

# Levinas: FOR THE KIDS!!!

Mitchell Cowen Verter

June 11, 2008

"The state of nausea that precedes vomiting, and from which vomiting will deliver us, encloses us on all sides. we are revolted from the inside; our depths smother beneath ourselves; even our hearts are sick – Emmanuel Levinas, 1935

" People who talk about revolution and class struggle without referring explicitly to everyday life, without understanding what is subversive about love and what is positive in the refusal of constraints, such people have a corpse in their mouth." – Raoul Vaneigem, 1967

Against philosophies that propose impersonal origins, Levinas's thought describes a continuous creation of gendered generations. In this family drama, one begins life in the infantile state of enjoyment; then gets married to the woman who opens up the home; then becomes a man who owns property and produces works; then has sex and dies; then is reborn in a new generation as a son. It often seems as if Manhood is somehow the telos of this genealogy. In many ways, the "Face-to-Face" relationship described in *Totality and Infinity* is figured as a "Man-to-Man" relationship. One is welcomed by the feminine alterity of the home, but facehood *qua* facehood seems to be the property of an adult male. Only a man can manifest himself as a sovereign speaker, as a master who presents his words. Thus, I am eminently responsible to *l'autre homme*, the Other Man, the brother I meet through fraternity.

The correlation of ethical responsibility to masculine adulthood is reinforced by Levinas's 1957 essay "A Religion for Adults" and *Totality and Infinity's* section "The Mythical Format of the Element." Paganism bathes one in the childlike innocence of elemental, oceanic consciousness, subjecting one to possession by anonymous forces. Against this, Judaism tears one away from mere enthusiasm and positions the individual as an adult, as person who already exists in a state of ethical responsibility, who must already follow commands and perform duties. Levinas avers "my consciousness as a man" – again, as an adult male – is contemporaneous with "the consciousness of any natural injustice, of the harm caused to the Other, by my ego structure."<sup>1</sup>, which Levinas elsewhere refers to as an offense perpetrated on *man*.<sup>2</sup>

Although the Face-to-Face does describe a relationship between adult males, it would wrong to consider this relationship as the goal of one's ethical development. Although Levinas only employs the term "ethical" in certain sections of his texts, each moment of his genealogy opens

---

<sup>1</sup> "A Religion for Adults, 16-17

<sup>2</sup> missing footnote

up a new perspective, a different ethical orientation towards the Other, a different hyperbolic Riemann curvature of intersubjective space.

Alongside the Man-to-Man, Face-to-Face relationship, different ethical perspectives are denoted by every figure and every metaphoric that Levinas introduces in his writing. Already in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas describes the ethics of fecundity: erotic love is not only a relationship with the Beloved, but also engenders a child, a messianic future of new hopes. Furthermore, the figure of the "orphan" does not merely refer to a biblical motif, but subtly alludes to the moment of Need felt in the heart of childlike Enjoyment.<sup>3</sup> Through fecundity, one is already ethically responsible in relation to the consumption of others, committed "FOR THE KIDS!!!", for all those born into misery, for all those lost in the supermarket of empty commodities.

Levinas deepens his meditation on the ethical significance of youth throughout the sixties. In his essay on the May 1968 student and worker uprisings, "No Identity", Levinas states that "Youth, which the philosopher loves is the 'before being, the otherwise than being.'" <sup>4</sup> He praises this radical political movement: <sup>5</sup> "among the most imperative sentiments of May 1968 was the refusal of a humanity that would be defined not by its vulnerability .. but by its self-satisfaction. the person understood as an accumulation of being, by merits, titles, professional competence instituting a heirarchized society maintained beyond the necessities of consumption."<sup>6</sup>

Levinas's remarks demonstrate some interesting affinities to one of the texts that inspired the uprisings, Raoul Vaneigem's *Traite du savoir-vivre a l'usage des jeunes generations*, known in English as *The Revolution of Everyday Life*. A more literal translation of the title, however would better demonstrate that this glorious affirmation of free subjectivity is not mere egoism, but is straightaway an ethical declaration *A l'usage des jeunes generations*, for the usage of the young generations, an immediate responsibility "FOR THE KIDS!!!"

Vaneigem's critique of everyday life can be understood as emerging from Karl Marx and Georg Lukacs's analysis of commodity fetishism and reification. Under capitalism, all social relationships between persons appear as commodity relationships between things. Because all human existence is mediated through these apparently objective, impersonal structures, men are alienated from the products of labor, from nature, from other men, and ultimately from themselves.

Vaneigem writes at a certain juncture in the development of capitalism in which the domination over production was in the process of being complemented by the domination over consumption. As has become obvious in today's world oversaturated by spectacles, capitalism not only controls the process and product of labor, but also dictates the way that one enjoys one's own leisure time. Vaneigem states, "The dictatorship of the consumable perfects the real mastery of dead things over men."<sup>7</sup> He repeatedly laments the way that consumerism is crushing the youth,

---

<sup>3</sup> missing footnote

<sup>4</sup> P 147 This remark already indicates that Levinas's central problematic in his second major book *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* is how to conceive of the subjectivity of youth, of how to reconfigure his earlier correlation of childhood with elemental enjoyment. The word "Beyond" similarly indicates a radical affiliation, but this is not yet the time to explicate it.

<sup>5</sup> However, other comments demonstrate Levinas's hesitation towards radicalism. "While we recognize in Judaism as in certain aspirations of the left . defender of a the human person we cannot identify destiny of Judaism with destiny of proletariat not just a social cause . Revolution be fatal to Judaism, death of Judaism in revolutionary man more delicate values than those at disposal of socialism." Nevertheless, we consider it important to read along this fissure to understand the mutual implications of Levinas and radical politics.

<sup>6</sup> missing footnote

<sup>7</sup> missing footnote

making them "children doomed to age prematurely as soon as the market system has transformed them into mere objects of passive consumption."<sup>8</sup> Personally, I fully concur with this profound sadness in seeing how much the kids today are being coerced into identifying themselves with corporate products.

The commodification of existence not only impinges upon the expression of free subjectivity, but also distorts the possibility of genuine interpersonal relationships. One constantly experiences the humiliation of being an object to other people and one meets only with other objectified people, "cogs in the general machine for destroying people."<sup>9</sup> Vaneigem decries the way that people represent themselves and perceive each other according to roles, becoming "people who are crushed under their wardrobes."<sup>10</sup> Vaneigem bemoans, "Who reduces a man's life to this pathetic sequence of cliches. He does it himself, breaking his day down into a series of poses chosen more or less unconsciously from the range of dominant stereotypes."<sup>11</sup> It is important to not confuse this statement with an existentialist condemnation of inauthenticity or an elitist avant-garde critique of kitsch culture. Vaneigem's remark comes from a compassion towards those of us – all of us – who are complicit in our own degradation, and from the defiant optimism that affirms that we are more than just cliches.

Like Vaneigem, Levinas also opposes the domination of roles, "violence ... makes persons play roles in which they no longer recognize themselves, making them betray their own substance."<sup>12</sup> In his analyses of the economy of phenomenon and expression, Levinas explains that individuals express their interiority through external works, works that could have been produced by and can be consumed by anybody in the impersonal public realm. This is how we generally encounter others, through their works, consuming them as if they were products, entering their interiority by burglary.<sup>13</sup> Thus, most of the time we meet another person not as an ethical *who*, a human face, but rather as an ontological *what*, a thing with properties.

To overcome this dehumanization, Vaneigem recommends that we rediscover the spontaneity, creativity, and poetry of our subjectivity. Whether they know it or not, people are continuously expressing their creativity, and need only to reawaken their wills to live in order to bring new realities to being. Until it is crushed out of her by consumer society, the child maintains the greatest power to affirm her daydreams, to transform her life, and to grasp her freedom. Vaneigem explains, "The child acquires a subjective experience of freedom unknown to any other animal species. . . the child possesses a feeling of the continuous transformation of the world, or poetry, to an unlimited degree."<sup>14</sup>

Levinas figures a similarly exuberant childhood as the state of enjoyment, remarking that "enjoyment is the very production of a being that is born [and] encloses itself in a person."<sup>15</sup> Levinas's affirmation of this ecstatic state echoes the sentiments of Bataille by declaring "To enjoy without utility in pure loss, gratuitously, without referring to anything else, in pure expenditure – this is the human."<sup>16</sup> That is, the humanity of the human and the subjectivity of the subject is

---

<sup>8</sup> Page

<sup>9</sup> missing footnote

<sup>10</sup> missing footnote

<sup>11</sup> missing footnote

<sup>12</sup> missing footnote

<sup>13</sup> missing footnote

<sup>14</sup> missing footnote

<sup>15</sup> missing footnote

<sup>16</sup> missing footnote

constituted by enjoyment. One can not overemphasize the importance of this affective joy. The Face-to-Face would not be ethical if it did not begin from my own personal enjoyment: "Whatever be the transfigurations this egoism will receive from speech, it is for the happiness constitutive of its very egoism that the I who speaks pleads".<sup>17</sup>

I would argue that it is within this realm of enjoyment that ethical responsibility emerges. Once Levinas's work is understood to be a series of reversals,<sup>18</sup> it becomes clear that my enjoyment also doubles as an indigence, a lack, a suffering riveted to being. Furthermore, the Other's destitution for which I am responsible is the perspectival inversion of my own indigence.

Although Levinas dedicates his second major book to those "of all confessions and all nations, victims of the hatred of the other man,"<sup>19</sup> it is not just the horror of man made mass death that we need to remember. Vaneigem reminds us: "will it need as much blood again to show that a hundred thousand pinpricks kill as surely as a couple of blows with a club?"<sup>20</sup> As memorializing suffering and protesting continuing atrocities, we must also oppose the manifold ways we are degraded and conditioned in everyday life.

Vaneigem cites an "admirable principle" of Keats "Everything that can be annihilated must be annihilated so that children may be saved from slavery"<sup>21</sup> As a gloss, we can adduce Levinas' statement from his essay on May 1968 "the condition (or the uncondition) of being strangers and slaves in the land of Egypt brings man close to his neighbor. In their uncondition of being strangers men seek one another."<sup>22</sup> I would claim one's responsibility to the other is not merely to undo her enslavement, but to encourage her liberty, to help her discover and embrace that which makes her free. A pre-original anarchism obligates us to what Levinas calls "my responsibility for the freedom of others."<sup>23</sup>

I would like to claim that one is not only responsible for the other's suffering but also for their pleasure. Vaneigem explains the authentic communication of genuine love, saying "To love only oneself through other people, to be loved by others through the love they owe themselves."<sup>24</sup> This sentiment does not express some empty egoism, but rather echoes Levinas's explanation of love as a voluptuousity that delights in the voluptuousity of the beloved, perhaps even what Levinas refers to as the "wisdom of love"? The foreigners, the strangers do not just want an end to discrimination for their otherness, but as "Gentleman" Joe Strummer points out "the immigrants want to sing all night long."<sup>25</sup> As Simon Critchley urges, even if Levinas is correct that everything outside of the Bible and the Greeks is dance, then "let's dance, let's dance all night, let's party hearty."<sup>26</sup>

Critchley's remark should remind us that, in his later writings, Levinas maintains a constant dialogue with philosophy's greatest dancer, Friedrich Nietzsche. Although Levinas does dare to blaspheme against most infamous blasphemers in philosophy, he deliberately reappropriates

---

<sup>17</sup> missing footnote

<sup>18</sup> See "Levinas, Pervertor"

<sup>19</sup> missing footnote

<sup>20</sup> missing footnote

<sup>21</sup> missing footnote

<sup>22</sup> "No Identity" 149

<sup>23</sup> "Humanism and An-archy" 136

<sup>24</sup> missing footnote

<sup>25</sup> "Straight to Hell"

<sup>26</sup> "Five Problems" p 176. As someone who has gone drinking with Professor Critchley, a man with many friends, I must aver that he really does know how to party.

obviously Nietzschean concepts. Zarathustra's Yes-Saying is reiterated as Levinas's Saying in the form of Youth, the lightness of a free spirit already denucleated of its center of gravity. The *Otherwise than Being* of youth is inspired *Beyond Essence* through Nietzsche, of whom Levinas asks rhetorically "Is not Nietzsche the exceptional breath to make this 'beyond' resound?"

Nietzsche's exceptional breath is exhaled in the form of laughter. This can be understood on two levels. First of all, to laugh is to use one's mouth in a way that prohibits speaking.<sup>27</sup> Levinas had previously introduced this distinction between laughter and speech in *Totality and Infinity* through the witches of Macbeth<sup>28</sup>, whose laughter signals the ambiguity of a phenomenon that is manifested "an-archic[ally], without principle, without beginning,"<sup>29</sup> Levinas's relocation, revocation of laughter through Nietzsche's lips should therefore be understood as a way of reconceptualizing ethical anarchism.

Levinas moves beyond *Totality and Infinity* in his second book by further correlating this laughter with the dynamics of breathing, an inspiration which is religious prophecy rather than pagan possession. Levinas states "the breathlessness of inspiration that paralyzes essence, that transpierces it with an inspiration by the other, an inspiration that is already expiration that 'rends the soul.'" In this form, the laugh is almost indistinguishable from a cry. It is the sound made during the very trauma of birth. Levinas explains, "the human subject – me – [is] called on the brink of tears and laughter to responsibility."<sup>30</sup> Subjectivity itself is reborn as youth each moment, in a continuous creation, perpetually "born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward"<sup>31</sup>, always laughing-crying at the wounds that tears it apart.

Levinas's reference to the exceptional quality of Nietzsche's "breath" should remind us of Alfred Jarry's remarkable teaching of 'pataphysics, "the science of the particular [that] examines the laws governing exceptions, since the laws that are supposed to have been discovered in the traditional universe are also correlations of exceptions, albeit more frequent ones, but in any case accidental data which, reduced to the status of unexceptional exceptions." Even if commodity culture mass manufactures a series of formally identical<sup>32</sup> objects, and each person is being objectified by the society of the spectacle, nevertheless, each person undergoes his own history of accidents, of joys and pains, has been scarred by time with unique identifying marks. Time has imprinted you through your vulnerability, through your openness to wounds and outrage; time has left its traces in the places where you slit your wrists because you can't forget the guy you killed and where your girlfriend hit you so you needed to move in with us and where you shot up your veins when you could still get China white instead of brown tar and where years of living on the streets have wrinkled you prematurely and where your facial piercings got infected because you were train hopping and hadn't showered in weeks.

Levinas calls the May 68 demonstrators, "The youth [who] is the break in a context, the trenchant, Nietzschean prophetic word, without status in being. Yet it is not arbitrary, for it has come from sincerity, that is, from responsibility for the other."<sup>33</sup> Breaking away from the weight of the past, we the kids, the broken kids, and all of us as broken subjectivities, are created anew each

---

<sup>27</sup> Kissing is another such way of using ones mouth. Levinas's discussions

<sup>28</sup> See Levinas, *Perverters* for a discussion of Macbeth

<sup>29</sup> missing footnote

<sup>30</sup> missing footnote

<sup>31</sup> Job

<sup>32</sup> (but not temporally, as Deleuze points out)

<sup>33</sup> "No Identity" 151

moment unto a world that we did not create, unto a world already broken. Don't look at us: it's not our fault, the world is not our property, we don't own it, we're not the one's who broke it; and thank you very much – thanks for nothing – because it looks like we the kids are the ones who have to fix it now.

FOR THE KIDS!!!

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)  
Anti-Copyright



Mitchell Cowen Verter  
Levinas: FOR THE KIDS!!!  
June 11, 2008

[http://www.waste.org/~roadrunner/writing/Levinas/Levinas\\_FTK\\_Paper\\_WEB.htm](http://www.waste.org/~roadrunner/writing/Levinas/Levinas_FTK_Paper_WEB.htm)

**[usa.anarchistlibraries.net](http://usa.anarchistlibraries.net)**