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# A Defense of Levinasian Ethics in a Globalizing Economy<sup>1</sup>

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Two questions will frame this essay: Do we need to reconsider the meaning of justice in the face of economic globalization? Do we need new tools to evaluate the kinds of violence elicited by a globalizing economy? The economic developments of the past twenty years have shaped political and cultural discourse on a global scale; incorporating entire countries and peoples into a world project that contains an underdeveloped and genuinely insufficient ethical consideration. With economic globalization, the dominant priorities are: 1) to open up new markets, 2) to permit and promote exchange and trade with little or no international regulation, 3) to extend the range and power of capital accumulation. I would like to suggest, if not also defend, an argument for an ethical system that truly challenges the content and direction of the globalizing economy.

Emmanuel Levinas describes ethics as first philosophy, such that existence itself is infused with ethical connotation and all attempts at neutralizing or reducing these values is itself the essence of violence and injustice. Here, I can offer several arguments to support an application of Levinasian ethics in resistance to the legacy of imperialism which haunts the present movement toward globalization. I would like to defend a

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would-be Levinasian ethics and apply it as a form of criticism to the project of the globalizing economy as a whole.

### **I. The legacy of imperialism.**

*The bourgeois is concerned with business matters and science as a defense against things and all that is unforeseeable in them. His instinct for possession is an instinct for integration, and his imperialism is a search for security. ... What he possesses becomes capital, carrying interest or insurance against risks, and his future, thus tamed, is integrated in this way with his past (OE 50).*

Levinas has argued that the modern world project carries all the trappings of traditional colonialization, including the marginalization of otherness, violence and dispossession of peoples, and a fixed economic hegemony that suspends the demands of ethical imperatives. Levinasian ethics questions this vigorous effort to universalize, centralize, and equalize all aspects of social, political and ethical life through the lens of economic discourse. The elements of dehumanization in these efforts and the drive to structure the world around accelerating economic intercourse need to be urgently reconsidered. Here, I will argue that virtues like freedom and equality under the banner of economic globalization work at an ethical liability. Arguably, human activity begins to lose its capacity to be human as we transform all social interaction into the work of buying and selling.

On the other hand, I think Levinas' ethics introduces categories that may restore some humanity to the social sphere. I also think that his ethics implicitly informs us of ways to resist the uninhibited acceleration that changes the value of human life into the ways and means of capitalization. Modern capitalism has one special characteristic that

makes it a complex target for criticism; its strength is in its ability to profit from *any* environment and to fabricate the conditions that will be proper to its own promotion – though to the exclusion of other ways and means of life and sociality. It centers itself around the production and accumulation of capital. This brings to the fore (at least for me) two particular consequences:

1. **There is nothing internal to modern capitalism to make it remain localized, to confine or compartmentalize itself according to individual circumstances or to limit itself so that it plays only a particular role in everyday life.** Hence, it is a globalizing phenomenon that follows a colonizing impulse – toward growth and toward consolidation both literal and metaphorical (money, means, persons, places, etc.). It is, in its essence, the exercise of the principle: **“growth for growth’s sake.”** Not only is this an unsustainable premise, it is violent and preserves nothing of value. The growth imperative in modern globalization should become an impermissible premise, if not also offensive within an ethical theory.

2. **Most modern ethical theories permit unbridled capitalism and treat it as a benign form of social relation.** The value systems set up by globalization still contain the legacy of morality set up by social contract theories which grant freedom as a political or even natural right.<sup>2</sup> The political outgrowth of the social contract is a new form of Western imperialism with very specific and questionable ideas about the self in

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<sup>2</sup> This critique also comes from Levinas, “The interhuman, properly speaking, lies in a non-indifference of one to another, in a responsibility of one for another ... It is prior to any contract that would specify precisely the moment of reciprocity ... The order of politics (post-ethical or pre-ethical) that inaugurates the ‘social contract’ is neither the sufficient condition nor the necessary outcome of ethics” (EN 101).

relation to others in the world.<sup>3</sup> This produces an ethical theory that does not know how to “stay home.”<sup>4</sup> For Levinasian ethics, a value theory which centers itself on equality, neutrality, hyper-rationality, self-sufficiency, or industriousness and entrepreneurialism is a failed ethics. Even with the link of modern capitalism with an openness to or readiness for democratic institutions (“as if capitalism can condition people to democracy”) does not even remotely provide a genuine, humanistic ethics nor does it eliminate the imperialistic undertones of these efforts.<sup>5</sup> **“Equality for equality’s sake,”** the implied benefit of globalizing capitalism, levels out and neutralizes what makes human beings human – in particular, following Levinas’ lead, our capacity for *spontaneous generosity* and, with every face to face relationship, the possibility of *ethical substitution*, also described as the “one-for-the-other” of non-indifference.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This argument must be developed at a later point and I cannot address it in the body of this paper. Briefly: The contract theories of Locke and Rousseau grant an idea of the individual that is only bound to others by violence or by political conditions. According to these theories, the sociality of the human being as human is only possible by the contract (the exchange of ‘natural freedom’ for civic guarantees). Simply stated, we are bound by nothing but our animality and act like animals without the social contract. This, following Levinas’ account and keeping in mind the conditions of concentration camps, is not a fair account of what makes a human being human and it devalues the importance of infinite responsibility. The social contract account of humanity circumscribes conditions in which we are either animals or we are civilized, trading on differing degrees of freedom. Responsibility, in any meaningful sense, is not primary in these accounts and it is often part of a tradeoff for better forms of political freedom.

<sup>4</sup> To support this reading, Levinas also argues that the “Western tendency to ontologize,” (OE 51) or in other words, the continued work of reducing existence to sameness or unity, is one that “appears as a refusal to remain in place, as an effort to get out of an unbearable situation” (58).

<sup>5</sup> The war in Iraq would be my particular example here. Noam Chomsky, in *Hegemony or Survival: America’s Quest for Global Dominance*, describes the ideology and justifications that led to pre-emptive war: “We are instructed daily to be firm believers in neoclassical markets, in which isolated individuals are rational wealth maximizers. If distortions are eliminated, the market should respond perfectly to their ‘votes,’ expressed in dollars or some counterpart. The value of a person’s interests is measured in the same way. In particular, the interests of those with no votes are valued at zero: future generations, for example. It is therefore rational to destroy the possibility for decent survival for our grandchildren, if by doing so we can maximize our own ‘wealth’ – which means a particular perception of self-interest constructed by vast industries devoted to implanting it and reinforcing it” (235). Levinas provides one of the few contemporary ethical theories that do not prioritize rational self-interest or enlightened self-interest as the fundamental connection between self and world.

<sup>6</sup> Ethical substitution is borrowed from Levinas directly. He describes this as the ethical response to the face-to-face. It is one in which ‘I am called’ by the other as other and I take this encounter with another not as a “short cut,” but as original. He contrasts the work of ethical substitution with all other forms of economic substitution, including sympathy, in which I replace the other with myself (literally or imagined). For Levinas, economic substitution produces a diminished ethics because, *no other is “just like me.”*

The modern world-relation, as it becomes a globalized marketplace in which the self primarily relates to the world through the signs and symbols of possession, institutes a new form of violence – and I argue this through Levinas’ categories. The work of the *grasp* is a metaphor to demonstrate the ways in which we comport ourselves toward the world out of a desire to mask alterity and escape responsibility. Levinas describes an “industrious gaze” which is an effort between the eye and the grasp – all comprehension and exchange is for the sake of consuming the things of the earth (OE 7-8). He also argues that there is an ethical suspension in the work of turning the things of the world as well as others into the ‘furniture’ for selfhood. He states:

Possession is the mode by which a being, while existing, is partially denied. It is not merely the fact that the being is an instrument and a tool – that is to say, a means; it is also an end – consumable, it is food, and, in enjoyment [*jouissance*] offers itself, gives itself, is mine. ... The meeting with the other person consists in the fact that, despite the extent of my domination over him and his submission, I do not possess him.

But as Levinas argues it, “I can want to [possess him]. Yet this power is the complete opposite of power” (EN 9). Underlying this desire to possess is the desire for the Other, and this desire, which could manifest an ethical relation, instead degrades into the will for possession. The will for possession is refined into conduct, founding a fundamental psychology for a modern capitalist society; in Levinasian ethics, this will to possess is a “homicidal will” (EN 28).

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Traditional virtue ethics (beginning with Aristotle), in which equality is treated as a means to justice, is kind of comportment toward others that requires no real, individual responsibility of me in the Levinasian sense of “being called,” only an abstract responsibility of “oughtness.” The most helpful example of ethical substitution is when the parent who is hungry gives up his mouthful of bread to his/her child (OBBE 74).

There is a continued provocation in Levinas that provides an opening for my application of his ethics to globalization as a form of imperialism.<sup>7</sup> He asks: “My being-in-the-world or my ‘place in the sun,’ my home – have they not been a usurpation of places which belong to the others already repressed or starved by me, expelled by me into a third world: a repelling, an exclusion, an exile, a spoliation, a killing [?]” (EN 144). The alterity of the interpersonal becomes a site of displacement in the modern world. This disassociation of myself and my possessions with a world of others who suffer (by Levinas’ terms) out of my will to possess and to preserve my freedom, also strips me of my capacity to be human and to be ethical – to find myself in responsibility and to face another in their otherness. As Levinas argues it, only “Responsibility ... empties the I of its imperialism and its egoism” (T 353).

From the perspective of Levinasian ethics, I ask: How have we mistaken the global instantiation of economic freedom as an ethical relation? How has the pursuit of the free market suspended the demand of infinite responsibility?

The implicit imperialism written into the globalizing world economy cannot listen for the other, and as I argue, generates a hearing-loss<sup>8</sup> when it comes to the very intimate

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<sup>7</sup> See Chomsky for a detailed discussion of the American role in globalization and justification its “Imperial Grand Strategy.” He also provides the rhetorical evidence for the moralistic justifications and supposed ‘noble’ intentions of the U.S. role in global politics. For instance: “US hegemony is the realization of history’s purpose, and what it achieves is for the common good, the merest truism, so that empirical evaluation is unnecessary, if not faintly ridiculous. The primary principle of foreign policy, rooted in Wilsonian idealism and carried over from Clinton to Bush II, is ‘*the imperative of America’s mission as the vanguard of history, transforming the global order and, in doing so, perpetuating its own dominance,*’ guided by, ‘*the imperative of military supremacy, maintained in perpetuity and projected globally*” (p. 43, citing Andrew Bacevich, *American Empire* [Harvard 2003, pp. 215ff.]). The kind of “global rule” argued by Chomsky to be the America agenda since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, I would argue, has become primarily economic and not as obvious as the political forms of political imperialism.

<sup>8</sup> I have argued this elsewhere. An inattention to alterity and to the suffering of others is the source of violence in Levinasian ethics. I describe it as a hearing-loss in that, taking Levinas’ lead, “a famished stomach has no ears” (SH 12). The hunger that drives the globalizing economy is based on consumption and the desire to possess, manifesting as ‘the grasp’. This grasp is written into all sociality so that it

demand to take responsibility for the other, especially when rendered faceless, vulnerable or even silent by the dominating desire for personal freedom. Levinas argues that an ethical sociality requires that *I face the other* regardless of my intention, interests, fears, or rational justifications, and yet the direction of globalization is an “incessant chasing after things” (SH 4). One faces another “by hearing ... from the depths of ... weakness ... **a voice that commands**: ... not to remain indifferent to death, not to let the other die alone; that is, an order to answer for the life of the other man, at the risk of becoming an accomplice to that death” (EN 169, [emphasis added]). Our complicity rests in the power to instruct all sociality so that it is suitable for the growth of markets and the accumulation of capital. Where are the faces of the persons who are made more vulnerable by these supposed ‘accomplishments’?

Influenced by Heidegger, Levinas argues that there is a *temporal* relation at the heart of the face-to-face encounter. The proximity of the face that Levinas describes in his “phenomenology of sociality” (EN 169) is not a spatial proximity; rather it comes in the form of an *interruption* in the ‘ordinary course of things.’ This interruption is denied by the “homicidal will,” which turns away from the face-to-face situation, (“an ultimate situation”)<sup>9</sup> one that announces the vulnerability and, ultimately, the *poverty* of the individual, finite human being. Following an observation by Teresa Brennan, that since “globalizing capital substitutes speed and space for time,” and that “A real third way has to counter the substitution of space for time” (2003, 11), then perhaps here, in considering that *the world relation is a matter of time, not space*, we can better evaluate the kind of violence specific to a globalizing economy. This interruption is the

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becomes the ultimate gesture of all interpersonal relations, “Have we measured the depths of our hunger?” (10).

<sup>9</sup> For Levinas, “*The face to face remains an ultimate situation*” (TI 81, emphasis added).



‘diachrony’ or un-timeliness of the vulnerable Other who makes a demand on me, disrupting the *jouissance* of selfhood; in diachrony, the face presents itself, yet, even as I respond to this other, “I am always late for the appointed time” (BPW 106).

The ordinary course of business deals in equalization and reciprocity. There is no room or time for an interruption. Levinas makes an interesting and applicable case to question the way in which we have manufactured a psychology of need out of the human condition. He argues that we have taken on an ‘assumed metaphysics’ in which need becomes an “insufficiency” and to which reality is a matter of “fullness.” The work of specializing to need does not satisfy nor does it destroy need. So, by an ethical diagnosis, not only is this psychology of need “a bit too hasty” (OE 58), but it manufactures a sociality that is aggressive and impatient to need. Western globalization responds to need not ethically but with the tools of ‘satisfaction,’ and these tools run short – they do not engage the human, nor do they confront the demand of ethical substitution. We are not one-for-the-other in the way we are socially and economically intertwined with others, we have set up a system of exchange that provides temporary escapes from responsibility and from facing another more impoverished than I. This escape, as Levinas describes it, is “world-weariness, the disorder of our time [*mal du siècle*]” (OE 52).

## **II. The ethical versus the economic.**

*The injustice through which the I lives in a totality is always economic* (EN 30).

It is one of Levinas’ most basic arguments that the economic relation undermines a fundamental injunction that comes with all human relationships, the ethical demand: Thou-shalt-not-kill. Levinas takes this injunction metaphorically so that “murder” exists

in a world which is faceless, acting out of a movement that comes from “everyone and yet no one.”<sup>10</sup> There is a murder of the human in any economic exercise insofar as this exercise resorts to the language of mechanism and consumption. The political, in service to the work of mere reciprocity, also extinguishes the possibility for what is *beyond* or in *excess* of economic considerations. Levinas argues, as I argue, that this excess – beyond economic interests and calculations – introduces a real-world possibility of *generosity*, a work in which one gives *more* than necessary, even *more* than what is sufficient. Generosity in Levinasian ethics is the spontaneous election to act as a human being facing another human being. He asks about the possibility of what he calls a “one-way movement,” which perhaps most needs to be asked in the face of globalizing economy. This demand is to remain *non-in-different* to those in the world weakened or suffering at the command of global institutions, suspending the demands of *self-inter-estedness*.

There is a failure and violence attached to the efforts of value systems that center themselves on freedom. He argues that, “Western philosophy coincides with the disclosure of the other where the other, ... loses its alterity. From its infancy, philosophy has been struck with a horror of the other that remains other – with an insurmountable allergy” (T 346). Written into the West is this allergy for the foreign, which Levinas reads as also an *escape*, consequent of a denial of the face-to-face situation and the pure subjectivity experienced by an encounter with the truly Other. Faced with alterity, the desire for the Other degrades into an escape, so that the self retreats to egology (not just

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<sup>10</sup> Levinas discusses the facelessness (what I’ve called here the ‘everyone and no one’) of the impatience for finitude. See “The Virtues of Patience” in DF, “... concerning contemporary violence ... [it] is not just egoism ... The modern world has forgotten the virtues of patience. The rapid and effective motion to which everyone is committed for a single moment has furnished the dark gleam produced by the ability to wait and suffer. But the glorious deployment of energy is murderous ... The hand that grasps the weapon must suffer in the very violence of that gesture” (DF 154-155).

‘egoism’) – the will and all of its possibilities will be directed toward the self-same.<sup>11</sup> Escape is an attempt to cover the shame of an existential vulnerability: the conditions of human finitude.

Levinasian ethics, if we treat it as a system of categories, places the origin of violence with a “first injustice.” This primordial kind of injustice comes before all justice and is not merely the opposite of it. Levinas describes this first injustice in the context of what he calls “the third party.” That which stands outside of the face-to-face relation – sometimes also referred to by Levinas as “the third man”– is the beginning of sociality and of politics. With the “third party,” impartiality and legislation are introduced, or, as Levinas states it, “a third way emerges” (EN 27). The first injustice is constituted by a “totality” in which “one free being [has] control over another.” The work of reciprocity and equalization, including the granting of political rights and freedoms, and this ‘third way’ dominates at the sacrifice of the work of responsibility. Insofar as there “is a universality of economic life” (SH 8) in which we make ‘sameness’ reign (5), then only sameness becomes intelligible and valued. The excesses, what may be not spoken for and beyond the economy of social discourse, become ‘starved’ and hence unintelligible and devalued within the domain of sociality. Levinas’ argument in response: we will have to “exercise patience in regard to [our] appetites” (8).

The push of modernity toward what Levinas describes as a project of “assimilating and encompassing” (and what I am extending to economic globalization) was of specific concern for him in an essay, “The Old and the New” (TO 126-127). He

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<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of this term, see EN 159-162 and T 345.

argues that the desire for novelty is a masking of the desire for the Other,<sup>12</sup> manifested in an age of freedom over and above responsibility, “The novelty of the modern is understood as the supreme freedom referring to all possibilities, to all the acquisitions of European civilizations ... and interpreted as progress...” (TO 126). This progress works to eliminate all surprise and subjective intimacy that comes with the face-to-face encounter, in order to reduce the ethical demand to a working (and comfortable) economy of signs and significations. Embedded in this modern form of economy, the push toward novelty not only finds the old offensive, but then novelty for novelty’s sake becomes a primary mark of value, This push becomes parallel, if not also a substitute for non-economic forms meaningfulness and value, even to the point of dehumanization.<sup>13</sup> The imperative of novelty in the marketplace disguises and disfigures any other possible ethical imperatives, including obligations to others that are neither novel nor fashionable, and especially *dis*-regard the non-marketable. Further, this push of for the novel has already inscribed itself in all the ways in which our global economic investments

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<sup>12</sup> Specifically, “One loves the new ... the worry about fashion, the search for originality at any price – and all the degrees of degradation to which this love lends itself ... the Desire for the new in us is a Desire for *the other*; it distinguishes our being from *existing*, which is self-sufficient, and which, *conatus essendi*, perseveres in existing, holding, above all, to this very existing,” (TO 121).

<sup>13</sup> There is evidence in Levinas’ work that this modern push for novelty in the marketplace and with all form of social production is still a temporal issue insofar as the subject which looks to escape responsibility will construct fantasies that will distort expectations and the meaning of future possibility so that it will be a continued effort to sustain egology and escape. The continued demand for novelty within globalization, where the ‘newness’ appeals to the subject’s desire for the ‘marvelous’ (OE 53), also destroys alterity and only profits from the technologies of escape. Vandana Shiva accuses Western science for conditioning trade and patent regulations so that they will create “a monoculture of knowledge” against biodiversity (1997, 9) Regarding the problem of innovation and social creativity, see Shiva on this point, “Even though many of the patents in the United States are based on Third World biodiversity and knowledge, it is falsely assumed that without IPR protection, creativity lies buried ... In fact, the dominant interpretation of IPRs leads to a dramatic distortion in the understanding of creativity, and as a result, in the understanding of the history of inequality and poverty” (11). She goes on to argue that IPRs stifle innovation through secrecy, and assume creativity through the piracy of knowledge of other cultures, specifically, “In pharmaceutical and chemical industries, patents were judged essential for 80 percent of the inventions. ... [Yet] patents are not necessary for developing a climate of invention and creativity. They are more important as instruments of market control. Indeed, the existence of patents undermines the social creativity of the scientific community by stifling free exchange among scientists” (14).

continually and aggressively seek to open new markets. Levinas provides the insight to this connection between the direction of modern globalizing capitalism and the implicit irresponsibility inscribed into the world by this relation. To quote: “The new as modern is the fully arranged state of the self and world. ... Freedom is the *positive* power of modern man, exerted upon nature and human events ...” (TO 125).

The future habitability of the modern world, I think, will have to depend upon his argument for an intimate and infinite responsibility, and this intimacy is not just out of physical relation in quantifiable space, but rather as a temporal proximity. Here, we can see how the demand and urgency of infinite responsibility could be formulated in the particular:

But already, in the very heart of the relationship with the other that characterizes our social life, alterity appears as a nonreciprocal relationship – that is, as contrasting strongly with contemporaneity. The Other as Other is not only an alter ego: the Other is what I myself am not. The Other is this ... because of the Other’s very alterity. **The Other is, for example, the weak, the poor, ‘the widow and the orphan,’ whereas I am the rich or the powerful.** It can be said that intersubjective space is not symmetrical. ... The relationship with alterity is neither spatial nor conceptual. (TO 83-84 [emphasis added]).

Levinas uses an idea of election (in the existential rather than political sense) to describe the upright work of generosity and patience. Ethical election is a non-economic relation exemplified by the formula: “the one-for-the-other.” Economic substitution meets all of the demands of the globalizing marketplace, and the relation between the self and the world resembles more of a game; yet, it is only in patience and with generosity that I will not flee from the non-economic demand of responsibility, rather engage the vocational

character of ethical substitution, finding myself called to listen for when the game is no longer a game.<sup>14</sup>

### **III. Freedom against the demand of infinite responsibility.**

*Freedom, as a will productive of works, without being limited in its willing, enters into a history of which it is a plaything* (EN 28).

There are two prominent ‘virtues’ in Levinas’ work, more difficult to defend in the face of globalization: patience and generosity. These are not the virtues of traditional ethical theories because they are not founded on the usual ideas of self-sufficiency, voluntary action, and personal autonomy. There is a unique shift in Levinasian ethics because, while traditionally there is a promise of infinite freedom when one fulfills their finite responsibility, Levinas defends an infinite and existential responsibility prior to all finite (and political) freedoms. He argues that the structure of modern world history has lost its capacity for generosity (exemplified in the parent who takes the bread from their own mouth to give to child) and that the “modern world has forgotten the virtues of patience” (DF 155). Levinas argues that the desire for and exercise of possession and consumption is a loss of patience. On the other hand, there is *a fundamental impatience* in every demand for freedom. The call for freedom is an impatience for the vulnerability of human finitude, an evasion from the infinite demand of the face of another who “calls me by name” and asks me to respond. While the modern world treats freedom as if it should

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<sup>14</sup> The metaphor of the game, used to describe the self/world economy, is found in *On Escape*. “The need to be right, or justified [*d’en avoir raison*], in this game can only be a need to escape” (OE 53). Levinas demonstrates how reciprocally and economic sociality leaves the subject in a static form of juvenile psychology, “contradictions in morality are produced only by the same impetuosity that incites us to action and the blessing that thinkers give to such impetuosity. Perhaps morality is thus already banished from the domain of behavior when we ask it just to guide and control such behavior. The only morality is therefore one of kindness. ... [But] The slow maturation of things is intolerable. ... The exception is worth more than the rule; conflict is greater than work. They glorify whatever is harsh and pitiless, adventurous and heroic, dangerous and intense. They flatter adolescents” (DF 154-155).

be infinite and responsibility finite, Levinasian ethics reverses this requirement. Ironically, the call for exponential free trade has been the motto of globalization.<sup>15</sup>

To borrow again from Levinas in order to understand the justification for finding ourselves more responsible than free:

For an ethical sensibility, confirming, in the inhumanity of our time, its opposition to this inhumanity, the justification of the neighbor's pain is certainly the source for all immorality. ... It is perhaps thus that the for-the-other – the most upright relation to the other – is the most profound adventure of subjectivity, its ultimate intimacy. But this intimacy can only be discretely. It cannot give itself out as an example, or be narrated in an edifying discourse. It cannot, without becoming perverted, be made into a preachment (EN 99).

This is the infinite character of responsibility and its very intimate demand. There is no formulaic solution or moral truism to accompany the oughtness of ethical substitution. No story, exemplary case or moral platitude can demonstrate it as an imperative. The demand to diminish all 'useless' suffering, in the most basic sense, cannot, in good conscience, permit the rationalization of suffering as it is undergone by human beings.<sup>16</sup> The globalizing economy neither uplifts the humanity of human beings, nor does it inspire uprightness.

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<sup>15</sup> The perception that 'with free markets comes democratic or political freedoms' is a fallacy. As Chomsky argues, "John Maynard Keynes warned seventy years ago, 'that nothing less than the democratic experiment in self-government was endangered by the threat of global financial market forces.' The secretary-general of the Organization of American States [César Gaviria, June 2003], a strong advocate of neo-liberal globalization, ... [warned] that the free movement of capital, 'the most undesirable feature of globalization' – in fact, its core feature – is the 'greatest obstacle' to democratic governance, just as Keynes had warned. ... The same is true of other parts of the neo-liberal package: privatization, for example, reduces the arena of potential democratic choice, dramatically in the case of liberalization of 'services,' ... Even in narrow economic terms, the privatization programs were imposed with little if any solid empirical evidence or theoretical grounding" (2003, 138).

<sup>16</sup> In fact, there is a particular cruelty in the justification of suffering, as if it were 'necessary' or 'natural.' The 'suffering' that Levinas describes is attributed to the other and cannot be equated to my own sufferings. It is a mistake to build the obligation of ethical substitution on empathy or sympathy (in which the other is 'like me'). There is also much in his ethical theory that denies the heroic connotations of a virtuous individual who might come in and 'save' another who suffers. The idea of the moral agent, an important category in virtue ethics, does not actually fit into the Levinasian system.

Because the globalizing marketplace has lost all its “neighborly connotations,” the market, as a form of sociality and exchange has become a parody of the intimate, face-to-face encounter. Ethical engagement is without anonymity and runs counter to the global system which only poses itself as a virtual market, accelerating the command of anonymous being (what Levinas calls the *il y a* of neutral existence or ‘the everyone and no one’ phenomenon describe earlier). As Levinas describes it, the neighbor is a metaphor for the kind of ethical relation which makes a human being accessible “as a face” (EN 9).<sup>17</sup>

Levinas’ demand of infinite responsibility is the most difficult aspect of his ethics to defend. The requirement that one stand up for another (‘even one who persecutes me’), or that I intimately *owe* anything to one who is empirically alien to me, and that merely the presentation of the face of another contains a demand on me to come outside of myself (and self-interestedness), of which I must “undergo,” is a demand that has no correlating proof and cannot be demonstrated in the abstract. The only defensible aspect of this infinite ethical demand of substitution (one-for-the-other) is the urgency that comes with genuine suffering – in which humans are rendered more vulnerable and weak by the ordinary course of world affairs. In this argument, “business as usual” is to advocate for a world where unjustifiable violence is justice and “every man for himself” is the ultimate dehumanization of persons. To borrow from Levinas for this defense, “the concern for the ‘affairs’ of the other [is] possible: [How to treat others] as if they ‘regarded’ me and were entrusted to me, as if the other person were above all a face” (EN 193).

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<sup>17</sup> Jacques Derrida has described Levinas’ theory as an ethics of hospitality following these metaphors of the neighbor and the welcome. See his *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, (1999, 16).



We can see the symptoms of the absence of genuine ethical considerations in the way political and economic investments are made globally. As a temporal concern, (as I've already suggested, the ethical relation is one of temporality not necessarily spatiality), globalization invests only in the short term. Joseph Stiglitz describes global economic investments as a series of "broken promises" (which for an ethicist is very telling), and institutions like the IMF are his examples,

The IMF view was not rooted in a long-held concern about project sustainability. Sometimes countries had used aid dollars to construct schools or clinics. When the aid money ran out, there was no money to maintain these facilities. ... The Fund contended that international assistance was too unstable to be relied upon ... [yet] I knew that assistance was often far more stable than [even] tax revenues... (2003, 29).

It is clear that in a world dominated by economic globalization, there is little defense for 'rationalization' the long-term investment, rather, there is much justification for doing only what is absolutely necessary by economic calculations. Therefore, in a climate of economic globalization, an idea like "infinite responsibility" as Levinas is advocating looks indefensible. In the modern world, any investments that are not directly for the sake of the project of globalization are, at most, recognized only under the category of altruism. Altruism in modern ethical theory, as opposed to egoism, is a satisfactory position that one with rational self-interest might take. There are limits to this position as there are with egoism: one does not give more than they ought, but one ought to give. In the language of economic globalization, 'surplus' is relegated to calculations and terms limited to profit-motive and the preservation of future self-interests. Levinasian ethics categorizes any 'surplus' as an "excess," not as pure profit, and, in the best way possible, we can view these excesses as a site of possible goodness beyond economic goods. This

goodness, beyond economic and short-term calculations, *beyond what is me and is mine*, contains a bit of the infinite. To quote Levinas at length on this point:

The departure without return ... would ... lose its absolute goodness if the work sought for its own recompense ... if it impatiently awaited the triumph of its cause. The one-way movement would be inverted into a reciprocity...

A work, distinguished from games and from calculation, is being-for-beyond-my-death. Patience does not consist in the agent belying his generosity by giving himself the time of a *personal immortality*...

To be for a time that would be without me, to be for a time after my time, for a future ... to-be-for-after-my-death – “Let the future and the most far-off things be the rule for all the present days” – is not a banal thought that extrapolates one’s own duration; it is a passage to the time of the other (T 349).

To do more than required and in excess of self-interest and self-preservation, what I have called here spontaneous generosity, is not mere altruism and counters the categories and justifications of economic globalization as it has been presently instituted. Levinas’ ethical system does not assume scarcity as a principle as does modern economic theory<sup>18</sup> (as if the economic and political is merely a site to distribute these scarce goods equally among each), but rather, it purposely seeks out and defends these excesses as essential to human responsibility. Activity motivated by reciprocity alone reduces the capacity of the human being to economics without excess, and the subject temporarily escapes the demand of infinite responsibility. Yet, with the rationale of globalization as foundation,

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<sup>18</sup> The assumption of scarcity is proper to all economic theories born out of social contract philosophy. To quote a standard economics textbook: “From our definition of economics, it is easy to see why economists view the world through the lens of scarcity. Since human property and resources are scarce (limited), it follows that the goods and services we produce must also be limited. Scarcity limits our options and necessitates that we make choices. Because we ‘can’t have it all,’ we must decide what we will have, and what we must forgo. ... At the core of economics is the idea that ‘there is no free lunch.’ You may get treated to lunch, making it ‘free’ to you, but there is a cost to someone – ultimately to society” (McConnell & Brue 2005, 3). According to the arguments made here, the lens of scarcity and the decision-making consequent to limited resources, philosophically assumes too many things to interrogate properly here. Simply put, the argument made as the foundation of market economics is questionable and confuses *finitude* with *scarcity*.

the benefits may be economically, socially and even politically *justified*, but they, in themselves, contain no *goodness*.

Contemporary ethical theory needs to provide the proper tools of criticism to counter the self-justifying activities of the global marketplace. For Noam Chomsky, globalization creates an obvious dominance of the “haves” over the “have-nots” which justifies US military planning: “the ‘widening economic divide’ ... will lead to unrest and violence among the ‘have-nots,’ much of it directed against the US” (2003, 230). And from Stiglitz, this global dominance, to which he adds is “*without global government*,” is run by only a few players limited by “financial and commercial interests ... [they] dominate the scene, but ... many of those affected by their decisions are left almost voiceless” (2003, 22).

In this way, I think the ethical demand at the heart of Levinasian ethics is recognizable without necessarily needing to convince: “The hand that gives exhausts its reserves without being able to dissimulate anything ... [Yet when] wishes are uttered ... responsibility recedes” (GDT 192). This is what sustainable yet generous worldly work would be. The power of the human being is in the renewal of one’s reserves, that to give without reservation does not exhaust, it merely suspends the kinds of expectations that in themselves are unsustainable. The supposed ‘free individuals’ moving within the context of a “global free market” are in fact the straw men of our age. The ultimate economic categories of markets, in which everyone’s sociability is reduced to consumption and production, masks the demand of being a human being. What I recognize in Levinasian ethics, what I think is defensible here, is that *only human beings can grant humanity to other human beings* – give them faces, find them a place in the world to call home.

Levinas rejects the idea that selfhood is constituted independently of its relation to the proximal other (often described as the neighbor), and for the self to project a human face, it cannot be without regard for alterity or otherness as such. Yet, the defense of the self-same, which admits little or no alterity, can be paralleled with the exercise of imperialism. The groping or grasping of the hand of Western economic interests implicitly denies the face of human beings while it shapes the modern world. The desires given to and justified by the global marketplace makes the work of self-preservation a priority, so there are no faces but only open mouths,<sup>19</sup> betraying the desire for the Other as the need for spectacle and consumption which borders on the pornographic. The work of the modern world, as an effort towards possession and consumption, renders the world ‘faceless’ in an questionable and shameless eroticism, rendering the experience of an intimate face-to-face relation (and its task of infinite responsibility) impossible.

#### **IV. The new problem: homelessness and facelessness.**

*One of the most important things for me is that asymmetry and that formula: All men are responsible for one another and **I more than anyone else** (EN 107, [emphasis added]).*

It is Levinas’ argument that the face-to-face relationship is the foundation for the ethical relationship. This most intimate foundation can be both a critique of patriarchy as well as imperialism, both characteristics featured in the contemporary movement of globalization. The intimate distance of the face-to-face, challenging all claims of identity and selfhood by prioritizing the importance of the Other, is not merely a spatial

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<sup>19</sup> See my note 7.

proximity; rather, it is a temporal relationship. There is evidence of this interpretation in the later lectures and writings of Levinas, rooted in Heidegger's influence.<sup>20</sup>

For instance, "Since Heidegger we are in the habit of considering the world as an ensemble of tools" (TO 62). The consumer culture that emerges out of the globalizing economy has embodied this reduction. We see the work of building a home in the world as window dressing and the installation of fixtures. But in this home-construction, no one is really welcome, rather they too become part of the fixtures. The expectation of consumption dominates this self/world relation in such a way that all encounters between persons have a clearly marked script. If the ethical encounter with the other is not a dialectical relation, but a diachronous one ('always out of the ordinary course of time') that is also fundamentally asymmetrical,<sup>21</sup> the world as it is a globalizing phenomenon has fatally committed itself to identifying and valuing only what conforms to the dialectic of symmetries and consumables.

What of the ethical possibility of Being-in-the-World that works, as Levinas states it, against "the encompassing, accumulating and organizing consciousness of the system ... against the tendency to equalize the new, as if it were only an unknown to know and not the other to desire in its unassimilable alterity – **that is to say, to love rather than to equalize** by knowledge -- ... in an unceasing passage to the other which does not stop at identity" (TO 129 [emphasis added])? I have found that there has been a call – a genuine appeal – for developing new conceptual tools to describe the scope and scale of economic

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<sup>20</sup> There is an interesting discussion by Levinas of "Heidegger and Heideggarians" in DF. He discusses the issue of place, interpreted by Heidegger and by the technology of the modern world. Specifically, "Enrootedness. We should like to take up this term: ... A little humanity distances us from nature, a great deal of humanity brings us back. ... One's implementation in a landscape, one's attachment to *Place*, without which the universe would become insignificant and would scarcely exist, is the very splitting of humanity into natives and strangers" (DF 232).

<sup>21</sup> See Levinas, TI 215-216 on asymmetry.

globalization, especially as it seems to have suspended important ethical concerns. Traditional theories – even the work of identity politics<sup>22</sup> – may fail the ethical demand presented here.

Brennan constructs arguments that describe the effects of globalization as it creates psychological distortions. Suspending any defense of the globalizing economy, she describes the questionable symptoms that show it to be weakening the human-ness of human beings: “This is a world where inertia, exhaustion and the sense of running hard to stay in the same place mark everyday life. ... There is a terrible tiredness around, a sense of having no energy ...” (2000, 12). Brennan also demonstrates how the global market uses fantasy, hallucination and paranoia in order to maintain consumption, though constructing and controlling the means to instant gratification (27-30). She argues,

If the parallel drawn ... between psychical and socio-historical temporal dynamics is correct, if the construction of more and more commodities slows down real time while seeming to speed it up, then this means the physical reality in which we exist, the physical laws under which we live, *are being and have been altered* (2000, 177).

The claims of progress made by proponents of economic globalization are, in fact, by her account, creating a very specific kind of psychological deterioration. The forms of psychological deterioration go beyond the defense of rights and freedoms. The language of human rights, embedded in the trust of the modern republic, is archaic compared with new ways capital is accumulated. In response, Brennan’s diagnosis appeals to what she calls energetics; I, on the other hand, am appealing to ethics.

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<sup>22</sup> I am thinking here of all the work of multicultural studies that have looked to defend the positions of Third World peoples, the post-colonial condition as well as the international human rights organizations. Each of these critics of economic globalization draws upon political defenses or develops a psychology of selfhood that does not engage the ethical questions I’ve posed here. When they are engaged in the ethical questions (violence, specifically), the categories used to describe the human condition are often borrowed from philosophical theories arguably less fitting for understanding the ethical impact of globalization. I would also argue that most liberatory politics are limited in their criticism of economic globalization.

If, as Levinas argues, “Time is patience,” (GDT 7), then, to this degree, a globalizing world economy has made ‘no time’ and ‘no room’ in the world for the face-to-face relation. We make the world smaller and yet we run out of time. What remains at the periphery of the globalizing marketplace is reduced to the language of economic possibility. This work still uses the categories of old: mining for resources (physical *and* non-physical), acquisition of these resources, patenting or “owning” the knowledge contained by these peripheral sources, etc. These systems that are not yet part of the global economic strategy are considered territories yet-to-conquer, in the spirit of colonialization. Vandana Shiva argues that traditional colonialization has altered form, “Capital now has to look for new colonies to invade and exploit for its further accumulation – the interior spaces of the bodies of women, plants, and animals” (1997, 45). With the rise of the trans-national corporation (TNC), and its power to claim intellectual property rights,<sup>23</sup> and the deregulation of global markets justified in their unprecedented growth, rooted in the philosophical view of the natural world as *terra nullius*, (46-49), the free propagation of Western interests has taken on a new form of tenure. As she argues it, this proliferation still borrows from Locke and Columbus (1-5). The difference is in the territories now worth conquering, she states:

The issue of IPRs [Intellectual Property Rights] is closely related to the issue of value. If all value is seen as being associated with capital, tinkering becomes necessary to add value. Simultaneously, value is taken away from the source (biological resources as well as indigenous knowledge), which is reduced to raw material. ... IPRs allow for the privatization of biodiversity and the intellectual commons.

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<sup>23</sup> Shiva provides a very provocative account of the battle over the Neem tree (1997, 69-73). Her position is especially critical of the “Eurocentric notions of property and piracy ... It seems that the Western powers are still driven by the colonizing impulse to discover, conquer, own, and possess everything, every society, every culture. The colonies have now been extended to the interior spaces, the ‘genetic codes’ of life-forms from microbes and plants to animals, including humans” (3).

“Bioprospecting” is increasingly the word used to describe this new form of enclosure (72).

Under the banner of economic prosperity, human beings, their land and their knowledge, become *prospects* and biological “raw material.” Those who are at the periphery of globalization are not of ethical consideration, especially as they are displaced simply by the way they have made their home in the world. As she argues it, “From this perspective, cows, women, and children are merely instruments for commodity production and profit maximization” (1997, 23). Places are no longer inhabited by human beings; with globalization, a place worth noting is a site of market maximization, valuing only future prospects and profits, while all other values (like sentiment, attachment or affection) are dismissed as excessive.<sup>24</sup>

Globalization has no patience for what is in excess of the present tense, caught in the escapist egoism of consumer culture. Brennan describes the impatience within economic globalization,

Keeping pace is difficult precisely because production can outstrip human capabilities. Not only does the speed of technology as such move too fast for human time, but the cost of the other ingredients entering production is out of line with the cost of human labor-power. ... [It is] profit based on the speed of acquisition ... only one of the ways in which the reality of value is catching up with the fantasy world of technology ... we measure price in relation to speed (2003, 133-34).

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<sup>24</sup> This language is specifically invoking Levinas’ argument for defense of the excess. In one text, he describes the humanity and the vulnerability given to the affection “beyond measure.” In his lectures, published as *God, Death and Time*, he describes how the death of Socrates affects Apollodorus, “Beside those who find in this death every reason to hope, certain among them (e.g., Apollodorus, “the women”) **weep more than they should; they weep without measure: as if humanity were not consumed or exhausted by measurement, as if there were an excess in death.**” (GDT 9 [emphasis added]). He calls this excess of emotion, when another dies, an “affectivity without intentionality” (17). The relationship between the death of a proximal other, which for Levinas is ‘always a scandal’ (14, 78, 90-91), and our affection for places (including finding a home in the world) is an intimate one, but it cannot be demonstrated here.



Technological production profits from a fantastic desire for irresponsibility and *by virtue of its inhuman speed* of acquisition. (Brennan shows how this can be *exhausting* – essentially instituting unsustainable practices).<sup>25</sup> Economic values scripted by globalization and the hegemony already given to it, have no room and no time for human beings to be human.

Shiva shows how globalization is collapsing the space in the world for human beings, to the point in which the microbiological and genetic have become territories of a new world colonization; Brennan demonstrates how the speed of capital accumulation displaces human time and human labor for narcissistic fantasy. Here, I have tried to diagnose the question of globalization through the lens of an existential ethics, as a spatio-temporal problem of homelessness and facelessness.

Impatience, driven by what Levinas describes as a ‘secularized hunger,’ will always seek the selfsame – representing, condensing, reducing events to what suits the narrative and progress of what is now a globalizing economy. Ethical urgency is muted in comparison with the fervor of economic progress, so that real weakness and suffering, including the exhaustion given to globalization itself, is not met with a human face, but

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<sup>25</sup> In her ‘energetics,’ Brennan describes the exhaustion of the modern subject: “If these material effects are taken into account, the extent to which the fantasy takes hold individually ... should be cumulative. ... The less animate [the] environment is and the slower time becomes in natural reality, the greater the ego’s need to speed things up, its anxiety, its splitting, its spoiling of living nature, and its general aggression towards the other. **But of course, as with any paranoid anxiety, the ego by these processes only accelerates the production of the conditions that produce its fears. ... And by this ... it breaks down the identity barriers which preserved some form of individuality, leading to psychotic anxieties, and increasing the exhaustion of the modern subject.** The anxiety generated by this process is exacerbated by the failure to symbolize energetic connections, connections which are experienced through the ego’s lens, assimilated to a subject-centered worldview. ... The failure to find a vocabulary of connections, to symbolize them in terms which are not subject-centered, means that any feeling of connection will only be experienced through the ego’s lens, assimilated to a subject-centered world view” (2000, 174 [emphasis added]). To this, she adds, “**Other symptoms of this process are evident in how symbolized ethical codes break down to accommodate an increasing capacity to tolerate delay, a greater demand for service, a more extensive need for domination,** a horror of inferiority contingent on escalating envy and the constant comparisons envy demands” (175 [emphasis added]).

rather with a machine. The Western allergy to alterity is inoculated with the speed and efficiency of technological production, the expediency of market expansion, guided and encouraged by the development of the global marketplace – a place which is not a home. The symptoms of psychical exhaustion and ethical indifference described here are overlooked as a permissible tradeoff for the inoculation.

At the root of this problem, prior to displacement of globalization, is the faceless embedded within it. This incapacity to engage the face of another – as they are truly other – infects even the most intimate and personal of our social existence. So, with Levinas, I ask a final question, “What deafness to the call of consciousness! Can every human relationship be reduced to assessing damage and interest and every problem to balancing the accounts?” (DF 131). This is both an accusation and a question because there has been such insufficient attention to the dehumanizing effects of a globalizing sociality. With the promises of economic prosperity and political freedom that accompany the opening of global markets, how can one defend an infinite and intimate responsibility to others? How to demonstrate the false claims of these promises, when consumption has already catered to the escapism? Only with a gesture of patience and generosity, is there an opening to denying the homicidal will, made acceptable in the age of globalization. There is a missing *kindness* in the globalizing push for *sameness*; the defense for a humanistic ethics against the facelessness and homelessness inspired by economic globalization is possible only by allowing an excess of kindness and, as Levinas reminds us, “At no time can one say: I have done all my duty” (EI 105).

## V. Concluding Remarks

*The fear of each for himself, in his own mortality, does not succeed in absorbing the scandal of indifference toward the suffering of the other* (EN 192).

The modern globalizing economy, in all of its productivity, unbridled expansion and unprecedented growth is working at an interminable debt without remedy. This debt is instituting an anti-humanism and an ethical bankruptcy that, I would argue, will remain even if economic globalization as we know were to fail. We have become negligent in our power to be human as we exercise the power to transform the world into possessions and consumables because it has made the call for infinite responsibility nonsensical; the position of ultimate responsibility for others in the world, especially for those most vulnerable and in closest proximity, as a priority independent of the desire for personal freedom, has literally ‘no voice’ against the dominance and conspicuous rewards of a globalizing economy.

A new ethics of nonviolence is required in order to resist the degree and scope of violence possible by the present form of economic globalization. The kind of nonviolence required, I argue, contains a recollection of virtues that have been discarded by this world-project – a **spontaneous generosity** to counter possessiveness and the claims of the free will as well as an **existential patience** to sustain and undergo finitude without escapism. This patience and generosity would provide some salve to the extensive facelessness and homelessness being exercised by the dominating economic interests and intentions that are neither *upright* nor explicitly *ethical*.

**Levinas' works by abbreviation:**

- BPW**         *Basic Philosophical Writings*. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi, eds. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996.
- DF**            *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*. Sean Hand, trans. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1990.
- EI**             *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*. Richard A. Cohen, ed. Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 1985.
- EN**             *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav, trans. NY: Columbia UP, 1998.
- GDT**            *God, Death and Time*. Bettina Bergo, trans. California: Stanford UP, 2000.
- OBBE**          *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*. Alphonso Lingis, trans. Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1981.
- OE**             *On Escape*. Bettina Bergo, trans. California: Stanford UP, 2003.
- SH**             “Secularization and Hunger” in *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, Vol. 20, No. 2 – Vol. 21, No. 1, 1998, pp. 3-12.
- T**                “The Trace of the Other” in *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy*. Mark C. Taylor, ed. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986, pp. 345-359.
- TI**             *Totality and Infinity*. Alphonso Lingis, trans. Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1969.
- TO**             *Time and the Other [and additional essays]*. Richard A. Cohen, trans. Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1987.

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