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The Possibility of Relationships with Others

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THE POSSIBILITY OF RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
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requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

in

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by

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Abstract

Levinas offers a rich philosophical insight into the kind of responsibility and ethics that we must have for the Other. This involves a certain conception of what it means to be hospitable which turns out to be impossible. In order to talk about how this impossible relationship can occur, I use Heidegger's description of the existential Being-with structure and Derrida's conception of the event in order to make sense of how this Levinasian relationship can possibly exist in spite of—or thanks to—its impossibility.

Introduction

It is my goal here to concern myself with the possibility of a relationship with others. Primarily I am interested in the everyday kind of relationships that we have with the people around us, something that could encompass anything from an intimate, personal, or professional setting. The context is not very important since the fundamental truths about the way we interact with others throughout our lives remains the same. Here I will offer, primarily, an analysis of Levinas's phenomenological description of how one interacts with others and what kind of relationship he thinks that entails. This picture, not being completely satisfactory on my view, will be filled in using some ideas from Derrida. Doing this will offer a better, more complete view of how interactions with others happen, how relationships with others begin, and how they can remain centered upon ethics. This analysis will also say something about the way these kinds of relationships ought to be conceptualized in order to uphold an ethical, hospitable relationship with the other.

In order to accomplish this task, I will, in the first chapter, give an account of Heidegger's notion of Dasein in order to bring out and establish the groundwork by which my argument will be able to start from. Specifically, I am concerned with understanding the primordial situation of Dasein, who Dasein is, and how it understands the meaning of its Being, particularly as something that is constantly with Others, what Heidegger calls a Being-with. Heidegger's influence on Levinas and Derrida is reason enough, I think, to make sure some of Heidegger's ideas are made clear. As mentioned before, I think the Being-with structure is important for this project since it grounds Dasein as something that is essentially with and around others. Furthermore, this essential

structure that we can get from Heidegger will mean that everyday relationships with others will at first be characterized as necessary.

To continue my project, I will in the second chapter turn to Levinas in order to establish an ethics of the Other. Doing this will accomplish two things. Firstly, this will lay the groundwork for an ethical relationship with others. That is, it will allow me to build on Heidegger's ontological conception of Dasein in a way that respects and acknowledges the obligation we have towards Others. Secondly, it will reveal something that appears unintuitive. How can someone who cannot ethically presume to know the other have a relation with them? This results in a paradox where we find ourselves amongst and in relationships with others who we consider as friends, family, or otherwise, and yet according to Levinas's conception of how we interact with others, this should be an impossibility. The question of whether this structure should continue as such must be asked, and Levinas's phenomenology ought to be expanded to include an explanation of how relationships with others are supposed to work. Importantly, it is my goal to make sure that any expansion or revision to Levinas's theory remains ethically grounded.

In order to overcome this paradoxical relationship, I will turn to Derrida whose ideas will, I think, be able to allow us to escape the aforementioned paradox without sacrificing Levinas's ethics. It will also allow us to recognize more clearly the value of Heidegger's ontology and the place it has within an ethical structure between others. I think this is important because in order to make sure that relationships can exist authentically, I think it necessary to retain this ethics of hospitality. Doing this will involve using Derrida's notion of the event to reverse the paradox such that only insofar as the relationship between someone and an other is impossible, is it possible.

Chapter 1. Dasein as Being-With

Before any meaningful inquiry into the possibility of an authentic, ethical relationship with the Other can be made, questions must first be asked about the nature of Being. Since I would like to understand the way everyday relationships ought to function in an ethical and authentic fashion, I first need an understanding of the kind of beings that are implicitly involved in these relational structures. Heidegger, I think, naturally leads us to the ideas of interest while also providing an indispensable foundation from which to work. I think this works well since, as noted by Pierre Livet, “For Heidegger, the opening of Being is primary. To think of intersubjectivity and of interpretation, the question of Being is asked along the way”.¹ Being, then, must be understood because without an understanding of how Dasein comes to understand its Being as Being-with, an inquiry into the very nature of the Being-with structure cannot take place.

Specifically, I am concerned with the primordial situation that Dasein finds itself in, and what that situation says about the nature of the way it interacts with the world. I think what this discussion should reveal first and foremost is that, as is also argued by Hadrien France-Lanord, the structure of the Being-with eliminates a solipsistic concern and places us firmly and necessarily in the world with others.² This chapter will involve, then, an exegesis of what it means to be Dasein,

¹ Pierre Livet, “Mitsein et intersubjectivité”, in « *Être et temps* » de Martin Heidegger : *Questions de méthode et voies de recherche*, ed. Jean-Pierre Cometti and Dominique Janicaud (Marseille: Sud, 1989), 164. “Pour Heidegger, l’ouverture de l’Être est première. Pour une pensée de l’intersubjectivité et de l’interprétation, la question de l’Être se pose en route...”, translation my own.

² Hadrien France-Lanord, “Martin Heidegger et la question de l’autre: II. Le partage de l’être”, *Heidegger Studies* 21 (2005): 130.

what Dasein's relationship with the world is, and particularly, what Dasein's relationship with others is and the nature of the Being-with structure.

The need for the term 'Dasein' comes out of a question about the meaning of 'Being' which is an essential component of the Being-with structure that is most relevant for the larger discussion being had here. For Heidegger, Being is not an entity that something possesses, but rather that Being "lies in the fact that something is, and in its Being as it is; in Reality; in presence-at-hand; in subsistence; in validity; in Dasein; in the 'there is'".³ In order to understand this description of Being that Heidegger offers it will be best to get an understanding of the many technical terms Heidegger uses. Particularly, I think, an understanding of what is meant by "Dasein" is needed. For Heidegger, this entity will have to be something that has also been made clear in its Being, and this is what is referred to as Dasein.

Dasein is defined by its special relationship to Being, and in fact gets its nature of Being by virtue of asking the very question of what Being is. Heidegger says, "The very asking of this question is an entity's mode of *Being*; and as such it gets its essential character from what is inquired about—namely, Being".⁴ As just mentioned, this means that this special entity, Dasein, discovers its meaning of Being precisely by inquiring into what Being is. Thus, Dasein is a term that refers to an entity which, in the very fact that it takes interest in its own existence, gets its meaning of Being.

³ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 26.

⁴ Heidegger, 27.

Furthermore, this kind of inquiry into the meaning of Being is what separates Dasein from all other entities. It is “ontically distinguished by the fact that, in its very Being, that Being is an *issue* for it”.⁵ In this sense, it is the existence of Dasein that defines Dasein. This is because Dasein is that which “always understands itself in terms of its existence—in terms of a possibility of itself: to be itself or not itself”.⁶ Dasein, then, is distinguished from other entities simply because it is concerned with its own Being and that Being is a question for Dasein. This argument for the meaning of Dasein’s Being necessarily opens up questions about the nature of existence. If Dasein gets its meaning of Being by inquiring about Being or existence itself, then necessary to an understanding of Being is an understanding of what existence is or entails. Therefore, in order to get at the nature of Being for Dasein, the essential qualities of existence must be uncovered. The Being-with is one of these essential qualities of existence, but a closer look at even more primordial aspects of Being will also be necessary to complete our understanding of Being-with later.

Something that is primordial to Dasein is its condition of being in the world. “Being in a world is something that belongs essentially”,⁷ and this is important because it means that “Dasein’s understanding of Being pertains with equal primordially both to an understanding of something like a ‘world’”.⁸ It would seem then that an understanding of Dasein comes necessarily with an understanding of the world that Dasein inhabits, how Dasein relates to it, and whatever or whoever else Dasein might encounter within this world. Of course, relevant to my argument here is

⁵ Heidegger, 32.

⁶ Heidegger, 33.

⁷ Heidegger, 33.

⁸ Heidegger, 33.

how the relationship between Dasein and other Beings functions—something Heidegger will refer to as the “Being-with”—which is something that can’t be uncovered without first parsing what Heidegger means by his technical terms “ready-to-hand” and “present-at-hand”. These two categories of things in the world are crucial to understanding the world that Dasein takes its meaning of Being from. Without an understanding of these two concepts, we cannot adequately understand the role that others play in Dasein’s understanding of the world and therefore the meaning of its Being.

The present-at-hand is simply those entities which do not fulfill the in-order-to and so are entities which have no use. On the other hand, the things which are ready-to-hand are those things that do serve some purpose. Simply, what is ready-to-hand are those things which Dasein uses when it is concerned with something. It also refers to the things that are produced by whatever we are doing.⁹ Things that can be called ready-to-hand are things which have a certain *towards-which*, or, in other words, that which is ready-to-hand is equipment which already comes with a notion of an in-order-to. Explicitly, when something is ready-to-hand it exists in-order-to accomplish something for the sake of Dasein.

To demonstrate the notion of the ready-to-hand, a useful example is the very example that Heidegger gives. Consider, then, a hammer which is used for a particular purpose. It has some “involvement in hammering”. Furthermore, “with hammering, there is an involvement in making something fast; with making something fast there is an involvement in protection against bad

⁹ Heidegger, 99.

weather; and this protection ‘is’ for the sake of providing shelter for Dasein—that is to say, for the sake of a possibility of Dasein’s Being”.¹⁰ This demonstrates the in-order-to which defines the concept of the ready-to-hand. Ontologically, the ready-to-hand is more primordial than the present-at-hand. The world is, for Dasein, ready-to-hand and the present-at-hand can only be accessed by going “beyond what is ready-to-hand in our concern”.¹¹

Because Heidegger’s notion of Being-with is understood alongside an understanding of equipment, it is necessary to quickly make sure we understand what is meant by equipment. This is necessary to understand because without it we will not be able to easily distinguish Others from objects which simply exist in the world. Thus, to serve my purpose here, a quick exposition of equipment will do. Equipment is simply that which can be used for something else. As such, “there ‘is’ no such thing as *an* equipment”, but rather a “totality of equipment” which belongs to any given equipment which makes that the equipment that it is.¹² In other words, there is no individual idea of what equipment is, but rather all equipment is equipment only insofar as it contributes to other equipment which may, in turn, serve as “something in-order-to”.¹³ Equipment is called so when it exists to accomplish something, namely something for Dasein. With that aside and coupled with an understanding of present-at-hand and ready-to-hand, it will now be possible to differentiate the specific kind of Being that others possess from the kind of Being that is possessed

¹⁰ Heidegger, 116.

¹¹ Heidegger, 101.

¹² Heidegger, 97.

¹³ Heidegger, 97.

by things in the world. This is an essential point of the Being-with structure which, with these concepts, can become readily apparent.

Earlier I discussed the need that I have to understand the essential qualities of existence which ultimately give Dasein an understanding of its Being. Along with the world which is encountered in a way that is either ready-to-hand or present-at-hand, the Being-with structure is part of the essential qualities of Dasein. This is true particularly insofar as it answers the question of “*who* it is that Dasein is in its everydayness”.¹⁴ Further, this question can be answered by addressing the “kind of Being in which Dasein maintains itself proximally and for the most part”.¹⁵ This kind of Being will be, then, the kind of Being that Dasein has when they do not, for the most part, stand out in the world and when among Others. Dasein is in proximity with Others and will, for the most part, fit in with them. It is in this scenario that the meaning of the Being-with structure will be understood.

Others are “‘encountered’ in a ready-to-hand, environmental context of equipment” where certain things are ready-to-hand for Others.¹⁶ This is not to say that when something is ready-to-hand for Others that it is found to be present-at-hand for me, but instead that something is found in a world that is “always mine too in advance”, one that is ready-to-hand for me as well.¹⁷ Given my exposition on the ready-to-hand, present-at-hand, and equipment, this should already seem apparent. Dasein exists in a world of equipment where each piece of equipment has a certain

¹⁴ Heidegger, 149.

¹⁵ Heidegger, 153.

¹⁶ Heidegger, 154.

¹⁷ Heidegger, 154.

purpose which is to be for the sake of Dasein. Others too exist in this same world and encounter some of the same objects as Dasein which are at the same time for them a kind of equipment which is characterized by a certain for the sake of.

Thus, since Others experience the world in the same way that Dasein does and even share equipment with Dasein, they cannot themselves be equipment. Others are, then, completely separate from equipment because they are alike in kind with Dasein and they are with Dasein. They do not serve some kind of towards-which that involves Dasein, but rather experience the world in the same way that Dasein does and so take on the same meaning of Being. This situation is made more complex when we also realize that Others are in and a part of the world, just as Dasein is. They are a part of the world. As Heidegger says, “Dasein too is ‘world’”.¹⁸ This is what it means to existentially be with others. We exist in the same world as they do and in the same mode. Dasein fits in with others and doesn’t stand out since others too are Dasein.

We must also note that Others are recognized immediately as such and are not “discriminated beforehand and then apprehended”.¹⁹ This is because, at least for Heidegger, Dasein and Others are in a certain sense indistinguishable from each other. Further, Dasein is not found as a Being-present-at-hand-along-‘with’ because this idea of ‘with’ “is something of the character of Dasein” and there is an existential quality of sameness that can be found between Dasein and Others.²⁰ Since Dasein understands its Being in terms of its world, and if Others are a part of its

¹⁸ Heidegger, 154.

¹⁹ Heidegger, 155.

²⁰ Heidegger, 154–155.

world, then Dasein understands itself, at least in part, in terms of its Being-with Others. This means that “Dasein is essentially Being-with”, and this is the case even when no Other is present which explains the phenomenon of loneliness.²¹ That is, loneliness as a phenomenon acts as further proof that Dasein is essentially with Others since if this wasn’t the case there would be no accompanying feeling when one finds themselves alone.

In short, Dasein’s condition of Being with Others is an essential quality of Dasein’s Being, and as such it is “an issue for Dasein in its very Being” and so it must be concerned with Others.²² Finally, as such, “Dasein ‘is’ essentially for the sake of Others”.²³ The Being-with structure is critically important to my analysis here, then, because it establishes Dasein as something that is essentially and unavoidably with and among Others. It is also important that moving forward we have an understanding of the way Dasein understands the meaning of its Being. Of course, now that this has been established, it is possible to move into a much closer read of what kind of relationships with others are possible given this structure. Notably, and as will be expounded upon in the following chapter, Dasein’s relationship with Others is not one whereby Dasein collects a myriad of facts and pieces of information about them. Rather, for Heidegger, Dasein’s “understanding of Being already implies the understanding of Others”²⁴ since Dasein and Others are essentially equals which is demonstrated through the structure of the Being-with. However, it will be necessary to move away from Heidegger in order to argue what the relationship with others

²¹ Heidegger, 156–157.

²² Heidegger, 160.

²³ Heidegger, 160.

²⁴ Heidegger, 161.

ought to look like since he offers us little in the way of defining the relationship with others. Livet even suggests that the Being-with structure is “only that which makes my world a shared world”, and that this structure does not “define at all the specific relationship to the other”.²⁵

The specific relationship to others, then, must be defined, and now that the foundational condition of Dasein has been established, in the following chapter I will discuss Levinas’s conception of the Other in order to do this. Doing so will, in addition, shift the focus of my concern to ethics. This will be relevant for my continued discussion of our relationships with Others, how they should be carried out, and what our everyday relationships ought to look like.

²⁵ Livet, 159. “...le *Mitsein* est seulement ce qui fait de mon monde un monde commun, donc qui fait des êtres de ce monde des êtres partagés. Mais il ne définit nullement le rapport spécifique à l’autre”. Translation my own.

Chapter 2. Impossibility of Knowing the Other

Up until this point I have only established the essential conditions in which Dasein understands the meaning of its Being. The exposition until now has been largely about the ways that Dasein takes the meaning of its Being through an understanding of the world and others with a particular interest in Heidegger's Being-with structure. What this structure lacks, however, is a detailed view into what it looks like—or how it ought to look like—when someone interacts with an other.

Because of my focus here on the ethics of such an interaction, it seems only natural to look to the ideas of Emmanuel Levinas who focuses on these concepts while also building off and breaking away from Heidegger in many important ways. Notably, this will entail a break from Heidegger's ontology in order to focus on the transcendence of the Other. It is well known that Levinas thinks “Heideggerian ontology ignores transcendence and invites tyranny”,²⁶ and so of course the goal of Levinas's work will be, at least in part, to argue for a structure that cannot become tyrannical and puts ethics at the foreground.

Much of Levinas's philosophical discussion in *Totality and Infinity* centers around the ethics of how we interact with the Other, and my goal here is to outline the nuances of what it means to encounter the Other for Levinas, and how that grounds his ethical framework. This will be done in order to move forward from the platform where we've left Heidegger in order to focus on an ethics of the other, something which is, of course, absent from Heidegger's work. In fact, this

²⁶ Cecil L. Eubanks and David J. Gauthier, “The Politics of the Homeless Spirit: Heidegger and Levinas on Dwelling and Hospitality”, *History of Political Thought* 32, no. 1 (2011): 127.

is Levinas's main critique of Heidegger, that he "prizes ontology over ethics".²⁷ To start, I will look at Levinas's phenomenological description of how one encounters the Other. I will expost what it is to be "at home" in order to understand what it is to encounter the infinite Other. When someone is "at home" for Levinas, it means that they are existing for themselves without being turned outwards towards the elsewhere, otherwise, or other.²⁸ This notion is slightly different for Heidegger, but for the purpose of keeping in line with Levinas's thought, this will be the conception of the "at home" that will be understood moving forward. The notion of the infinite Other is important for this project since it will be the motivating force for a true ethics and it will eventually allow me to include an ethics in this new conception of our relationships with others.

Next, I will look at Levinas's notion of the face so I might examine the origin of ethics which is crucial because it will also work into how a possible relationship with others will work. This discussion of Levinas will culminate with the recognition that a relationship with others cannot be completely captured using Levinas's theory alone. Since it seems intuitively possible to have authentic and reciprocal everyday relations with others, I want to bring to light how that is possible without ignoring important philosophical insights from Levinas. This will ultimately lead us to ask how one could possibly authentically encounter an Other—or more specifically—how it is possible that someone can have an authentic, reciprocal relationship with an other. It will be

²⁷ Eubanks, 136.

²⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 33.

with this goal in mind that we approach the question of how we might revise Levinas's idea in a slight but critically important way.

1. *The Same*

Throughout Levinas's body of work is the idea that there are two opposing categories of being. There is the "I"—or as Levinas calls it, the "Same"—and the Other. The first term, the Same, is what Levinas uses to describe how the I in the world defines itself. He says that in order to define the self, "it is necessary to begin with the concrete relationship between an I and a world", which according to Levinas, "should [...] alter the I".²⁹ Levinas even goes so far as to say that the relationship between the I and the world reveals the I and the world to be "preeminently the same" as a result of "a *sojourn* in the world".³⁰

The way this relationship between the I and the world seems to reduce into one thing comes from Levinas's reasoning that the I defines itself as something within the world and a part of the world. He says that the I "finds in the world a site and a home" and it is in this sphere of "home" that the I finds itself.³¹ Levinas states that "[i]n a sense everything is in the site", and that "everything is at my disposal, even the stars, if I but reckon them, calculate the intermediaries or the means". It is important to note that this site, that which is a part of the Same, should be understood as a place where everything is understood and under the reign of the I: "The 'at home'

²⁹ "Totality and Infinity", 37. As we have seen (Chapter 1), this notion is also found in Heidegger and it will be critically important to remember how this relationship between Dasein and the world functions in order to understand the severity of Levinas's point here.

³⁰ "Totality and Infinity", 37.

³¹ "Totality and Infinity", 37.

is not a container but a site where *I can*, where, dependent on a reality that is other, I am, despite this dependence or thanks to it, free”.³² It is a place where the I settles itself within the world, where it forms a kind of collection of all there is to know, and a place where it finds itself to be a dictator. It is here where the I finds itself to be “at home”.

Since it is this very space where the I situates itself and in which the I defines itself, Levinas refers to it all, the space around the subject and the subject itself, as the Same. The Same is simply the I within the realm of objects, the site of the world. Furthermore, everything within this site is known to the I and belongs to it. Therefore, the Same refers to an I that exists in the world, is surrounded by things, and in a sense owns those things. The Same is that which does not look outwards and might be thought of as a subject who is in their own little world, and we might even go so far as to say that this subject is defined and henceforth *the same* as this world. The I takes its meaning of Being from the world around it. Levinas says in regard to the site where the I exists, “Everything is here, everything belongs to me; everything is caught up in advance with the primordial occupying of a site, everything is com-prehended”.³³ Therefore, the Same refers both to the space in which the I resides (amidst all that which is known), as well as the I itself.

The contention of the possibility of a relationship—let alone an authentic relationship with the other—arises, then, with the confrontation of that which is absolutely other. While it is true that Levinas says it is the nature of the Same to try and possess all that is within the world, it seems

³² “Totality and Infinity”, 37. The careful reader might take pause here when they read that this “being at home” is dependent upon a reality that is other. This will be addressed in the following section where the relationship with the Other will be explored.

³³ “Totality and Infinity”, 37–38. This phrase uses a play on words in the French where the word for “comprehended” contains “pris” which is the past participle for “take”.

that nonetheless there are things that are unable to be possessed. I want to point out also that not only do these things exist, but that they even seem to be necessary in order for one to have a meaningful existence. Levinas states this clearly when he says, “I am at home with myself in the world because it offers itself to or resists possession”.³⁴ As alluded to before, it is the thing which Levinas calls absolutely other which “does not only resist possession, but contests it, and accordingly can consecrate it”.³⁵ We must now turn our attention to the nature of this thing which is absolutely other. As we will see, it is the Other—the other subject—that is absolutely other.³⁶

2. *The Other*

It will be important here to discuss what exactly the notion of the absolute Other entails, specifically Levinas’s Other-decentered approach to interrelationality. This other-decentered approach found in Levinas can be traced back to our previous discussion and the conception of how the Same is related to all that which is outside the sphere of the being “at home”. As mentioned before, the Other is that which is absolutely other and so cannot be reduced to the Same. This notion of the Other consists of everything, or rather *everyone*, that is outside of the realm of the Same. As Levinas puts it, “He [the Other] and I do not form a number. The collectivity in which I say ‘you’ or ‘we’ is not a plural of the ‘I’”.³⁷ In other words, it is impossible

³⁴ “Totality and Infinity”, 38.

³⁵ “Totality and Infinity”, 38.

³⁶ “Totality and Infinity”, 39.

³⁷ “Totality and Infinity”, 39.

for the Other to ever be considered as something that is “owned” by the Same, nor can it ever be thought of as a part of the Same.

This idea, of being unable to capture the Other as an idea or a representation is part of the reason that Levinas does not think that Heidegger’s ontology is best suited to dictate how our relationships with others are supposed to work. This is because for Heidegger a relation with beings means to “let beings be, to understand them as independent of the perception that discovers and grasps them”.³⁸ Because, for Levinas, the initial encounter with the other is one that necessarily involves a certain “speaking”, our relationship with the other is never simply just a “letting be”.³⁹ His idea, then, is simply that the relationship to the other cannot be described ontologically since the bond we have with the other is that “which is not reducible to the representation of the other”.⁴⁰ Simply, the Other is that which cannot be reduced by the Same and so a relationship will always have to be mitigated by something else, which, as we will see is at first ethical.

Since the Other is someone who can never be captured and always remains outside the realm of the Same and it is the case that they can never be understood, the question still stands about what the Other actually is in relation to the Same, and what an encounter between the two might look like. Levinas makes the point that “[n]either possession nor the unity of number nor the unity of concepts link me to the Stranger”, which, for Levinas, is the thing that disturbs the “being at home with oneself”.⁴¹ Moreover, this Stranger is one who “escapes my grasp by an

³⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 6.

³⁹ “Entre Nous”, 6.

⁴⁰ “Entre Nous”, 7.

⁴¹ “Totality and Infinity”, 39.

essential dimension, even if I have him at my disposal”.⁴² one has the impression that a meaningful relationship with the Other is entirely impossible. However, since we do in fact have relationships with Others, we must examine how this event between the Same and the Other happens, and what the ethical implications of its occurrence entail.

The medium by which Levinas thinks the encounters between the Same and the Other operate is through that of the face. The idea of the face follows from the notion of the unknowable Other because “[t]he face is present in its refusal to be contained. In this sense it cannot be comprehended, that is, encompassed”.⁴³ The face is, of course, in this context meant to be taken metaphorically. Levinas notes that it is not possible to “speak about phenomenology of the face, since phenomenology describes that which appears”.⁴⁴ So what should be understood by the face is simply the way that one comes into contact with the Other. Furthermore, the face denotes a very special kind of presentation of the Other and that is because the reception of the face implies something beyond “the idea of the other in me”.⁴⁵

Though it is irreducible to the Same, the face still gives us a limited access to the Other since the “[f]ace and discourse are tied”, and because “it [the face] renders possible and begins all discourse”.⁴⁶ It is the case, then, that the face is simultaneously unknowable while also being the foundation for our connection to the Other, and is in fact the very foundation for all interactions

⁴² “Totality and Infinity”, 39.

⁴³ “Totality and Infinity”, 194.

⁴⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Éthique et infini* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1984), 79. “...parler de « phénoménologie » du visage, puisque la phénoménologie décrit ce qui apparaît.” Translation my own.

⁴⁵ “Totality and Infinity”, 50.

⁴⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, and Philippe Nemo, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 2011), 87.

with them. I think that this is the case since it is easy to imagine a situation where someone meets again someone they used to know. Before these two people met again, they each had an image or an idea of who that person was. However, at the moment of their encounter they realize that their idea of the other no longer fits the actual person in front of them at that moment. This is an encounter with the face that is easily imaginable, but it follows logically that if the idea of someone is insufficient after a long period of time, an idea of someone would also be insufficient after a short amount of time. Thus, there can never be an idea of an other that fully captures them since they change at each moment. The face is simply our confrontation with this reality.

The important thing to note is that the relationship between the Same and the Other is asymmetrical in nature. This can be seen in Levinas's description of how the Other commands the I. He says that what the face demands of the Same comes as an order, or rather, that "[t]here is a commandment in the appearance of the face, as if a master spoke to me".⁴⁷ The Other, for Levinas, is always that which comes down from on high or from above. The idea that this confrontation is asymmetrical can also be seen in what I've just been discussing. If the Same can only encounter something incomprehensible through the face of the Other, it follows that the Same would owe everything to that Other, and in fact, be infinitely indebted to them.

Since it is the case that the face cannot be reduced to the Same, because "[i]t is what cannot become a content, which your thought would embrace; it is uncontainable, it leads you beyond".⁴⁸ In this certain sense, the face is infinity. It is always that which is beyond the site of the Same. The

⁴⁷ "Ethics and Infinity", 89.

⁴⁸ "Ethics and Infinity", 86–87.

face of the Other doesn't refer to any meaning the subject can understand, but rather "is meaning all by itself".⁴⁹ This seems to hold true since it seems plausible that we are able to understand the world around us. I understand this desk in front of me and the keyboard that I touch. It is mine. I am not faced with a face each time I sit and write, but rather this special experience is sequestered and limited to the kinds of interactions that I have with other people, other beings that are ontologically like me.⁵⁰ What this means is that when the I finds itself at home amongst all that it knows and comprehends, that which can expose the Same to something unknown is the Other.

Because the face is the metaphorical medium by which all communication can begin between two beings who are essentially disconnected, it follows that language is that through which the Same and the Other may relate since "[l]anguage is a relation between separated terms".⁵¹ As Levinas puts it, "it is discourse and, more exactly, response or responsibility which is this authentic relationship".⁵² What Levinas means here by responsibility is that in the confrontation of the Other, the face commands us to be or act in some specific way. It is because of this command—the command that bridges the gap between the Same and the Other—that the Same therefore has responsibility for the Other. Furthermore, it is the response to the Other's command that founds their authentic relationship.

⁴⁹ "Ethics and Infinity", 86.

⁵⁰ This is not something that Levinas would agree with since he is trying to break from Heidegger's ontology, but I think it is possible to think of others as other beings ontologically similar to myself, but I address why we perhaps shouldn't break from ontology completely in the third chapter.

⁵¹ "Totality and Infinity", 195.

⁵² "Ethics and Infinity", 88.

Levinas notes that the “first word of the face is the ‘Thou shalt not kill’”, but that in the very same moment, “the face of the Other is destitute; it is the poor for whom I can do all and to whom I owe all”.⁵³ It isn’t possible to understand how relationships work through Levinas’s thought alone since for Levinas there isn’t really a relationship with the other that is possible. As we have thus seen, the interaction between the Same and the Other is a non-relation. However, Derrida notes in regard to Levinas’s thought that between the Same and the Other, “[t]here would be neither welcome nor hospitality without this radical alterity, which itself presupposes separation”.⁵⁴ This radical alterity that is the condition for all hospitality is the very foundation for ethics for Levinas who says that ethics is to be understood as responsibility for the Other.⁵⁵ This is how it will be possible to understand the interaction between the Same and the Other as a relationship which will be realized through the idea of hospitality and the event. It is critically important that this asymmetry between the Same and the Other exists since it tells us about the kind of relationships we ought to have with Others even if Levinas doesn’t think that the interaction between the Same and the Other is in itself a relationship.

3. *Justice (The other Other)*

Levinas offers a somewhat unsatisfactory explanation of how equality and relationships are able to exist between people and I will here briefly explain this concept so that I can move beyond it.

⁵³ “Ethics and Infinity”, 89.

⁵⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 92.

⁵⁵ “Ethics and Infinity”, 95.

Levinas, then, in order to get to the idea of justice and society, writes a little about a third party who arrives after the initial confrontation with the Other. It is the third party or the other Other, so to speak. He says that this “third party looks at me in the eyes of the Other—language is justice”.⁵⁶ Before the encounter with the Other, there are no Others. That is, in the encounter with the Other, all others are also realized in the same moment. Levinas describes this by saying that “the epiphany of the face qua face opens humanity”.⁵⁷

As Colin Davis notes, Levinas’s discussion on the third party is very brief and not very well flushed out within *Totality and Infinity*. A difficulty arises for us, then, because within Levinas’s framework, the third party is how we come to the possibility of equality, and without a very detailed exposition of the third party we are left with a limited understanding of equality. As mentioned before, “the third party is revealed to me at the same time as the Other, but is equal to me”, which “allows Levinas to combine asymmetry and equality within the social relation”.⁵⁸ So it appears that the (non-)relation with the Other is “vertical” for Levinas, but expands horizontally with the third party. This perhaps is how we should understand our everyday relationships for Levinas, but the problem of the possibility for a relationship with the original other still remains.

The consequence of bringing the third party into the picture is complicated. This is because it “raises questions about my relationship with the Other”,⁵⁹ which up until this point has been very intimate and exclusive. With the addition of the third party comes the realization that

⁵⁶ “Totality and Infinity”, 213.

⁵⁷ “Totality and Infinity”, 213.

⁵⁸ Davis, Colin, *Levinas: An Introduction* (Indiana: Notre Dame Press, 2007), 52–53.

⁵⁹ Davis, 82.

“the other does not exist merely for my sake” and this “prevents my relationship with the Other from becoming too cosily self-enclosed”.⁶⁰ It is at this moment, which if we remember well, is the same moment in which we first encounter the Other, when we realize that we are also a third party to the other Other. It is at the same moment, then, when the concern for justice arises and “lays the foundations of society”.⁶¹

In summary, when the Same encounters the Other, they encounter something completely outside of their own realm of being which therefore implies an impossibility of relation. At the same time, they also realize the possibilities of not only other Others, the third party, but also that they are a third party to these other parties. This means that the third party “acts as a corrective to the asymmetry of ethical relations. [...] [T]he asymmetry of my responsibility for the Other no longer means that I cannot expect respect and fair treatment”.⁶² This is the foundation of society and therefore the foundation of justice. I think it important to note, however, that neither society nor justice precludes the necessity of institutional systems to maintain what they seek to accomplish. Levinas says that while laws in a society may be practical, and in fact inevitable, that “justice only has meaning if it retains the spirit of dis-inter-estedness which animates the idea of responsibility for the other man”.⁶³ This means that justice is simply the result of a society in which every other is responsible for one another. However, Levinas maintains that the hierarchy between the Same and what we might call the immediate or primary Other remains the same. He says, “The

⁶⁰ Davis, 83.

⁶¹ Davis, 83.

⁶² Davis, 84.

⁶³ “Ethics and Infinity”, 99.

I always has one responsibility *more* than all the others”.⁶⁴ With this we still aren’t left with a satisfactory understanding of the possibility of a relationship with the immediate Other, and so I will continue.

4. Problems and Further Considerations

The crux and purpose of my work here is to of course identify and address potential problems that I think arise when we take the structure proposed by Levinas as is. One of these problems is perhaps Levinas’s negligence of ontology and extreme focus on ethics. This is where Heidegger’s ontology can help to mitigate this and why we would do well not to completely ignore the questions of Being which undoubtedly precede questions of ethics, however important ethics may be. This is something also noted by others and it is even argued that “Levinas does not give sufficient deference to ontology” since Levinas’s conception of ethics cannot occur without some understanding of Being and an understanding of the other as other.⁶⁵ In this way I think it best to retain some idea of the nature of Being as described by Heidegger, but not to let that overpower Levinas’s conception of ethics which will of course not only be beneficial but imperative when trying to describe how a relationship with others ought to function. Indeed, it might also be argued that Levinas never really abandons “egological thinking”, but that one way to approach these issues is to think about “the ethical resources of ontology, and the ontological senses of ethics”. In other

⁶⁴ “Ethics and Infinity”, 99.

⁶⁵ Eubanks, 145.

words, it might be said that we ought to think about “the Other *as the most proper problem of being*”.⁶⁶

That aside, the problem that is most relevant to my interest here is the idea that it is impossible to have an authentic, ethical, and perhaps reciprocal relationship with the Other. This is, I think, a problem for Levinas since it seems to deny the possibility of certain everyday relationships that we generally take for granted. Take, for example, a relationship between two friends. If my friend is Other to me, we can never truly be friends and this, at the very least, seems unintuitive. Further, the idea that this is impossible seems to go against what we take to be our primordial, essential, ontological qualities that define the nature of our Being. Surely it is the case that if a friend and I share the world with each other that we have at least some mutual understandings about each other since we at least share the qualities of Dasein and we inhabit the same spaces.

The question might be asked, then, why Levinas’s ideas shouldn’t simply be replaced with something that can more adequately describe the kinds of relationships we generally understand as being possible. I think that doing this would be unwise since Levinas offers some unignorable insights into the kind of responsibilities that we have for the Other. Without these initial observations and clarifications, we can’t start our ethical, authentic relationships with others. I think this problem is one that can be resolved by putting Levinas in dialogue with Derrida,

⁶⁶ François Raffoul, “Being and the Other: Ethics and Ontology in Levinas and Heidegger”, in *Addressing Levinas*, eds. Eric Sean Nelson, Antje Kapust, and Kent Still (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2005), 150.

particularly if we are able to think of the apparition of the face, or even the Other more generally as an event.

The event, for Derrida, necessarily comes out of impossibility. What this will allow us to do is reframe Levinas in such a way that the relationship between the Same and the Other could possibly be more reciprocal insofar as reciprocity is impossible. If relationships with Others are impossible, then a genuine hospitality which arises from impossibility will be something that can explain how our everyday relationships work, and in fact, how they ought to work in an ethical sense. It is this problem here that when going forward I will be trying to address.

Chapter 3. Possibility of the Impossible

Between Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida there may be found the possibility of a relationship with the Other. This possibility arises from the juxtaposition between Levinas's conception of the absolute Other and the impossibility of a relationship with them, and Derrida's argument that the event is only possible insofar as it is impossible. If a relationship with the Other can be thought of as an event, then it will be possible only insofar as it is impossible as it is for Levinas. The question I will be attempting to answer here is the question of whether or not a reciprocal relationship with the absolute Other that remains authentic and founded in ethics is possible. In order to do this, I will build off my previous discussion of Levinas's idea of what our interactions with others look like and continue with a discussion of both the Levinasian and Derridean notion of hospitality. Then, I will give an analysis of Derrida's notion of the event which will be critical for my understanding of a possible impossibility. Finally, I will apply the Derridean notion of the event to the Levinasian notion of the Other in order to start a discourse about the possibility of this aforementioned kind of relationship with the Other as well as what that relationship ought to look like.

1. Responsibility for Others: Hospitality

The idea of hospitality is one place where we can see a clear intersection between Levinas and Derrida. I have just been discussing how, for Levinas, it is the face which calls the Same to responsibility. This is because the face is what calls the subject to non-violence, and therefore to

ethics. Hospitality, then, is simply “the-one-for-the-other in the ego”.⁶⁷ Levinas says that “[t]he face is exposed, menaced, as if inviting us to an act of violence. At the same time, the face is what forbids us to kill”.⁶⁸ It becomes then, as our responsibility to the Other, to welcome them, or rather, to welcome the face. This is because the face “remains commensurate with him who welcomes; it remains terrestrial. This presentation is preeminently nonviolence, for instead of offending my freedom it calls it to responsibility and founds it”.⁶⁹ Furthermore, it is in the “welcoming of the face [that] the will opens to reason”.⁷⁰ The thread of hospitality can be found throughout, but notably Levinas poses this question: “But how can the Same, produced as egoism, enter into relationship with an other without immediately divesting it of its alterity?”⁷¹

The answer to this question can be found in my previous analysis, and it is something that can be called hospitality. As Jeffrey Bloechl notes, “It hardly needs to be said that this hospitality calls for nothing less than a reversal of everything belonging essentially to the subjectivity of the Same”. He also notes that “the very subjectivity of the subject is composed of an ‘obsession by the neighbor’”.⁷² This reading understands Being in a familiar way and also emphasizes Levinas’s focus on hospitality. Derrida notes also that “[a]lthough the word is neither frequently used nor

⁶⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 79.

⁶⁸ “Ethics and Infinity”, 86.

⁶⁹ “Totality and Infinity”, 203.

⁷⁰ “Totality and Infinity”, 219.

⁷¹ “Totality and Infinity”, 38. Here I have capitalized “Same” although it is not in this translation simply because it appears as “le Même” in *Totalité et infini*. I have taken the liberty of doing the same throughout.

⁷² Bloechl, Jeffrey, “Words of Welcome: Hospitality in the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas”, in *Phenomenologies of the Stranger: Between Hostility and Hospitality*, eds. Richard Kearney and Kascha Semonovitch (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 235.

emphasized within it, *Totality and Infinity* bequeaths to us an immense treatise of *hospitality*".⁷³

Furthermore, François Raffoul offers an analysis of Derrida's work that very plainly puts hospitality at the center of Levinas's work. Notably, "Levinas offers us a genuine ethics of hospitality, that is to say, an ethics *as* hospitality".⁷⁴ It seems clear, then, that hospitality is at the forefront of Levinas's thinking of the Other. This hospitality can be defined simply, as Derrida puts it, as that which "opens itself to the face, or, more precisely, of what 'welcomes' it".⁷⁵

When speaking of his own conception of hospitality, Derrida discusses the ways the host and guest interact. He says that the common view of "hospitality is supposed to consist in giving something, offering something",⁷⁶ but if hospitality comes with an expectation that "the guest should give back to the host, then it is not hospitality but conditional hospitality".⁷⁷ It is the case, for Derrida, that true hospitality does not come with conditions, and so the question arises, then, of the possibility of unconditional hospitality. Derrida makes a point about both hospitality and peace which is similar to Levinas who says that the presentation of the face is "preeminently nonviolence, for instead of offending my freedom it calls it to responsibility and founds it. As nonviolence it nonetheless maintains the plurality of the Same and the other. It is peace".⁷⁸ Derrida, in the same vein, invokes Kant who Derrida describes as having advocated "universal hospitality as

⁷³ "Adieu", 21.

⁷⁴ François Raffoul, "The Subject of the Welcome: On Jacques Derrida's Adieu à Emmanuel Levinas", *Symposium* 2, no. 2 (1998): 213.

⁷⁵ "Adieu", 21.

⁷⁶ Jacques Derrida, "Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility: a Dialogue with Jacques Derrida", *Questioning Ethics Contemporary Debates in Philosophy*, eds. Richard Kearney and Mark Dooley (London: Routledge, 1999), 69.

⁷⁷ "Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility", 69.

⁷⁸ "Totality and Infinity", 203.

the condition of perpetual peace”.⁷⁹ Derrida, at first, seems sympathetic to this notion, but then expresses some apprehension about this kind of Kantian hospitality.

Derrida’s apprehension stems from this kind of hospitality being conditional since it assumes a certain kind of behavior from the Other. For instance, Derrida suggests that for hospitality to be truly unconditional, you must welcome the other “[e]ven if the other deprives you of your mastery or your home”.⁸⁰ Furthermore, Derrida also says that “[f]or unconditional hospitality to take place you have to accept the risk of the other coming and destroying the place, initiating a revolution, stealing everything, or killing everyone”.⁸¹ This is what Derrida refers to as pure hospitality. It is, I think, also in line with Levinas’s notion of hospitality, or at the very least isn’t incompatible with it. Raffoul points out as well that in Derrida’s interpretation of Levinas, “[h]ospitality is not a mere ‘region of ethics,’ but is ‘ethicity itself, the very principle of ethics in its entirety’”.⁸² However, it is important to note that at this point we are still left with something that is impossible.

The idea that Levinas’s conception of hospitality is impossible is not a new one. In fact, it is even something recognized by Derrida outright. But this can be a confusing and convoluted thread to pull. Richard Kearney and Kascha Semonovitch point out this problem by describing how it can be easy to think that “[a]ll hospitality is *in practice* conditional”, and that “[o]ur welcome to actual

⁷⁹ “Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility”, 69–70.

⁸⁰ “Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility”, 70.

⁸¹ “Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility”, 71.

⁸² “Subject of the Welcome”, 213.

foreigners, bound by law and finitude, is always limited”.⁸³ It’s reasonable, then, to understand that this is “why Derrida claims that ‘pure hospitality’ is never possible”.⁸⁴ On the other hand, Derrida also holds that when it comes to the absolute Other, “the door is always open. In fact there is no door at all. And that, for Derrida no less than for Levinas, seems a ‘good’ thing. Something we should strive to live by, no matter how impossible”.⁸⁵ I tend to agree with this analysis that when reading Derrida “[o]ne senses a tacit ‘ought’ whispering behind the deconstructive account”,⁸⁶ and I think this is especially compelling when one has Derrida’s notion of the event in mind. This is something that I will expand upon below, but for now it will be important to keep building on our understanding of what is meant by hospitality.

Hospitality, for Derrida, “consists in welcoming the new arrival before imposing conditions on them, before knowing and asking for anything at all”.⁸⁷ It necessarily requires some kind of individual recognition of the Other, but also necessitates that the recognition of the Other not devolve into something methodical, thoughtless, or conditional. He specifically says that “[h]ospitality consists in doing everything possible to address the other, to grant or ask them their name, while avoiding this question becoming a ‘condition,’ a police inquisition, a registration of information, or a straightforward frontier control”.⁸⁸ At the very least, for pure hospitality to

⁸³ Richard Kearney and Kascha Semonovitch, “At the Threshold”, in *Phenomenologies of the Stranger: Between Hostility and Hospitality*, eds. Richard Kearney and Kascha Semonovitch (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 12.

⁸⁴ “At the Threshold”, 12.

⁸⁵ “At the Threshold”, 12.

⁸⁶ “At the Threshold”, 12.

⁸⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Paper Machine*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 67.

⁸⁸ “Paper Machine”, 67.

occur, it must demand nothing of the Other. It must be completely welcoming without requiring anything, not even a name, while still recognizing and addressing the Other as individual.

Derrida also makes note of the nature in which one welcomes an Other according to the ideal of pure hospitality. He wants to say that in welcoming the Other, the Other must indeed *feel* welcomed, for if the Other perceives that “I would prefer, in short, that he not come in, then it is assuredly not hospitality”.⁸⁹ He says further that in welcoming the Other, one “must be laughing or smiling, happy or joyous”.⁹⁰ Furthermore, this joyous welcome must not only apply to those who we consider friends, neighbors, or brothers, but rather to everyone, no matter the person. In giving his analysis of this, Derrida observes in Levinas that “the other, the other man, man as the other is *my* neighbor, my universal brother in humanity”, and poses the question about whether hospitality is then “reserved, confined, to man, to the universal brother”.⁹¹ This is, perhaps, a point where Levinas’s ethics of responsibility must not be replaced, but rather expanded and reconceptualized to some degree, a point that Lisa Guenther also makes in an essay regarding Levinas’s encounters with animals.⁹² If, for Levinas, every Other is neighbor, the possibility of pure hospitality is not precluded, but rather only reframes the Other as one who is *already* welcomed, or accepted by default.

There is another issue adjacent to my interest here and this is the question of whether hospitality extends beyond human beings. At first this may not appear relevant to my concern with

⁸⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2010), 358–359.

⁹⁰ “Acts of Religion”, 359.

⁹¹ “Acts of Religion”, 363.

⁹² Lisa Guenther, “Le Flair Animal: Levinas and the Possibility of Animal Friendship”, *PhaenEx* 2, no. 2 (2007): 235.

the nature of everyday relationships, but as Derrida points out, the fact that Levinas “thinks of the other human” is something that “will later be revealed as a matter for serious concern”.⁹³ This is because of our relationship to Being that we share with other humans and possibly animals, but more importantly because of the lack of conditions that must come with hospitality.

Indeed, there are good arguments to be made that animals have a certain kind of Being that humans can relate to, and Lisa Guenther even argues that animals ought to be thought of in a Levinasian way because of their own faces. Guenther points out, in regard to Levinas’s comments about his time as a prisoner, that “the passers-by who reduced Levinas and his fellow prisoners to a ‘gang of apes’ not only degraded their humanity; they also betrayed their sensible animality”. And in relation to the dog who would pass by, Guenther points out that “[i]t was enough simply to be a friend, and to greet other animals in their everyday departure and return”.⁹⁴ It might be said, then, that even within Levinas’s structure there should not be any conditions for hospitality. If, however, this is not enough, notions of who or what can receive hospitality cannot include exclusions because of Derrida’s emphasis on pure hospitality’s lack of conditions—that is, hospitality can only truly exist if there are no associated conditions that need to be met prior to hospitality.

Regarding the nature of our relationship to animals, Derrida points out that for Levinas, the animal is simply “a machine that doesn’t speak, that doesn’t have access to sense, that can at best imitate ‘signifiers without a signified’”.⁹⁵ To be brief, Derrida argues that the animal “has a

⁹³ Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 12.

⁹⁴ Guenther, 234.

⁹⁵ “The Animal that Therefore I am”, 117.

relation to the being, but not to the being as such”.⁹⁶ What he means by this is Heideggerian in nature, and points to the animal having a connection to being, but not to that which founds being. In short, to look at the animal as simply automatons or machines appears to be some kind of mistake since they obviously do possess some kind of Being even if it is not the same kind of Being that is possessed by humans. The exact nature or relation between animal and human is something worthy of discussion—especially given Guenther’s discussion of animal faces a reexamination of the Being of animals may be in order—but this is largely outside of the scope of this project. For my purposes here, it is simply important to note that if hospitality is to truly exist, it must be unconditional and therefore must not exclude anything whether it be human or animal for this would be a condition of hospitality.

As I’ve been discussing here, the nature of hospitality must be absolutely unconditional, joyous, and must recognize the Other in their individuality without becoming something mechanical or expected for it to be truly hospitality. This is reflected in Derrida’s discussion of Levinas’s notion of hospitality where he notes that “[t]he welcome cannot be derived, no more than the face can, and there is no face without welcome”.⁹⁷ As we’ll see, the true nature of hospitality, and therefore the experience of the face, is founded in impossibility. I think, also, that this structure works well within Levinas’s line of thinking since hospitality, or the welcoming of the other is “a welcome of an infinite”. That is, the Same “welcomes or receives the other *beyond its*

⁹⁶ “The Animal that Therefore I am”, 142.

⁹⁷ “Adieu”, 25.

own finite capacities of welcoming".⁹⁸ On the face of things this is, of course, impossible. As Derrida also notes, "We must first think the possibility of the welcome in order to think the face and everything that opens up or is displaced with it".⁹⁹ In order to understand why this must be the case, and why hospitality among other things are only possible in their impossibility, we must turn to Derrida's notion of the event since the concept of the event will allow us to think about possibility in terms of impossibility.

2. *The Other as Event*

2.1 *The Event*

Central to Derrida's thinking is his notion of the event. It is in the event where we can begin to glimpse the true function of Levinas's notion of the face. For Derrida, the event is something that "implies surprise, exposure, the unanticipatable".¹⁰⁰ The event is, at its core, something that in its impossibility becomes possible. Derrida says that "if there is an event, it must never be something that is predicted or planned, or even really decided upon".¹⁰¹ Derrida describes a scenario in which one says "yes" to the Other, something he says "may not be unrelated" to the way one would say "yes" to the event. Furthermore, he says that it is the saying "'yes' to what comes, to letting-it-come", and that "[t]he event is also what comes, what happens",¹⁰² or in other words, a saying "yes" to the event. It seems, then, that the event is something one must be open to. One must be willing

⁹⁸ "Subject of the Welcome", 214.

⁹⁹ "Adieu", 25.

¹⁰⁰ Jacques Derrida, "A Certain Impossible Possibility of Saying the Event", *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 2 (2007): 441.

¹⁰¹ "Impossible Possibility", 441.

¹⁰² "Impossible Possibility", 443.

to let the event happen to them, for in fact, there is no other way to experience something that one cannot prepare for.

Another facet of the event is that it is “absolutely singular”. That is, it cannot be repeated, nor can it be described.¹⁰³ Derrida says that in our attempt to convey the event outside of its actual occurrence, “[e]vent making is covertly being substituted for event-saying”.¹⁰⁴ There is no way to convey the happening of the event because doing so would reduce the event to the Same (to use a Levinasian term), an impossible act. The event is irreducible and so therefore, in some sense, incomprehensible. It will always surpass the finite capabilities of a subject to understand, much like Levinas’s conception of the Other.

To explain further his notion of the event, Derrida offers several examples of what could be an event. Of course, for the purposes of my argument here, Derrida’s explanation of hospitality as the event will be most useful. To reiterate, the event is something that must come as a surprise. The very nature of the event is that it must first appear to be impossible. This is perfect for my argument, then, because hospitality and a relationship with others is at this point understood to be impossible.

The example I will discuss here, then, is Derrida’s example of hospitality. Hospitality should be an event, and this is because the one who arrives “must be someone whose unexpected, unforeseeable arrival, whose *visitation* [...] is such an interruption that I’m not prepared to receive

¹⁰³ “Impossible Possibility”, 446–467.

¹⁰⁴ “Impossible Possibility”, 447.

the person”.¹⁰⁵ For Derrida, this is an example used to explain the concept of the event, which, if we remember well is something which necessitates that it come unexpectedly and without conditions. Hospitality must occur in this way if it is to be hospitality at all. I must be open to letting the event happen to me, I must greet the other at my door happily and welcome them in without hesitation, without asking their business or even their name. I must say yes to the apparition of the other, and I must gladly offer them anything for I owe them everything. Without these things, hospitality has not truly occurred, but rather something else which ought not to be called hospitality.

Derrida uses this example to describe the impossibility of the event, or rather, the possibility of the event only insofar as it's impossible. After all, this conception of hospitality is impossible, but that is precisely the point. If it were not impossible, then it could not truly occur. Therefore, only insofar as welcoming the other or entering into an authentic, reciprocal, and ethical relationship with the other is impossible on Levinas's terms is it actually possible. Derrida describes Levinas as saying that “the subject is a host who welcomes the infinite beyond his or her capacity to welcome.” In fact, for Derrida, “Welcoming beyond my capacity to welcome means receiving precisely when I cannot receive”.¹⁰⁶

Derrida also discusses at length the notion of the event in which the *arrivant* comes down from on high, from above, or from somewhere else unexpectedly. He describes the vertical coming of the Other in opposition to the traditional phenomenological description of things appearing on the horizon. He does this, as does Levinas, because of the unexpected nature of the event. If the

¹⁰⁵ “Impossible Possibility”, 451.

¹⁰⁶ “Impossible Possibility”, 451.

Other were to appear upon the horizon, one could see them coming and be prepared. As a true event, pure or absolute hospitality occurs when you cannot see the other coming. Derrida says, “I insist on the verticality of this coming, because surprise can only come from on high”.¹⁰⁷ Without this verticality of the Other, the event could not occur because “[t]he event can only seem to me to be impossible before it occurs”.¹⁰⁸ The point that Derrida is making here is that for the event to occur, it must not appear upon my horizon. It’s something that I can never see coming.

Raffoul points out that the event is something that “does not appear on the horizon from where I may be able to fore-see it, anticipate it: rather, an event falls upon me, comes from above, vertically, and is an absolute surprise”.¹⁰⁹ There is certainly more to be said about the vertical break from the horizon including that it need not come only from above but also from behind, below, or otherwise. However, the important thing to note is that the event is just that which is unforeseeable and is always surprising when it occurs. For now, however, with this understanding of the event, we can begin to apply it to our previously discussed concept of the face and further our understanding of its significance.

2.2 Everyday Relationships with Others

Up until this point I have discussed Levinas’s conception of the absolute Other along with the experience of the face, both Levinas’s and Derrida’s notions of hospitality, and finally Derrida’s

¹⁰⁷ “Impossible Possibility”, 451.

¹⁰⁸ “Impossible Possibility”, 452.

¹⁰⁹ François Raffoul, “Derrida and the Ethics of the Im-possible”, *Research in Phenomenology* 38, no. 2 (2008): 290.

notion of the event. To quickly summarize, for Levinas, the face of the Other is what calls us to responsibility and therefore hospitality for them. Alongside Levinas's conception of hospitality, we were able to use Derrida's similar line of thought to explore the idea of unconditional hospitality which we have seen to be the event. That is to say, hospitality is something that becomes possible only in its impossibility, only when it is carried out without expectation or preparation, as a complete surprise to the host.

Of course, as I've argued through Levinas's philosophical thought, ethics must lie at the center of our relationships with others. However, Levinas's philosophy offers not the possibility of a relationship with others, but rather the impossibility of one: a non-relation. This is because of our inability to grasp that which goes beyond what we can possibly understand, namely the Other. In this way it is impossible to have a relationship with an other that keeps a focus on ethics, responsibility, and hospitality. This is a problem that I turned to Derrida to resolve. Derrida argues that "ethics can only happen as impossible. The impossible is the very possibility of ethics".¹¹⁰

It is my proposition, then, to look back to Levinas's conception of the face in relation to the event. It seems to me that the experience of the face and consequently the experience of the Other, if it is to be authentic, must happen as an event. The apparition of the face and the subject's subsequent confrontation with infinity, with something outside of the *chez-soi*. It must first appear to be impossible. To look at the face of the Other is to encounter something completely incomprehensible, and therefore, much like the event, can never be retold or repeated. I think, with

¹¹⁰ François Raffoul, *The Origins of Responsibility* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2010), 287.

this approach to the face of the Other, one could never make the mistake of categorizing the Other and reducing them to the Same. In this way it will be possible to uphold an ethics of the Other as the centerpiece of our relations with them. It is as Levinas says, “The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me”.¹¹¹ It is in the very unknowing of the Other that one can fully accept and say yes to the other. Any reduction of the other that Levinas prohibits will always be a failure of “knowing”. Therefore, only insofar that knowledge hasn’t been achieved in regard to the Other is the Other appreciated in a truly ethical and hospitable way. In other words, only in its impossibility is a relationship with the Other possible.

With this in mind, I think it is clear to see that the apparition of the face of the Other, which appears as the *arrivant*, fits nicely into Derrida’s idea of the event. The apparition of the face must always be unexpected; the Other descends upon us from above or otherwise outside of our horizon of expectations. The Other can never be subsumed into the Same and they will always remain outside of our grasp, our understanding. The face of the Other, or rather, the discourse made possible by the face of the Other should be thought of as an event. The confrontation with the Other and the subsequent welcoming of the Other must also be thought of as an event. It is the event of encountering the Other, encountering something previously unthought and impossible that grounds hospitality and leads to Levinas’s idea of our ethical responsibility towards the Other. Furthermore, I think this connection will be useful in a longer, more sustained discussion about the nature of the relationship between the Same and the Other that, for now, is outside of the

¹¹¹ “Totality and Infinity”, 50–51.

scope of this project. However, we may say for the moment that if any relationship with the Other is possible, it is possible only in its impossibility.

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Vita

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