PHL 587.201 Reading Levinas ***Office Hours 5-6 Tues***
Tues 1-4, Winter 2012 ***& by appointment***
Professor Chanter ***Rm 11, Dept of Philosophy***

Course description

Perhaps we could say that a defining issue for Levinas's philosophy is trauma. How to respond to trauma, how to be ethical in the face of trauma. Given this, the peculiarity of Levinas's philosophy consists in, on the one hand, the radical insistence upon subjectivity as a central structure (an insistence that runs against the dominant trends of twentieth century French philosophy as represented by the likes of Derrida, Deleuze and Foucault), yet on the other hand it consists in a complete recasting of the traditional or metaphysical meaning attributed to subjectivity. Taking on the mantle of phenomenology, but also moving beyond it Levinas interrogates the priority that phenomenology attributes to ontology, elevating ethics above ontology, and construing the subject in terms of an ethical commitment to the alterity of the Other.[1] Thus, while preserving the structure of subjectivity, he could be said to empty out its traditional connotations. The subject is not conceived within an epistemological framework, as the locus of knowledge about the world or knowledge of objects. It is not conceived as mastering, as unity or as a controlling, active agent. It is not conceived primarily as the seat of rationality, will or intentionality, and it does not aspire to universality. Rather, Levinas's notion of subjectivity is a radically decentred subject, a subject who is structured by its infinite response to the Other, the Other who makes a claim to which the subject can never be adequate. In doing so, the claim of the Other puts in question any assumption that the subject is at the center of its world, in control of its destiny, or author of its own fate.

One of the hallmarks of Levinas's philosophy, with its articulation of a subject, the hallmark of which is to be ethically attuned to the infinite demand of the Other, is his refusal to speak for others. He insists on inhabiting the first person. One of the difficulties that this raises, as we shall see, is that the insistence on speaking only for oneself, the refusal to extrapolate an ethical system that pertains to others, also tends to evacuate the possibility of situating the subject in any historical or social context. While this tendency is taken up very deliberately and self-consciously by Levinas, and while it conforms to the abstract and absolute claims that the face of the Other makes on me, it also constitutes a site of contestation for anyone who wants to draw on Levinas's insights in a way that might render them relevant to speak to a politically attuned discourse, including a feminist appropriations of this work.

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[1] Levinas famously observes his need to leave the "climate" of Heidegger's philosophy but not for a philosophy that would be "pre-Heideggerian."

The course will focus on reading Levinas's *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (1974). In this work, Levinas elaborates the infinite responsibility of the I for the Other in terms of the idea of substitution, or being for the other. Since this work assumes the development of Levinas's earlier philosophy, most notably notions such as the face to face in *Totality and Infinity* (1961), and the sense in which Levinas is both indebted to and seeks to take his distance from the discourse of phenomenology, we will read a couple of other essays by Levinas in order provide some context for reading this mature work by Levinas. Given the notorious difficulty of *Otherwise than Being*, my hope is that this will also help us orient ourselves. In "Meaning and Sense," Levinas provides a critique of phenomenology, which will be useful in situating his own relationship to it. We will also consider a couple of interviews, by way of providing some background to Levinas's influences, and to some of the guiding concepts of his philosophy. In addition, we will begin by considering some of the issues that Judith Butler has raised in relation to Levinas's philosophy, in what is both an appreciative and critical reflection on and appropriation of the philosopher who has come to be known as the philosopher of the Other par excellence.

In essays such as "Precarious Life," and in *Frames of War* (2009), Butler draws on Levinas to develop the idea of the precariousness of life (FW 177), emphasizing the ambivalence of the face (see FW 172-3). At the same time she raises some crucial questions about Levinas concerning how the subject always encounters others in ways that are conditioned by the ways they are framed (FW 179-80).

In the background of my own thinking about this course lies an interest in and commitment to thinking about the relationship of art and politics, both of which play a role in Levinas's thinking that, from a formal point of view, take second place to the driving force of his philosophy, namely the ethical relation of the face to face. Performatively, however, it might be said that art and politics, despite the overt skepticism Levinas displays about their ability to operate at the fundamental level that his philosophy reserves for ethics, in fact structure and organize Levinas's thinking in ways that thematically escape his control. The suggestion that art and politics operate performatively in Levinas's texts, shaping in advance the possibilities and limitations of his thinking, will be at play in thinking about the role that the feminine plays in Levinas's philosophy, and in thinking about the effects of Levinas's insistence upon rigidly distinguishing between politics and ethics. Also at stake here is the extent to which Levinas allows art to systematically inform and inspire his philosophy, constantly drawing on the insights of Dostoyevsky, or appealing to the work of Rodin. The impact of art on his philosophy is not just peripheral or incidental, but systematic and pervasive.

Schedule

I: Intro (Butler on Levinas, *Frames of War*)
II: Butler, "Precarious Life," Levinas "Peace and Proximity," "Meaning and Sense" *Basic Philosophical Writings*.
III: Butler, "Responsibility" in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Levinas, interviews from *Dialogues*, and *Ethics and Infinity*
IV: *Otherwise than Being*, Chapter 1, pp. 1-20
V: *Otherwise than Being*, Chapter 2, pp. 21-59
VI: *Otherwise than Being*, Chapter 3, pp. 61-97
VII: *Otherwise than Being*, Chapter 4, pp. 99-129
VIII: *Otherwise than Being*, Chapter 5, pp. 131-171
IX: *Otherwise than Being,* Chapter 6, pp. 175-85
X: Derrida, *Adieu/At this Very Moment*

Seminar Expectations:

The requirements for the seminar are a presentation and a seminar paper. Copies of presentations should be typed and handed out. If you choose to present on something other than the designated reading, please also provide copies of relevant texts where this would be helpful. Papers should be at least 10 pages (double spaced, 12 point font), and can be on a topic of your choice. Papers can be exegetical, thematic, critical or contextual. I encourage you to take up a topic or theme of interest to you and work it through in relation to Levinas. I also encourage you to discuss your paper topic with me.

Butler, Frames of War

Quote 1

"If, as the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas claims, it is the face of the other that demands from us an ethical response, then it would seem that the norms that would allocate who is and is not human arrive in visual form. These norms work to *give face* and to *efface*. Accordingly, our capacity to respond with outrage, opposition, and critique will depend in part on how the **differential norm of the human** is **communicated through visual and discursive frames**. There are ways of framing that will bring the human into view in its frailty and precariousness that will allow us to stand for the value and dignity of human life, to react with outrage when lives are degraded or eviscerated without regard for their value as lives. And then **there are frames that foreclose responsiveness**, where this activity of foreclosure is effectively and repeatedly performed by the frame itself—its own negative action, as it were, toward what will not be explicitly represented" (77).

Several questions arise from this passage. Does the face "arrive in visual form"? Or is it rather absolute and abstract? Levinas wants to claim that the face abstracts itself from history, politics, totality, that it transcends all contingencies, and that it breaks through its plastic presentation. Yet to the extent that he allows his own discourse on the face to be defined by a context that glorifies the European culture of the west (and disparages other cultures), the concepts of humanity and dignity to which he appeals turn out to be bound by a historical and political context, the contingency of which he does not make available for interrogation. His appeal to the face as a site of absolute transcendence, and his refusal to define the Other with regard to context, history, politics, world, horizon, totality, operates as a foreclosure, a blindness to how the face is necessarily conditioned in the sense that Butler indicates. Certain faces are more liable to elicit a response than others, certain faces are more likely to register as human and worthy of dignity than others. By relegating the question of politics to a second order, Levinas refuses to entertain this possibility as philosophically primary. Yet if a kind of blindness about which faces count as fully human, and which do not, is built into his elevation of European culture over other cultures, this refusal would haunt his philosophy in a profound way. It would compromise his construal of the absolute claim that a face makes. If only some faces figure as properly human, and yet this partiality is disavowed, the suggestion that the face transcends or abstracts from its concrete manifestation, and from its historical context turns out to operate differentially, and therefore any claim for the absolute status of the face to break through totality turns out to be compromised. The response of the I to others is affected, in Butler's words, by "the differential norm of the human."

Quote 2: the ambivalence of the face

For Levinas, violence is one 'temptation' that a subject may feel in the encounter with the precarious life of the other that is communicated through the face. This is why the **face is at once a temptation to kill and an interdiction against killing**. The 'face' would make no sense if there were no murderous impulse against which it

had to be defended. And its very defenselessness is what apparently stokes the aggression against which the interdiction functions. Levinas has articulated a certain **ambivalence** for the subject in the encounter with the face: a desire to kill, an ethical necessity not to kill (FW 172-3).[2]

Quote 3: **ethics as a fallible practice**
"for Levinas, the meaning of responsibility is bound up with an anxiety that remains open, that does not settle an **ambivalence** through disavowal, but rather gives rise to a certain ethical practice, itself experimental, that seeks to preserve life better than it destroys it. It is not a principle of non-violence, but **a practice, fully fallible, of trying to attend to the precariousness of life**, checking the transmutation of life into non-life" (FW 177).[3]

Quote 4: under what conditions can I respond to the claim of others?
If **non-violence** has the opportunity to emerge here, it would take its departure not from recognition of the injurability of all peoples (however true that might be), but **from an understanding of the possibilities of one's own violent actions in relation to those lives to which one is bound, including those whom one never chose and never knew**, and so those whose relation to me precedes the stipulations of contract. Those others make a claim upon me, but **what are the conditions under which I can hear or respond to their claims?** It is not enough to say, in Levinasian vein, that the claim is made upon me **prior to my knowing** and as an inaugurating instance of my coming into being. That may be formally true, but its truth is of no use to me if I lack the **conditions** for **responsiveness** that allow me to **apprehend** it **in the midst of this social and political life.** Those 'conditions' include not just my **private resources**, but the various mediating forms and frames that make responsiveness possible. In other words, the claim upon me takes place, when it takes place, **through the senses**, which are crafted in part through various forms of media: the **social organization of sound and voice**, of image and text, of tactility and smell. If the claim of the other upon me is to reach me, it must be **mediated** in some way, which means that our very **capacity to respond with non-violence** (to act against a certain violent act, or to defer to the 'non-act' in the face of violent provocation) **depends upon the frames** by which the world is given and by which the domain of appearance is circumscribed. The claim to non-violence does

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[2] Butler refers us to her essay "Precarious Life" and to Levinas's essay "Peace and Proximity." Levinas writes in "Peace and Proximity:" "we have previously been able to write that the face of the other in its precariousness and defenselessness, is for me at once the temptation to kill and the call to peace, the 'You shall not kill.'" (BPW 167). The reference is to *Totality and Infinity* (199).

[3] In "Precarious Life," Butler emphasizes the ambivalence of the response to the face of the Other, pointing out that for Levinas "at the heart of ethics" is "a struggle" (135), that Levinas's non-violence comes from a "tension between the fear of undergoing violence, and the fear of inflicting violence" (137).

not merely interpellate me as an individual person who must decide one way or another. **If the claim is registered, it reveals me less as an 'ego' than as a being bound up with others in inextricable and irreversible ways, existing in a generalized condition of precariousness and interdependency, affectively driven and crafted by those whose effects on me I never chose.** The injunction to non-violence always presupposes that there is some field of beings in relation to whom non-violence can only make its appeal by differentiating between those against whom violence ought not to be waged and those who are simply 'not covered' by the injunction itself (FW 179-80).

In her 2004 essay, "Precarious Life" Butler had elaborated the themes she condenses in *Frames of War*. She begins by noting, in a formulation that is clearly indebted to Levinas, that the obligation at stake here is has a temporality that we might think in terms of a belated structure, as acknowledging that subjectivity has been achieved at the expense of thinking through how the subject has already benefitted from an assumption that does not immediately situate it in relation to the other. Ethics comes on the scene as disrupting the complacency that the subject has been able to assume. We might think of how subjects have been acculturated such that the typical or default ways subjects have of thinking and comporting themselves have privileged individuality, and have emphasized the subject as bearing rights—with all the attendant structures of the modern, political state that this implies. It is the very assumption of isolated, rights bearing subjects that Levinas puts into question when he formulates ethics according to a temporality that attends to the interruption of totality, to the disruption of the idea that my right to exist takes precedence over any claim that an other might make on me. The other's claim arises *after the fact*, as it were, in the midst of a life that is already being lived, as if autonomy and self-determination were not open to disturbance. "This obligation is something other than the rehabilitation of the author—the subject *per se*. It is about a mode of response that follows upon having been addressed, a comportment toward the Other only after the Other has made a demand upon me, accused me of failing, or asked me to assume a responsibility" (PL 129). The subject discovers itself, in the claim that the face of the other makes, as having already fallen short, unbeknown to itself. It discovers itself as having made the error of positing itself as the origin of all its possibilities, as the legitimate author of the world it has innocently represented to itself. It discovers itself as having already committed a certain violence, simply by virtue of having survived, simply by virtue of existing.

The structure of reflexivity that phenomenology has championed (see "Meaning and Sense") no longer has purchase, or priority here. If we are used to thinking of ethics as intentional, Levinas challenges us to think it, as Butler says, as something that makes a claim on us "against our will" (PL 130). We are disoriented by the call of the other. Levinas's notion of the face makes a claim that "we do not ask for" (PL 131)[4]

[4] Butler goes on to say that "we are not free to refuse" (131) the claim that the face of the other makes upon me. It is worth noting, however, the complexity of the

The call of the other makes the subject come into existence in some way that it did not previously exist: "in some way we come to exist, as it were in the moment of being addressed, and something about our existence proves precarious when that address fails" (PL 130).

Other themes that Butler deals with in the essay "Precarious Life" include Levinas's Eurocentrism, the Hebraic influence on his philosophy, and the burka.

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situation for Levinas. In "Meaning and Sense" Levinas says, "a face imposes itself upon me without my being able to be deaf to its call or to forget it, that is, without my being able to suspend my responsibility for its distress. Consciousness loses its first place" (BPW 54). It is not clear that the impossibility of remaining deaf to, or forgetting, the call of the other is exactly equivalent to not being free to refuse it. In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas writes of the separated being in such a way as to demonstrate (again, according to the belated discovery of the other by the I) as a being that is both invoked by the other, and yet "remains separated and capable of shutting itself up against the very appeal that has aroused it" (TI 216). In other words, it is possible to hear the call of the other, yet refuse to respond, to choose not to respond. It is possible to reassert one's own sovereignty, a reassertion that could occur despite having heard the appeal of the other. Part of the complexity of the situation consists in the fact that the demand made on me by the face of the other is a demand made against the background of enjoyment. "Separation is first the fact of a being that lives *somewhere*, from *something*, that is, that enjoys" (TI 216). The face that speaks to me, which makes a demand on me, approaches an I that has the possibility of helping, of welcoming the other, of giving to the other, of responding not with empty hands, but with food and sustenance. "Speech is not instituted in a homogenous or abstract medium, but in a world where it is necessary to aid and to give. It presupposes an I, an existence separated in enjoyment, which does not welcome empty-handed the face and its voice coming from another shore" (TI 216). This makes it no easy matter to understand exactly what is at stake when Levinas speaks of "Responsibility for the other" as "anteceden[t] to my freedom" in *Otherwise than Being* (15). What exactly is meant by antecedence here? Perhaps we can begin to think what it might mean by recalling that even if separation is lived concretely by an I that is innocent of the claims an Other has yet to make on it, this separation proves to be "illusory" (TI 216). Whatever freedom I might have assumed also, we might say, proves illusory.

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