [T]his is philosophy [...] annulled by theology, itself no longer a theology [...] but, precisely, an ethics. (Badiou 22–23)

The concept of non-reciprocity in the formulation of the divine is the purview of a monotheism in which God “holds me in his gaze and in his hand while remaining inaccessible to me” (Derrida, Gift 31). God asks me to keep the secret of his interiority in me, he sees me without my being able to return the gaze, and what he asks of me is the absolute non-reciprocal act of total devotion to God, in secret. But this non-reciprocal relation is a specifically Western construction, Derrida notes, born out of a historical process of incorporation in which older mysteries (the demonic and the platonic) are subsumed to the Judeo-Christian conception of God as absolute atemporal interiority within me, God as the one who sees without being seen. As the basis for Levinas’s ethical standard, non-reciprocity disqualifies itself out of hand because of its unacknowledged historical and cultural specificity, which problematizes this ethic as a universal standard.

Utilizing the face as ethic without gesturing to the material historical circumstances that gave rise to it as an ethical formulation is only the work of neocolonialism reborn, traduced into the liberal discourse that Badiou correctly critiques for its tacit distinction between the (white Western) subjects who act and the (non-white) victims who are acted upon. In this mode, the West can invoke the face (indeed, has already invoked the face) to justify every self-serving imperialist venture under the cloak of responding to the suffering of the other. Additionally, the imperative towards ethical non-reciprocity is too akin to the “commandment of faithfulness” in awaiting “a revelation from the very God who was silent at Auschwitz” (Levinas, Entre Nous 99); its address parallels “[t]he dissymmetry of the gaze, this disproportion that relates me, and whatever concerns me, to a gaze that I don’t see and that remains secret from me although it commands me” (Derrida, Gift 27). You, the Holocaust survivor, must overcome the disappearance of God at Auschwitz, to retain your faith in God who exposed you to unimaginable suffering, only because the thought of renouncing God is too much for those of us who did not experience Auschwitz. Furthermore, you must be responsible for the crimes of others, even those who inflicted violence upon you or those you loved, because the other demands your absolute engagement with ethical responsibility, irrespective of the particulars of your own existence. This proposed asymmetry of obligation is unbearable in the intensity of its restaging of trauma. We could, of course, reduce that subject’s responsibility, claiming that Levinas of all people would not have demanded such an obligation from a Holocaust survivor. However, it is precisely the inadmissibility of the temporally specific example that undermines the face as a tenable ethical
principle. If the survivor of Nazi violence is exempt, what of Afghanistan? Libya? Iraq? The Sudan? How many exemptions can an ethical standard support before it loses privilege as a standard?

I have argued that the Laplanchian breast at which the infant is exposed to the enigmatic signer of the other’s desire becomes the locus of an excessive demand in Levinasian thought, a demand whose unbearable weight for the infant resurfaces as the unbearable ethical task of the adult: because the breast asks too much, the face of the other will always already ask too much. Essentially, the impinging breast overdetermines the response of the adult, who compulsively shrouds the figure of absolute vulnerability (the beloved) with an ethical prohibition against violence (the face), concealing a pathological anxiety that might precipitate the subject into either perpetrating violence on others (sadism) or an unhealthy and all-consuming guilt over the endless obligation to the other (masochism).

I have also characterized an inattentiveness to temporality — to spacing and distance — as the means by which Levinas can formulate a notion of ethical responsibility that makes no reference to its historical and cultural specificity and to its essential identity as a “pious discourse” (Badiou 23) of non-reciprocal obligation to a thinly-veiled God (the other). By subsuming individuated experience to endless responsibility to the face, we compound the infliction of physical violence with epistemic violence on those for whom justice is not an impartial adjudicator but rather a colluding agent in their oppression. For these subjects, refusing persecution and endless responsibility might well be the crucial first step in challenging the very judicial system that exiles them from the discourse of Levinasian ethics.

notes

1 This tendency, interestingly enough, is part of what Levinas himself, in “Hermeneutics and the Beyond” (1977), finds objectionable in Edmund Husserl’s definition of presence. At that time, Levinas is clearly wary of a conscious subject that “already allows itself to be forgotten for the benefit of present entities” (Entre Nous 67).

2 Is it possible that isolation contains the attraction towards violence, the probability that no one is watching in this isolated space of (almost-)profanation? No one will see, interfere, or bear witness.

3 To whom is Levinas writing, if not to a self-identified heterosexual masculine subject for whom this impossible transaction with the beloved represents an otherwise impermissible fantasy of violation without consequence? It is as if Levinas himself is seduced by the very transgression he describes.

4 We find the same opposition to psychoanalysis in Levinas’s claim that he “has never been a Freudian” (Entre Nous 113).

5 Though he is careful to level the affective register by substituting “caregiver” for “mother,” Laplanche elides the question of why every gesture, caress, or act of “impingement” on the infant necessarily carries the same weight and/or valence. Why are all things equally persecutory to the infant? Can we really confute the incidental or passing touch of various caregivers with the process of providing nourishment to the infant, which likely takes place before all other examples of care? How can the affective magnitude of breast-feeding and other forms of care be the same? Regrettably, a full analysis of the problematic of Laplanche’s position is beyond the scope of this article.

6 Laplanche is also guilty in his turn of situating us at a specific time and place — the infant before the mother’s breast — without sufficiently accounting for the temporal specificity of that encounter. Because the infant, the subject-to-be, lacks motor skills, language, and cognitive understanding, the mother cannot impinge on him out of sight, or beyond the range of his perception, except as absence: in either case, the space occupied by the infant in relation to the mother is vital in determining the event horizon of the adult’s impingement on the child. Any act of caregiving demands a certain relational distance: the infant must be able to see, hear, or touch the adult who will subsequently generate the excessiveness of alien desire. As Irigaray notes, “[y]our appearance to me creates a distance, a perspective which maintains the two” (46).
Nothing occurs without spacing as a determining factor.

7 Extending Nancy’s argument, Derrida asks:

What if the work of mourning, philosophy perhaps, philosophy precisely, far from only dealing with “keeping at a distance the incorporation of the dead,” were, by way of this, working on such an incorporation, on a denying avoidance, by way of the incorporation of the dead? (Touching 52–53)

This seems to me part of the issue at stake for Levinas: the attempt to incorporate death into an ethical posture of mourning whose denial of spacing and temporality (“by way of” the face and the beloved) constitutes a “denying avoidance” of death proper.

8 Irigaray offers another insight when she notes that “the sadist and the masochist play with death” (41). As an example of the two poles of the Levinasian ethic, the sadist, in his profanation, and the masochist, in his self-flagellating responsibility for everyone else at all times, are quite suitable figures for my argument. What unites them is the excessive magnitude of their desires: what exceeds containment in both material and affective terms.

9 The demonic or orgiastic mystery “is originally defined as irresponsibility,” residing in “a space in which there has not yet resounded the injunction to respond” (Derrida, Gift 3). Though platonic responsibility “breaks with orgiastic mystery,” Platonism still contains a certain “demonic mystery” (7). Finally, the Christian mysterium tremendum (trembling mystery) incorporates or represses both the older traditions by asking the Christian subject to keep the secret of their sublation. As Derrida notes, “[r]epression doesn’t destroy, it displaces something from one place to another within the system” (8).

10 Badiou also points out the frequency with which the Holocaust and the phenomenon of Nazi Germany are invoked as the “absolute form of Evil,” yet are constantly “used to schematize every circumstance in which one wants to produce, among opinions, an effect of the awareness of Evil” (62–63). A historical atrocity passes into the register of radical atemporality, from where it can now signify as an unquestionable first example of Evil’s primacy. This sort of erasure uncomfortably parallels Levinas’s own work, which is bound up with the need to frame the Holocaust as “the paradigm of gratuitous human suffering, in which evil appears in its diabolical horror” (Levinas, Entre Nous 97).

bibliography


Jay Rajiva
320 Lonsdale Road #38
Toronto
Ontario M4V1X4
Canada
E-mail: jay.rajiva@utoronto.ca