# IS FACEBOOK EFFACING THE FACE? REASSESSING LEVINAS'S ETHICS IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL CONNECTIVITY

BENDA HOFMEYR, Department of Philosophy, University of Pretoria, South Africa

Though the distant Other, the faceless stranger becomes ever closer and more accessible through various technological mediations and social networks, we seem to grow increasingly disconnected from any possibility of what Levinas calls 'proximity'.
'Proximity' – the face-to-face encounter with the other person – signals a traumatising indictment of the gravitational pull of our egoism rooted in what Spinoza referred to as our *conatus essendi*. Rather than individualistic self-actualisation, Levinas sees brotherhood as the fundamental presupposition of our shared humanity and as the foundation of freedom and equality. While rather unethical than immoral, it is our very *conatus* that seems to open the door to indifference, prejudice and hate. On the other hand, the possibility of ethical action, of a humane society, is something that Levinas attempts to account for by the help of a responsibility more fundamental than our ontological blueprint.

**Keywords:** Levinas – Proximity – The face – Social connectivity – Interface – Technologically mediated encounters – Facebook

**1. Introducing the Problematics.** Our present age of irrepressible technological innovation offers a plethora of diverse digital means to alleviate the burden of our unbearably heavy being, which Levinas identifies as such at the very beginning of his career (cf. Levinas 1935; Hofmeyr 2012). Times might have changed, but the escapism that is the order of the (present) day is symptomatic of the existential plight of those trying to survive in the digital age, at bottom not so unlike bygone eras. Plugged into computers, tablets, e-readers and smart phones various interfaces have come not merely to supplement, but to supplant the 'proximity' of the 'face' of the other person. Digitalisation, it seems, brings in its wake ever increasing individualisation with the resultant waning of social interaction, any sense of community or active engagement with the plight of others.

Levinas challenges the primacy of ontology over ethics and rather insists upon ethics, i.e. the ethical relation, as that which can counter the burden of our ontological drama. In the ontological drama other selves figure as egos competing for the same finite domain. It is a drama, therefore, inevitably defined by violence. It is this ontological drama that has, Levinas insists, always taken precedence over another, more fundamental drama – the ethical intrigue. It is what transpires in the second drama that has the potential to put a

human face, as it were, on the drama of Being. In other words, the ethical response is the only legitimate and redemptive way to deal with the indifference and widespread cruelty of the existential drama (Caruana 2007, 251).

It is against this backdrop that I shall attempt to reassess the value of Levinas's ethics in our present time of technologically mediated encounters. Has our current condition of constant connectivity changed us and our relations with others to the extent that the condition of possibility of ethics – the simultaneity of Being and truth made possible by the position of the one with regard to the other – is being eclipsed? Put differently, is Facebook effacing the 'face' or are these social technologies themselves morally neutral, a mere tool that can be wielded for good or evil purposes? In an attempt to address this question, I shall first outline the existing arguments for and against mediated encounters (section 2), before critically assessing the terms of the problem from a Levinasian perspective (section 3). Finally, I shall revisit the existing arguments and reassess the legitimacy of their conclusions on Levinasian grounds (section 4).

### 2. Weighing the Arguments: for Better, for Worse, or for Mere Use?

*2. 1. Information Technology is Changing Who We Are For The Better. The mediation of* social relations by information technology and its effect upon conceptions of self as well as self-other relations has become a hotly debated topic. The point of contention concerns *the extent to which* selfhood and the relation between the self and the other are altered, and therewith the conditions of possibility of ethics. Sherry Turkle, for example, celebrates the liberating possibilities opened by cybernetics for a decentred and multiple self. Not so long ago this postmodernist construction flew in the face of the "normal requirements of everyday life [that] exert strong pressure on people to take responsibility for their actions and to see themselves as intentional and unitary actors" (Turkle 1995, 15). Turkle contends that digitilisation has changed this for many. Within the virtual realm of electronic communication, social networks, Internet Relay Chat (IRC), and interactive computer games that unfold in Multi-User Domains (or Dungeons) (MUDs) we can assume multiple personae of our own creation. It is a particular brand of escapism that has become an integral part of our daily lives.

In many respects, (cyber-)space not only supplements but supplants 'place' for we can do and be more, more efficiently virtually than in reality, thereby eroding the boundaries between the real and the virtual, eroding our sense of human identity in terms of a particular unique embodied being. It offers the seductive possibility of expressing multiple and often unexplored aspects of the self and to try out new ones. Not only can you be in more than one place at the same time; you can be many selves at the same time (parallel identities in parallel lives). According to Turkle (1995, 14), the experience of this parallelism encourages treating on-screen and off-screen lives with a surprising degree of equality. The subject has become a relational self in an entirely different way than Levinas intended – multiple, fluid and constituted in interaction with machine connections: I create, adopt, become and meet characters who put me in a new relationship with my own identity. There could be 'real' people behind these characters or they themselves

could be bots – computer programmes able to roam cyberspace and interact with characters there. The one could be many and the many could be one.

The pace of technological innovation has transformed the nature of computing from the linear logic of calculation to simulation, navigation and interaction. What use to be nothing but a giant calculator, has become a simulation device in which personas, relationships, indeed entire worlds are made and remade, a device commonly used to extend one's physical presence via real-time video links and shared virtual conference rooms. According to Turkle (ibid., p. 21), "[a]s human beings become increasingly intertwined with the technology and with each other via the technology, old distinctions between what is specifically human and specifically technological become more complex. Are we living life *on* the screen or life *in* the screen? Our new technologically enmeshed relationships oblige us to ask to what extent we ourselves have become cyborgs, transgressive mixtures of biology, technology, and code. The traditional distance between people and machines has become harder to maintain".

What are we becoming, asks Turkle, if the first objects we look upon each day are simulations into which we deploy our virtual selves? The movement from a culture of calculation toward a culture of simulation has brought with it a different mode of engagement with the screen. To be sure, the computer remains a tool that humans wield to further their capabilities. But unlike other tools, the screen exerts an agency of sorts – it offers a range of possibilities for interaction and response that has the power to shape not only what we do and can do, but also essentially what we are. As technology advances and computers do increasingly more *for* us, what they do *to* us – how they affect our relationships and our ways of thinking about ourselves – become increasingly more difficult to ignore. Our computers, Ipod's, Ipad's, and Iphone's use sophisticated graphical user interfaces designed to simulate human interactions that goes beyond the mere instrumental logic defining the relationship between user and bare machine. This has brought us ever closer to "a culture of simulation in which people are increasingly comfortable with substituting representations of reality for the real" (ibid., p. 23). In fact, for most of us those computer-mediated aspects of our lives – as long as they work – have all the reality they need.

Proponents of his position essentially argue that at a time of globalisation, rampant individualisation and fragmentation, when any sense of community and fraternity is rapidly waning and institutions and public spaces that traditionally served to bring people together no longer work as before, people are turning to their cyberspatial lives to full this lacuna. Many people spend a considerable portion of an average day alone in front of the computer screen. Meanwhile, social beings that we are, we are seeking ways to 'retribalise' (to use Marshall McLuhan's term) (Turkle 1995, 178). The plethora of digital media at our disposal offer a wide range of possibilities for connectivity linking us 'in space' as our rootedness to place becomes increasingly more attenuated. One of the most important issues that these shifts raise within the context of our present argument is *what will computer-mediated communication do to our commitment to other people?* Can it satisfy our needs for connection and social participation or will it further unravel fragile relationships? Importantly, what kind of responsibility and accountability will we assume for our

virtual actions? If the Internet revolution has further contributed to an understanding of personal identity as multiple, heterogeneous, flexible and fragmented, and if these shape-shifters' virtual reality has become real enough to more or less supplant social interaction 'in place', how should we approach and navigate this moral minefield? It is within this context that scholars such as Lucas Introna (Introna 2001) and Richard Cohen (Cohen 2010) have turned to Levinas in the hope of finding a surer ethical foothold to navigate the virtual quagmire. Ultimately the question for us is whether digital escapism is marking the eclipse of the face-to-face (ethical) encounter that offers the only possible escape, according to Levinas, from the burden of Being.

According to Richard Cohen (Cohen 2010, 156), virtual reality is not real enough to necessitate moral yardsticks: in the virtual reality of a whole slew of video games a player has a virtual figure (say a soldier) kill, pummel or otherwise violate his virtual opponents every minute, but *not* in reality. It serves rather to stress that the limited field of aesthetic play on the monitor screen is precisely *not* real, since I can do what I cannot or ought not do in real life. What this rebuttal fails to account for, however, is the fact that what I do in cyberspace might not be *real*, but what I *am* in cyberspace remains tied to who and what I am for real – although the exact nature and extent of this tie remains unclear. What exactly is the relation between my various virtual personae and 'me'? Are these virtual identities something separate and apart from the self, an expansion or fragments of a coherent real-life personality? Do they communicate with or mutually influence each other? If I kill, pummel or otherwise violate virtually, does it affect who I am in space? Is it a harmless outlet or fundamentally affecting who I am, and how I relate to others? Here we may recall Aristotle's insistence that we *become* moral by *doing* moral acts; what we do affects who we are: "moral virtue comes about as a result of habit ... For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them, e.g. men become builders by building and lyre-players by playing the lyre; so too we become just by doing just acts" (Aristotle [1103$^a$33]). And so too, we might add, we become (like) our virtual selves by repeatedly donning those virtual masks and performing those virtual acts and tasks. Turkle, for one, as we have seen, has argued – quite persuasively – that the impact of our virtual lives is becoming increasingly more decisive for who and what we are for 'real'.

***2. 2. Information Technology is Changing Who We Are For the Worse.*** Another argumentthat also acknowledges the fact that information technology is increasingly being harnessed by many in the developed world to bridge their temporal, spatial and existential limitations, is that of Lucas Introna (Introna 2001). He fears, however, that we "have a very limited understanding of the implicit cost of digitisation, or virtualisation" (ibid., p. 12). His is therefore a more cautionary or pessimistic account. Against the enormous benefits and endless possibilities afforded us by mediated social interaction, he warns that we do not yet fully understand the extent to which this virtualisation of the social is attenuating the face-to-face encounter. He utilises Levinas's ethical metaphysics to take a radical stand against the electronic mediation of our encounters with others: according to Introna, "the primordial source of our social being is being eroded" (ibid.). His argument hinges on Levinas's conceptualisation of the 'face' of the Other, i.e. not the

phenomenal face, but rather a signifier of the absolute alterity of the other person vested with the power to disturb the complacency of my self-centred, self-serving being. According to Introna, the screen strips the face of its power of critique and reduces it to a mere representation exposed to the violence of my egocentric economy. In other words, the digitised face or 'inter-face' becomes nothing but a mere object alongside others at the service of the instrumental logic that rules supreme in the 'economics of existence' of the ego. The Infinity vested in Levinas's 'face' is consequently reduced to the Totality responsible for the violent 'reduction of the other to the same' as it becomes nothing but another image that circulate the global information infrastructure. Introna's argument goes to the very heart of the problem concerning what computer-mediated communication will do to our commitment to other people.

**3. The Problematics From a Levinasian Perspective.** To assess to what extent Introna's counter-argument holds water, I will attempt to reconstruct the terms of the problem afresh from a Levinasian perspective in the following section. The logical starting point would be Levinas's pivotal notion of the face through which the Other addresses me, and which is precisely what risks being attenuated by screen-mediated encounters, according to Introna.

***3. 1. The Face-to-Face-Encounter.*** Set within the context of his ethical metaphysics, Levinas maintains that the face of the other person addresses me and imposes the responsibility I bear towards others. This encounter stops me in my selfish tracks, as it were, and makes me aware of my inherent responsibility towards others in need. How does the face of another succeed in affecting me in this life-altering way? According to Levinas, the ethical encounter with the other person coincides with the "epiphany of the face", i.e. the face consists in a manifestation of the Infinite. In order to 'embody' an expression of this nature and magnitude, the face clearly cannot be reduced to a person's facial expression. Instead, the face is "invisible" – irreducible to a person's appearance or representation (TI, 194/168). The encounter with the Other is therefore not an empirical encounter. In other words, it is not what I see in the actual face of another person, but what is expressed by way of that face. Precisely because the Other person (through which the Infinite affects me) defies all fixating representations his/her alterity, i.e. the Infinite, can show itself – "express" itself beyond what is seen or understood. "Expression renders present what is communicated and the one who is communicating" (F&C, 21) and if the one that is communicating is the Infinite through the vehicle of a fellow finite being, then "[a] veritable 'phenomenology' of the noumenon is effected in expression" (ibid.). This expression is a confrontation because it interrupts our reductive perception and representation of the Other. More than that, it interrupts our complacent egocentrism, questioning our very right to be. In this way, the being that presents itself in expression "already engages us in society, commits us to enter into society with him (ibid.). In this context, society signifies the fraternity of true humanity for Levinas, a fraternity in which the self is willing to serve the Other to the extent of substitution. In this sense, the face is "the fact that a being affects us not in the indicative, but in the imperative": it does not serve as a

sign or indication of someone but denotes an authoritative command. This address found in the face is nevertheless not a moral prescription, but an indictment that not only uncovers the violence of our being-for-ourselves, but also the condition of possibility of being-otherwise, as we shall see.

With these qualifications Levinas is countering a common misconception – our tendency to associate 'face' with physical countenance i.e. literally a person's face, physiognomy or facial expression and by extension, character, social status, situatedness or context through which a person becomes visible and describable to us. In seeing the face, we assess and inadvertently reduce the Other to fit into our own conceptual framework. Levinas's use of the face precisely defies this kind of reductive characterisation or representation. It testifies to the fact that the other person never coincides with his/her appearance, representation, image or evocation. The face, as we have seen, is that which in the countenance of the Other *escapes* our gaze – that which is irreducible to his/her appearing. While the Other is indeed visible, the encounter cannot be reduced to an empirical encounter. How I am *affected* cannot be accounted for by what I see of him/her (also see E & I, 89-90/85-86 and OB, 87-91/109-115).[1]

This encounter with the face of another is ethical therein that it enables ethical action, and ethical action consists in taking on one's inherent responsibility towards others. Levinas's ethical metaphysics should nevertheless not be understood as a prescriptive or normative 'ethical theory', as we have seen, but as an attempt to account for the conditions of possibility of ethical action. He claims that ethical action, i.e. putting the well-being of another before my own, is – in the first instance – not a free, rational decision but a fundamental responsibility that is inherently part of being human. When confronted with an Other in need, our responsibility to help him/her is not a question of rational deliberation but an unavoidable duty that is pre-consciously felt – through the face the Other *affects* me. An encounter of this nature – that questions and stultifies our very ontological drive to persist in our own being, as we shall see – is the necessary condition for ethical action. Levinas believes that we can only act once we have become re-sensitised – awakened through a kind of paralytic shock – paralysed into action, as it were. This paralytic shock is produced in the ethical resistance posed by the 'face' of the other person – a resistance that is not a *real* resistance as if confronted by a counterforce or opposing violence (F&C, p. 22). It is a non-violent intelligible resistance emanating from s/he that can be easily overpowered and yet challenges my power in a way that cannot be ignored. Levinas argues that the needy other [the orphan, the widow, the stranger] incapacitates our normal selfish ways and this "radical passivity" enables us to recognize our inherent responsibility towards others in need.

Passivity in the radical sense is therefore a paradoxical notion: it precedes the passivity-activity opposition and functions as necessary condition for activity or agency. It is

---

[1] To be sure, in TI Levinas qualifies the face in terms of the word *and* the gaze of the Other. In OB, on the other hand, the encounter with the face is conceived in less phenomenalist, more conceptual terms – as substitution (cf. Bergo 2011).

passive with regard to *itself,* and thus submits to itself as though it were an exterior power. Hence, radical passivity harbours within itself *a potentia* – a power or enabling force. In this sense, passivity evokes passion - not knowledge, not the rational realisation of responsibility but (pre-conscious) passion - what Levinas (CPP, 62-63, footnote 4) refers to as "the primordial feeling" (cf. Hofmeyr 2007; 2009, 18)

***3. 2. Conatus essendi.*** To understand the significance of Levinas's insistence on the possibility of a face-to-face encounter, it needs to be understood against the backdrop of his conception of Being and the being that is our (human) being (cf. Hofmeyr 2012). For Levinas, as for Heidegger, Being is a verb that as dynamism 'animates' all that is. Unlike for Heidegger, however, it is not simply a 'letting-be' of all that there is, but a totalizing reduction of all that there is as identity. Despite the apparent diversity and irreconcilability of the particularities of existent data, events and things, Being (or essence) is a totality that reduces all to the same. The essence of Being can therefore be understood as a perseverance in Being, a persistent to-be here-on-earth, literally inter-esse, i.e. self-involvement or interest. Levinas explains the Being of a being (the existent) in terms of the Spinozian conatus essendi: "the desire of [a] being to be, to persevere in its being" (OB, xxxv (Translator's Introduction). In other words, the way of being of the human being animated by Being is a striving for and a maintenance of identity, an unremitting attempt to remain itself and to increasingly realise itself. In the process, everything and anything other that could threaten it, are swallowed by or subordinated to sameness. As an "active and reductive immanence", it wants to take and keep everything in hand (Burggraeve 2008: 16-17). This reductive violence is nevertheless ethically neutral since it is a mere ontological fact. Yet, it does not amount to a determination as if we should resign ourselves to the fact that the Being of our being is pre-programmed to be egoist and other-reductive, and that there is nothing to be done. According to Levinas, beyond mere being, there is the more fundamental, more original possibility of ethics.

***3. 3. Proximity.*** *The radicality of Levinas's ethical metaphysics consists in his* insistence that there 'will-always-already-have-been' *more* than our persistence in the Being of our being. The existent as finite is predisposed towards the Other, because it has the *idea of Infinity,* i.e. it *will-always-already-have-been* fundamentally infected by something that predisposes it to overcome the limitations of its self-serving, self-maintaining conatus. To be sure, for Levinas, the conatus of the existent is a *necessary* self-subsisting self-serving drive that is a-ethical rather than an immoral. It nevertheless circumscribes an *egoist* self-subsisting economy incapable to being affected by what falls beyond its own perseverance in the being that is its being. Hence Levinas's oft-quoted explication: "Why does the Other concern me? … Am I my brother's keeper? These questions have meaning only if one has already supposed that the ego is concerned only with itself… In this hypothesis it indeed remains incomprehensible that the absolute outside-of-me, the other, would concern me. But in the 'prehistory' of the ego posited for itself speaks a responsibility. The self is through and through a hostage, older than the ego, prior to principles" (OB, 117/150).

According to Levinas, this anachronistic, pre-original, pre-ontological responsibility is the only reason why there is pity, compassion and pardon in the world. It is from this vantage point that it becomes possible to understand Levinas's insistence that "[w]hat is at stake for the self, in its being, is not to be" (ibid.). This extreme responsibility that strips me of my very right to be – a being that is necessarily at the expense of others – ,"is not the limit case of solidarity", not its most extreme form, "but the condition of solidarity" (ibid.). It is this very responsibility for the other that binds us together as a fraternity. It is the very condition of possibility of all existant ethical acts, both big and small, in this world.

I feel this responsibility because the Other – as the trace of the Infinite placed within the finite – is lodged within the self. Levinas describes this *hyperbolic* presence of the Other *in* the subject as *obsession* and *proximity* (OB, 86-89/108-113). For him, presence is neither the self-possession of the present nor consciousness present to itself and for itself, which is associated with the imperialism of the Same. The always-already there of the Other cannot be grasped or conceptualised – it is preconceptual. Consciousness always arrives *après coup*, too late. The presence of the Other is so primordial and immediate that it does not allow the subject time to await or welcome the responsibility imposed "(which would still be a quasi-activity), but consists in obeying this order before it is formulated" (OB, 13/16). Proximity is obsession, constant pressure of the Other in me and on me, an internal *assiégement* which cannot be shown. Obsession and proximity designate the absolute antecedence of the Other beneath [*en deçà*] any manifestation at the core of the subject. The Other is pre-phenomenal, immediate presence. Immediacy is also a synonym for proximity and obsession: immediacy is the ob-sessive proximity of the neighbour (OB, 86-87/108-109). The Other therefore affects me not because of some empirical encounter with an actual face, but because I will always already have been infected with a responsibility that precedes me in origin. To be sure, the Infinite touches me by way of an encounter with another person, but this encounter – which is an extreme imposition on me, to me and in me – cannot be reduced to what is seen. It would therefore seem, in other words, that no mediation – technological or otherwise – can attenuate the pre-original affectation by another (cf. Hofmeyr 2010). In Levinas's words, proximity is described as "a relationship with a singularity, *without the mediation of any principle or ideality ...* It is the summoning of myself by the other (*autrui)*, it is a responsibility toward those whom we do not even know. The relation of proximity does not amount to any modality of distance or geometrical contiguity, nor to the simple 'representation' of the neighbour. It is *already* a summons of extreme exigency, an obligation which is *anachronistically* prior to every engagement. An anteriority that is older than the a priori" (S, 81).

Proximity, therefore, is irreducible to physical nearness or being in the vicinity of another in order to '(re-)present' oneself to that other. It is an anachronistic affectation or infection by the Other that precedes any contact or engagement, and as such cannot be attenuated by distance, mediation, or a lack of contact. It is against the convention of the Western metaphysical tradition to reduce the pre-original signification to the present, appearing, thematisation, and manifestation, that Levinas insists that signification cannot be reduced to representation (TI, 65/81).

**4. Returning to the Arguments.** Let us now attempt to reassess the terms of the problematic against this Levinasian backdrop. Both Turkle and Introna maintain that cybernetics is capable of radically transforming the human condition. According to Turkle, as our lives – work and play – and our interactions with others become increasingly digitilised, *the self* is changed into a self-creating shapeshifting or multiple self no longer tied to the limitations of physical features and a fixed identity. It is a liberated self that is no longer accountable – for the virtual is not real. The virtual nevertheless has all the reality we need and the type of people we become by virtue of our virtual realities cannot but affect who we are and how we interact 'for real'.

Introna, on the other hand, maintains that digitalisation 'changes *the other person*'. As soon as my interaction with another is mediated, expression is reduced to presentation. Whereas expression – as defined by Levinas – is vested with the ethical resistance to critique my self-serving ways, presentation via the screen reduces the Other to a mere image. In the appropriation the image becomes dislodged from its source and vulnerable, as a result, to reduction to my thematic gaze. While some images – think, for example, of the televised images of children left orphaned and starving by unjust wars – nevertheless retain the power to unsettle us, Introna contends that the potential for presentation increases with digital mediation. Ethics is at risk, in short, because electronic mediation introduces the excessive potential for transforming expression (the face) into presentation (the image). Digitilisation may therefore "be eroding the very essence of our social being, the ethical relation that binds us to the Other" (Introna 2001, 18).

Introna's Levinasian argument hinges on the fact that the otherness of the Other is at risk of being reduced to the Same through digitalisation. The truly Other, according to Levinas's own contention however, cannot be reduced. He insists, as we have seen, that the trace of the Infinite in us, which for him signifies "the humanness of man" (Levinas 1998: 222) cannot be contained in representation – it is unrepresentable (OB, 116/148). Here Levinas (1998: 219-220) follows Descartes's insistence that the finite thought of man cannot draw from itself the idea of the Infinite (of the Good or of God). The Infinite must have put the idea of Infinity into us. Otherness has the power to affect me because the Other is *in* the self. Levinas explains this by insisting that true dialogue – in which the Other's need impinges upon my happy egoism – consists in the saying that signifies beyond the said: "But in the saying [*le dire*] of the dialogue ... an extraordinary and unique passage is cleared, stronger than any ideal tie and any synthesis that the *I think* would accomplish in aspiring to equal and comprehend" (OG, 145-146). For Levinas, the said is what is reduced to themes, appropriations and presentations. In the saying of the ethical encounter, on the other hand, there is always an excess, a surplus that overflows the content of the said and expresses the other as Other. The trace of the Infinite, expressed in the saying rather than the said of the other person, is "refractory to thematization and representation" (OB, 153/195). For Levinas, the Infinite is an enigma: "The enigma separates the Infinite from all phenomenality, from appearing, thematization and essence. In representation, the Infinite would be belied without ambiguity, as though it were an infinite object which subjectivity tries to approach but misses. The plot of the Infinite is not ela-

borated according to the scenario of being and consciousness... The refusal that the infinity opposes to assembling by reminiscence does not come to pass in the form of a veiling and does not exhaust its meaning in terms of consciousness" (ibid., p. 154/196).

The Infinite is an enigma in the sense that it cannot be contained phenomenally or thematised or attenuated through representation as if (re-)presentation is but a poorer copy of the original. The Infinite cannot be reduced through (re-)presentation (in a copy), because it precedes even the original in origin.

The image of the other person presented through simulation cannot, therefore, contrary to Introna's insistence (2001, 14), shatter proximity or the face-to-face encounter with the Other. If the truly Other could have been reduced or attenuated by virtue of human mediations, it would have been another phenomenon amongst many. Only the known, the clear and distinct object of knowledge, can become unknown, obscure or confused as a result of digital or any other kind of mediation. Contrary to these figments of human consciousness, the enigma of the Other, for Levinas, is precisely beyond Being. The transcendence of the Infinite is diachrony – "an irreversible divergency from the present, like that of a past that was never present". More precisely, Levinas maintains that the ethical confrontation that imposes a "responsibility without recallable commitment ... is *not* an attitude taken in regard to a being, close in its face" (OB, 154/195, my emphasis). If the face-to-face-encounter is not an empirical encounter, and if responsibility is a not the attitude I assume when faced with another person, the image – as a mediated other – cannot possibly be vested with the power to shatter proximity.

To be sure, the presence of another person in front of me is more difficult to ignore than an image of him/her projected from a screen. It is more difficult to inflict violence on a human being close at hand than on a distant other dehumanised through mediations. It is after all the 'proximity' of the other person that is vested with the power to fundamentally alter my very conatus, i.e. to challenge my self-serving egoism. However, for Levinas, "meeting the face is not of the order of pure and simple perception, of the intentionality that goes toward adequation" (E&I, 96). Put differently, "the proximity of the Other", as we have seen, cannot simply be equated to the Other being "close to me in space, or close like a parent, but he approaches me essentially insofar as I feel myself – insofar as I am – responsible for him. It is a structure that in nowise resembles the intentional relation which in knowledge attaches us to the object – to no matter what object, be it a human object. Proximity does not revert to this intentionality; in particular it does not revert to the fact that the other is known to me" (ibid., pp. 96 97).

The other person can affect me in this fundamental way because s/he coincides with the 'epiphany of the face', which means that the face is in actual fact a manifestation of the Infinite. What is revealed in the 'face' of the Infinite is the limitation of a finite being concerned only with itself. The face confronts me not because it is in front of me, but because it is *inside of me*: this revelation is also an affectation, or infection: in proximity the idea of Infinity is placed within a finite being enabling him/her to act other-wise than in self-interest. This idea of Infinity is older than any a priori, more fundamental even than the conatus of a being. The ana-chrony of this pre-ontological affectation signals an

ethical capacitation that *will always already have been.*

The fact remains, however, that an encounter or confrontation is needed to 'awaken' the ego to the violence of its egoism and the exigencies of ethics. If this encounter is not necessarily reducible to an empirical encounter, and if proximity is not necessarily a physical nearness, can the interface impinge upon the face or are these social technologies themselves morally neutral, a mere tool that can be wielded for good or evil purposes, as Richard Cohen (2010) maintains? The jury is still out on what computer-mediated communication does to our commitment to other people.[2] In Levinasian terms the question would be whether technology eclipses the revelation of alterity of the other person (rather than the revelation of Being as for Heidegger). For Heidegger, as Cohen (2010, 158) points out, the primary (albeit not exclusive) means today through which Being reveals itself is technology. What is at stake for Levinas, however, is not the ontological difference between beings (ontic) and the Being of their beings (ontological), but what is beyond Being, the Good. Technological mediations 'operate' on the plane of our economic transactions in the world and are therefore, as far as Levinas is concerned, a-ethical rather than immoral. The face can be effaced in actual social encounters as much as in mediated or virtual encounters. The "force" or ethical resistance of the face is precisely ethical rather than ontological. It is not dependent upon the means through which Being is revealed; its force comes from beyond Being. Ethics should not be confused with ontology as if how things ought to be somehow is. When I 'connect' with another – whether in place or in space – it is not a meeting between physical faces or 'interfaces' but a community founded on the pre-ontological fraternity between the Other and the other-in-the-Self. Levinas's ethical metaphysics, therefore, cannot be utilised to discredit mediated encounters as morally erosive.

**References**

ARISTOTLE (1980): *The Nicomachean Ethics.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
ATTERTON, P. & CALARCO, M. (Eds.) (2010): *Radicalizing Levinas.* New York: SUNY.
BERGO, B. (2011): "The Face in Levinas: Toward a Phenomenology of Substitution". *Angelaki*, 16 (1), 17-39.
BURGGRAEVE, R. (Ed.) (2008): *The Awakening to the Other. A Provocative Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas.* Leuven-Dudley, MA: Peeters.
CARUANA, J. (2007): The Drama of Being: Levinas and the History of Philosophy. *Continental Philosophy Review*, 40, 251-273.
COHEN, R. A. (2010): Ethics and Cybernetics. Levinasian Reflections. In: Atterton & Calarco (Eds.), 153-168.

---

[2] See, for example, a recent article (of 19 October 2012) published in *The Daily Telegraph* that reports on the effects of the decline in physical human contact as a result of overexposure to the cyber world: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/9620117/Twitter-and-Facebook-harming-childrens-development.html

HOFMEYR, A. B. (2007): Isn't Art an Activity that Gives Things a Face? Levinas on the Power of Art. In: *Image [&] Narrative* 18, available online: http://www.imageandnarrative.be/inarchive/thinking_pictures/hofmeyr.htm

HOFMEYR, A. B. (2009): Radical Passivity: Ethical Problem or Solution?. In: Hofmeyr, A. B. (Ed.) (2009): *Radical Passivity. Rethinking Ethical Agency in Levinas.* Dordrecht: Springer, pp. 15-30.

HOFMEYR, A. B. (2010): From Activity to Radical Passivity: Rethinking Ethical Agency in Levinas. *Monokl* 8-9: 97-117.

HOFMEYR, A. B. (2012): On Escaping the Seemingly Inescapable: Reflections on Being in Levinas. *Filozofia*, 67 (6), 460-471.

INTRONA, L. D. (2001): Virtuality and Morality: On (Not) Being Disturbed by the Other. *Philosophy in the Contemporary World*, 8 (1), 11-19.

LEVINAS, E. (1953): Freedom and Command. In: Levinas, E. (1987): *Collected Philosophical Papers: Emmanuel Levinas,* trans. Alphonso Lingis, Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, pp. 15-24 [cited as F&C].

LEVINAS, E. (1957): Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity". In: Levinas, E. (1987): *Collected Philosophical Papers: Emmanuel Levinas,* trans. Alphonso Lingis, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 47-60 [cited as P&IoI].

LEVINAS, E. (1961): *Totalité et infini: essai sur l'extériorité* The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff / *Totality and Infinity,* trans. Alphonso Lingis. (1979). The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff [cited as TI]; French page references follow the English page references.

LEVINAS, E. (1968): Substitution. In: Levinas, E. (1996): *Basic Philosophical Writings,* eds. Peperzak, A., Critchley, S. & Bernasconi, R., Indiana: Indiana University Press, pp. 79-96 [cited as S].

LEVINAS, E. (1974): *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff / *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence,* trans. Alphonso Lingis. (1991). Dordrecht/Boston/London: Kluwer Academic Publishers [cited as OB].

LEVINAS, E. (1982a): *De Dieu qui vient a l'idee.* Paris: Vrin / *Of God that Comes to Mind,* trans. Bettina Bergo. (1998). Stanford, California: Stanford University Press [cited as OG].

LEVINAS, E. (1982b): *Éthique et infini. Dialogues avec Philippe Nemo*. Librairie Arthème Fayard et Radio-France, L'espace intérieur 26 / *Ethics and Infinity. Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen. (1985). Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press [cited as E&I].

LEVINAS, E. (1982c)[1935]: *De l'évasion.* Montpellier: Fata Morgana / *On escape,* trans. Bettina Bergo. (2003). Stanford: Stanford University Press [cited as OE].

LEVINAS, E. (1987): *Collected Philosophical Papers*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers [cited as CPP].

LEVINAS, E. (1998): The Idea of the Infinite in Us. In: Levinas, E. (2000): *Entre Nous. On Thinking-of-the-Other,* trans. Michael B. Smith & Barbara Harshav. London: The Athlone Press, pp. 219-222.

LEVINAS, E. (2000): *Entre Nous. On Thinking-of-the-Other*. Trans. Michael B. Smith & Barbara Harshav. London: The Athlone Press.

MCLUHAN, M. (1962): *The Gutenberg Galaxy.* Toronto: Toronto University Press.

TURKLE, S. (1995): *Life on the Screen. Identity in the Age of the Internet.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

_____

Benda Hofmeyr
Department of Philosophy, University of Pretoria
Private bag X20 Hatfield
Pretoria
0028 South Africa
e-mail: benda.hofmeyr@up.ac.za