

# UNFOLDING FLESH TOWARDS THE OTHER: LEVINAS' PERSPECTIVE OF MATERNITY AND THE FEMININE

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**Abstract:** *The paper discusses a formation of the ethical body in Levinas' philosophy. The central question is how different modalities of subjectivity, brought into light in face-to-face relation with the other, constitute a particular ethical and sensible embodiment. The main topics of the paper are caress, touch, and pain, and their role in constructing ethical embodiment. The focus is given to such existential modalities as being-in-one's-own-skin, the-one-for-the-other and having-the-other-under-one's-own-skin. The conceptual work of maternity and the feminine in the face-to-face situation accentuate a meaning of responsive and responsible sensibility which Levinas reveals in his major works *Otherwise than Being* or *Beyond the Essence and Totality* and *Infinity*.*

**Keywords:** *Emmanuel Levinas, sensibility, embodiment, flesh, face, the other, skin, caress, touch, pain, maternity, feminine*

## Introduction

The question of flesh and body is not a central one for Levinas' philosophy. The ethical relation to both the epiphenomenal other and the ethical transformation of subjectivity stay remains a main concern in major works such as *Time and the Other* (1990), *Totality and Infinity* (2004), and *Otherwise than Being or Beyond the Essence* (2006). The intersubjective relation indeed presupposes different modalities of embodied subjectivity. However, the aspect of embodiment is enlightened only as a side issue and is not seen as a central concept in revealing the responsible subjectivity. Although bringing Eros into discussion, Levinas does not really prioritize the formation of

the sensible erotic body of subjectivity and of the embodied feminine. In *Otherwise than Being*, I find a fascinating exposition of how skin, touch, caress, and pain form integrative parts of subjectivity. I suggest that the face-to-face relation with the other introduces not just a new modality of responsible subjectivity, but a particular embodied experience which can be described as being-in-one's-own-skin, the-one-for-the-other, and having-the-other-under-one's-own-skin. I believe that these embodied states accentuate the conceptual work of maternity and the feminine in constructing ethical subjectivity.

In the title of the paper I use the expression "unfolding flesh." Levinas discusses the notion of the flesh in *Otherwise than*

*Being*, while analyzing the role of substitution in ethical relation. In this paper, I take the flesh as the key notion which both forms the ethical response and modulates subjectivity. I will show how the flesh of subjectivity is constructed by touch, caress, and pain. The meaning of “unfolding flesh” will be revealed on the following levels: erotic love relation, welcome, and maternity. Thus, my aim is to disclose the ethical body of subjectivity within the face-to-face situation, and to prove that the relation with the other questions and deconstructs the body of subjectivity.

### **The Embodied Face-to-Face Relation with the Other**

The intersubjective face-to-face relation implies a practical experience of being-in-the-world. This particular engagement has, first of all, an ethical meaning as being responsible and responsive to the other. One of the modalities of responsible subjectivity is conceptualized in Erotic relation. In *Time and the Other*, Levinas writes that “the exteriority of the other is not simply due to the space that separates what remains identical through the concept, nor is it due to any difference that the concept would manifest through spatial exteriority. The relationship with alterity is neither spatial nor conceptual” (Levinas 1990: 84). It is a relationship based on a specific form of sensibility which is grasped in love.

Introducing Erotic face-to-face relation with the other Levinas elaborates on ethical responsibility as a particular form of embodiment and sensibility funded by a loving caress and touch. It is in the relation of love that subjectivity approaches the

other in feeling the touch of its body and skin (Levinas 1996: 85). This is a unique situation, in which the other appears as an object of love (that is, an object of need), but at the same time remains totally other (Levinas 1990: 36). In love I am called to responsibility because the beloved one appears to me in all its fragility and weakness; in love I fear for the other. To put it differently: for Levinas, to be beloved means an absolute exposure, nakedness and also helplessness (Levinas 2004: 255). In Eros, ethical subjectivity is formed as embodied sensibility which responds to the proximity of the other held by its openness and fragility in loving caress and touch.

Levinas emphasizes that this embodied sensibility and proximity are given through skin contact: “The expression “in one’s skin” is not simply a metaphor for the *in itself*. It relates to a recurrence in the dead time or the *between-time* separating inspiration and expiration, the diastole and systole of the heart beating softly against the lining of one’s own skin. The body is not merely an image or a figure; above all, it is the in-oneself and contraction of ipseity” (Levinas 1996: 87). This being-in-one’s-skin initiates a proximity to the beloved one, but is also a fatigue of one’s own embodiment crystallized in desire for the other. It is vulnerability and exposure to the other in a desire for love but, at the same time, it is a painful openness of skin contact with the other.

Precisely in the relation of love is ipseity tied to the incarnation. Being-in-one’s-skin places subjectivity in the state of a constant contraction of breathing and pulsation of heart beats because of the exposure to the beloved one. It is also an incredible

withdrawal of the self as going beyond the self in a desire for the other (Levinas 1996: 87). Yet, the erotic situation is, as Levinas puts it, “the equivocal par excellence” (Levinas 2004: 255). This equivocal meaning is rooted in a double structure of desire (*Ibid.*: 258): it is a quest for satiety and, at the same time, it is an eternal quest for something which can never be mine or a part of me – the future. In love I search for something which has not yet become, something which is always in the future and escapes my intention: “This not knowing,” this fundamental disorder, is the essential. It is like a game with something slipping away, a game absolutely without project or plan, not with what can become ours or us, but with something, always other, always inaccessible, and always to come” (Levinas 1990: 89). For Levinas, the originality of Eros consists precisely in the impossibility of returning to the ego; Eros becomes a manifestation of a pure relation with the other in which the other and subjectivity can never form a union (Levinas 2004: 257–259).

In this context, the skin touch is neither a passive surface of intersubjective communication nor a biological one. It is not only a condition of relation to the object but, being in its nature erotic, serves as grounds for ethical relation. Being in one’s skin is a pre-conceptual and pre-reflexive state of the subjectivity. Levinas argues that “the ego in itself like one is in one’s skin, that is to say, cramped, ill at ease in one’s skin, as though the identity of matter weighing on itself concealed a dimension allowing a withdrawal this side of immediate coincidence” (Levinas 1996: 86). To

escape this coincidence with its ipseity, the subjectivity has to move from the modality “being-in-one’s-skin” to “having-the-other-under-one’s-skin”<sup>1</sup>. “Having-the-other-under-one’s-skin” conditions the constitution of ethical embodiment, which precisely leads to the non-coincidence with oneself within the lived and sensible body in erotic relation.

The main reason why Levinas introduces the concept of embodiment into face-to-face relation with the other is, as Critchley observes, “to ‘ground’ ethical subjectivity in sensibility and to describe sensibility as proximity to the other, a proximity whose basis is found in substitution” (Critchley 1992: 179). Levinas’ intention is to “disengage the subjectivity of the subject from the reflections on truth, time and being in the amphibology of being and entities which is borne by the said; it will then present the subject, in saying, as sensibility from the first animated by responsibilities” (Levinas 2006: 19). This strategy allows him to give special attention to the questions of Eros, love, and sexuality. Ethical experience is, thus, located not in a consciousness, but in embodiment and in the flesh exposed to the other. For Levinas, the initial displacement of the intentional consciousness is rooted in the body itself “in the form of corporeality, whose movements are fatigue and whose duration is ageing i.e., the passivity of signi-

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<sup>1</sup> Levinas does not explicitly use “having-the-other-under-one’s-skin”, however, in *Otherwise than Being* he describes a traumatic experience of embodied subjectivity being marked by and exposed to the other as turned inside out and as having the other on the other side of the skin (Levinas 2006: 48-51). Therefore in this paper I decided to introduce a modality of “having-the-other-under-one’s-skin” to conceptualize the work of affection.

fication, of the one-for-another is not an act, but patience, that is, of itself sensibility or imminence of pain” (Levinas 2006: 55).

Levinas seizes upon corporeality only as ethical one: it is giving oneself to the other. However, this statement needs a detailed explanation of how the corporeality and ethical embodied response to the other are formed, and what is the role of “being-in-one’s-skin” to “having-the-other-under-one’s-skin.” To reach this goal I will take the following steps. First, I examine the feminine in the face-to-face situation and the connection between the feminine and “being-in-one’s-skin,” with a focus on caress, touch and vulnerability. Second, I analyze being-in-one’s-skin as a manifestation of welcome. Then I will gradually move to a discussion of “having-the-other-under-one’s-skin” in the form of maternity.

### **Erotic Embodiment: The Feminine**

The subject cannot go beyond the power of knowledge while it remains within itself. Levinas tends to find a transcendence that lies in maintaining the integrity of the self while allowing being-in-one’s-skin to surpass itself. For Levinas, the decision is rooted in the erotic relation: in love the subject can fulfill all these conditions<sup>2</sup>. The

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, the argument is about the question of whether erotic relation can be subsumed under the social relation. Also, Freud’s concept of the erotic relation is worth discussing in this context: Levinas claims that Freud’s misunderstanding lies in his attempt to perceive that sexuality starts with the self but not with the Other. Levinas writes: “The categories of separated sexuality, of psychology and biology where they have been lodged until now are the categories of a pluralistic ontology, of a plurality which does not merely count being, but which constitutes it as event. The elaboration of these categories irreducible to those of light appear to us a philosophy of transcendence” (Levinas 1949).

encounter with the feminine is qualified as a relation with alterity which is akin to the alterity of the ethical relation. Thus, the feminine is a privileged term for Levinas. First, it is a central concept in erotic relation. Second, introducing the feminine, he claims a priority of alterity over the one. The idea that alterity can be accomplished in the feminine amounts already to a radical philosophical claim: “the place of Eros allows us to see that the other par excellence is the feminine” (Levinas 1978: 85). The Erotic relation implies already the feminine as a structural component.

The otherness of the feminine catalyzes the desire for the beloved one and the desire to touch and to be touched. The embodied self is provoked and questioned by the nudity of the feminine in the erotic situation. The sensory experience of the touch befalls the subject before any conceptualization. Irigaray describes this experience as follows:

Touch makes it possible to wait, to gather strength, so that the other will return to caress to reshape, from within and from without, flesh that is given back to itself in the gestures of love. The most subtly necessary guardian of my life being the other’s flesh. Approaching and speaking to me with his hands. Bringing me back to life more intimately than any regenerative nourishment, the other’s hands, these palms with which he approaches without going through me, give me back the borders of my body and call me back to the remembrance of the most profound intimacy. As he caresses me, he bids me neither to disappear nor to forget but rather to remember the place where, for me, the most intimate life holds itself in reserve. Searching for what has not yet come into being, for himself, he invites me to become what I have not yet become. (Irigaray 1986: 232–233)

In Irigaray's interpretation, the otherness of the feminine shapes the modality of being-in-one's-skin because of intimate moment of making love as flesh to flesh. However, the feminine also moves the subjectivity towards having the other-under-one's-skin, as love presupposes the unsatisfied search for the body of the beloved one, its openness and vulnerability, its appeal and voluptuousity.

Irigaray shows how, in this most intimate relation with the other, the feminine gives itself as welcoming embodiment and as being-for-the-other:

The gaze still innocent of the limits of reason, the division of day and night, the alteration of the seasons, animal cruelty, the necessity of protecting oneself from the other or from God. Face to face encounter of two naked lovers in a nudity that is older than, and unlike, a sacrilege. Not perceivable as profanation. The threshold of the garden, a welcoming cosmic home, that remains open. No guard other than that of love itself. (Irigaray 1986: 243–244)

The touch constructs the body of subjectivity by tracing the surface of sensitive experience. However, for Levinas, the touch in Erotic situation is not an ethical one, and has a cognitive structure: it is a search for the alterity of feminine embodiment. From the start Levinas is concerned with an ethical embodiment in which the erotic relation is the supreme manifestation of alterity. According to Levinas, Eros has a double structure: "Love remains a relation with the other that turns into need, and this need still presupposes the total, transcendent exteriority of the other, of the beloved. But love also goes beyond the beloved" (Levinas 2004: 254). Eros involves

a return to itself: in love I do not only love the other, but I also return to myself, I love myself, and I am also touched. It presupposes transcendence, but it also collapses into the enjoyment of being touched. The erotic relation is less radical than the ethical relation of the face-to-face.

There is a sort of egoism found in love: "If to love is to love the love that the Beloved bears on me, *to love is also to love oneself in love*, and thus to return to oneself. Love does not transcend unequivocally — it is complacent, it is pleasure and dual egoism" (*Ibid.*: 266). Indeed, in love I can transcend myself, but in love I also enjoy myself and enjoy my own flesh. Levinas insists that love bears both immanence and transcendence, it is "situated at the limit of immanence and transcendence... as though the too great audacity of the loving transcendence were paid for by a throw-back this side of need" (*Ibid.*: 254).

Levinas' idea, then, is to find a transcendence that lies in maintaining the integrity of the embodied self while allowing the self to surpass itself. The subject cannot go beyond the power of knowledge while it remains within itself. For Levinas, the decision is rooted in the erotic relation. In love the subject can fulfill all these conditions.

However, the feminine, being tenderness and beauty, again kindles the desire for enjoyment. For Irigaray, the feminine resists and attracts this desire. In Levinas' description of the feminine I find an interesting explanation:

...a play with something elusive, a play absolutely without aim or plan not with that which may become ours and our self, but with something other, always inaccessible, always in

the future. The caress is the anticipation of the pure becoming, without content. It is made up of this intensified hunger, of promises ever richer, opening new perspectives onto the ungraspable. It is nourishing by innumerable hungers. (Levinas 1990: 89)

This statement becomes decisive for Irigaray. She claims that the caress does not mean the approach to the other in its more vivid appearance, i.e., in erotic feeling, but that it is a reduction of the other and of the erotic event which becomes apparent in the approach to the other's body (Irigaray 1991: 110). Thus, according to Irigaray, the caress reduces the function of the feminine body to the satisfaction of the subject which produces the desire and hunger for flesh contact (*Ibid.*: 110–111). She writes:

To caress, for Levinas, consists, therefore, not in approaching the other in its most vital dimension, the touch, but in the reduction of that vital dimension of the other's body to the elaboration of a future for himself. To caress could thus constitute the hidden intention of philosophical temporality. (*Ibid.*: 1991: 110)

The body of the other serves as a relation with the future which belongs to the subjectivity itself. In other words, the subjectivity gains its embodied future horizon in lovemaking thanks to the other.

For Irigaray, the masculine subject uses the feminine for its own intentionality in becoming an embodied subject; an acquisition of one's own body (*Ibid.*: 111). Thus, according to Irigaray, erotic embodiment leads us back to the intentionality of subjectivity and to the reduction of the feminine. In love the masculine subject transforms the body of the other, or the feminine body into its own embodiment.

As a response to Irigaray's critique, I shall accentuate Levinas' concept of the feminine. The feminine is presented as an ideal figure of alterity, manifesting a form of difference that "is in no way affected by the relation that can be established between it and its correlative"; it is a relation that "permits its term to remain absolutely other" (Levinas 1990: 85). This means that the feminine is not defined in terms of an opposition to the masculine, and because it is a pure alterity, it presupposes a different kind of relation which cannot be disclosed in terms of the masculine and feminine.

Levinas' description of the feminine indicates an important structural feature that makes a clear distinction between the transcendence of the erotic relation and the transcendence that intentionality of consciousness implies. Levinas claims that the feminine is "on the same level as, but in meaning opposed to, consciousness" (*Ibid.*: 88). But the feminine inverts the structure of intentionality: it is not a movement towards, but a withdrawal. Levinas writes: "The transcendence of the feminine consists in withdrawing elsewhere, which is a movement opposed to the movement of consciousness" (*Ibid.*: 88).

I suggest that this withdrawing necessarily includes the work of the caress in love. In the erotic relation, the caress tends towards something with which the lover can never coincide, something which always escapes intention. The caress signifies a moment that cannot be accommodated by language, and as Levinas notices, the object of the caress has not come into being (Levinas 2004: 257). The caress searches for something which is beyond the future and beyond the

possibility of being grasped. I accentuate that in love relation, the caress is described as an ethical gesture.

Levinas writes that the caress expresses “love, but suffers from an inability to tell it. It is hungry for this very expression, in an unremitting increase of hunger. It thus goes further than to its end, it aims beyond an existent however future, which, precisely as an existent, knocks already at the gates of being” (Levinas 2004: 258). Levinas calls it sensibility, that which is expressed most often by the gesture and by the corporeal enjoyment in Eros, but it is also that which resists being captured in concepts. It is not a manifestation of any free will, but is exactly a moment of being affected by the embodied feminine.

I should add that the caress and sensibility are distinguished from the notion of the sensation of touch. Levinas argues that if the caress belongs to the sphere of sensation, then it would be included in the structure of intentional consciousness: the beloved one would be grasped by touch, and that “what is caressed is not touched, properly speaking” (Levinas 1990: 89). The caress indicates a different structure of intention: the caress is seeking and, in this sense, places itself on the same level as consciousness, but this seeking gesture is not terminated in an object. The essence of the caress is “constituted by the fact that the caress does not know what it seeks. This ‘not knowing,’ this fundamental disorder, is the essential” (*Ibid.*). Despite the fact that the erotic relation imitates the intentional act, it inverts and breaks the structure of intentionality. Levinas remarks that “the relation with the other can be sought as an irreducible intentionality, even if one must

end by seeing that it ruptures intentionality” (Levinas 1985: 32). To continue Levinas’ idea, I would add that the caress opens up and, at the same time, preserves the vulnerability of the beloved one, while the touch searches for, or, in other words, studies the alterity of, the embodied other.

With this understanding of the caress, the beloved other can never be fully grasped within the horizon of my erotic touch, but remains the not-yet, always a mere possibility for my existence. This aspect is systematically marked as the feminine in Levinas’ texts. For the beloved to be assimilated totally into the horizon of my being, to become a possibility for the subject’s self-recognition, would be to lose the essence of the face (body) entirely, to utterly profane the other in a light that exposes its nudity while obliterating its gaze.

Thus, beyond the intentionality of Eros, escaping the touch, there is still a face, the superior other, withdrawing before the heavy-handed approach of the lover, permitting and welcoming his advances but still maintaining herself in alterity. This has not yet become fecundity, for the child is not anticipated in the caress – love does not issue (Levinas 2004: 261). Nor have we really gone beyond the movement of the caress toward the Beloved yet, or examined what lies behind the movement of the caress. For what Levinas truly demonstrates is that love is a double structure of voluptuousity, an accidental yet happy return to being-in-one’s-own-skin that involves both lovers as lovers, and demonstrates the truth of both of their embodied desires.

However, the modality of “being-in-one’s-own-skin” is not fully ethical. It discloses the embodied subjectivity in its

vulnerability and openness but it does not generate an ethical response to the other. The embodied subjectivity is an exposed flesh which is marked and structured by the caress and touch of the beloved one, but the relation to the other is regulated by the desire and the enjoyment of one's own enjoyment and by the contact with one's own skin.

### **Embodiment as Welcome**

Levinas introduces the feminine as a sensible embodiment which is seen in modesty and welcome. I believe that femininity and modesty are not essential traits of the existent woman; femininity is loved in and through the love of the beloved's love. The feminine does not define modesty, but rather modesty and withdrawal indicate the presence of the feminine, for the delight in the other's voluptuousness is at the same time the delight in my own femininity – femininity is present in the modesty of the subject, in my original face-to-face presence with the other (Levinas 2004: 257–258).

It is precisely due to this egoism of being as separateness, however, that I am able to welcome the other who disturbs my enjoyment of my own embodiment. The appearance of the face of the other in its need, and the possibility of its death and disappearance, tells me that is not violent, but awakens responsibility in me which manifests as concern for the other. "By virtue of its intentional structure, gentleness comes to the separated being from the other" (*Ibid.*: 150). This call compels me to open my dwelling to the other; specifically to offer my recollection and representation to the other (*Ibid.*: 154). The dwelling that I

offer is the egoism of my enjoyment transformed into a stable habitation as an attempt to defer the uncertainty of the future and the possibility of death and unfulfilled need (*Ibid.*: 155). This offering takes the form of my apology to the other as well – language, representation, and dwelling are intimately connected.

Levinas also stresses that the gesture of hospitality can be seen as a gesture of giving one's own body's enjoyment to the other. He writes:

In corporeality are united the traits we have enumerated: for the other, despite oneself, starting with oneself, the pain of labor in the patience of ageing, in the duty to give even bread out of one's own mouth and the coat from one's shoulders. As a passivity in the paining of the pain felt, sensibility is a vulnerability, for pain comes to interrupt an enjoyment in its very isolation, and thus tears me from myself. (Levinas 2006: 55)

The subjectivity is thrown back to itself or to being-in-one's skin in being called for responsibility. For the subject, this also means to answer in the place of another, i.e., to substitute. Thus, Levinas moves from an analysis of being-in-one's-own-skin to the-one-for-the-other. There is a double structure of subjectivity: the subjectivity is awakened by the other, but is also deposited by the other, because it is put in the place of another. It is wounded by the other's appeal and converted into for-the-other. The subjectivity is singularized as the-one-for-the-other and it becomes unique in its pain and vulnerability.

Thus, beginning from a phenomenology of enjoyment in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas moves to ethical embodiment as fractured and exposed in its nakedness, because, as he

writes: Pain penetrates into the very heart of the for-oneself that beats in enjoyment, in the life that is complacent in itself, that lives of its life. To give, to-be-for-the-another, despite oneself, but in interrupting the for-oneself, is to take the bread out of one's mouth, to nourish the hunger of another with one's own fasting. (Levinas 2006: 56)

Here, the pain is a load of one's being and a heavy weight of being bounded to the ethical response; the impossibility of escaping the other. I would suggest this is an ethical but, at the same time, a physical pain of the flesh; it is an embodied substitution for the other.

Recollection, as it constitutes my dwelling, is already a distraction from both immediate enjoyment and a concern for the well-being of the one for whom the possibility of death and needfulness are recognized (Levinas 2004: 155). It is through this structure of recollection in the dwelling that the other is welcomed. As I see the other in his poverty and need, I recognize the absolute alterity present in the possibility of his death and the urgency of his need. In order to do so, my own recollected bodily enjoyment must be displaced – withdrawn in modesty in order to offer the other a welcome. This structure of recollection and welcome is here also deemed the feminine (*Ibid.*), the source of gentleness in itself, and as being of my own gentleness as a separated being.

The feminine is present in the separated ego from the very beginning. It is in fact an inherent part of the ego individuated in enjoyment. In a section of *Totality and Infinity*, "Habitation and Feminine," the feminine is a component which makes the world 'habitable' and a kind of enjoyable embodiment of being-in-the-world. Levinas

suggests that the world becomes habitable because the feminine creates a refuge in it. He equates the feminine with a certain intimacy, and argues that the subject does not accrue the world or master it, but that the world appears with the feminine: "the other whose presence is discreetly in absence, with which is accomplished the primary hospitable welcome is the condition for recollection, the interiority of the Home, and inhabitation" (*Ibid.*: 155). Thus, the feminine is a condition of the ethical because while being inherent part of subjectivity it opens it towards the other by welcoming and being hospitable.

Love shows two layers of the feminine. Pure voluptuousness exists as the attempt to go beyond the face to lose itself in hunger and in need of a skin contact, of the other's body. When, in love, I "renounce myself by myself," without violence, I in fact renounce my own femininity as it consists in my apology that is offered through language, the representation of my enjoyment. However, modesty itself is not abolished, the face is not surpassed. Rather, it is inverted in the structure of love, which is what constitutes it as the inverse of signification. Insofar as the feminine is the welcoming of another into my representation, my offering of language and dwelling to the other, the inversion of that structure – my hunger for the other's welcome – is an abolishment of my goodness that is paradoxically only justified by its own abolishment, since modesty and welcome are still presupposed. This is the very concern manifested before the fragility of the other, the concern with maintaining myself in my goodness, as the love of the

other's love for my goodness, alongside my pure desire and hunger.

Levinas states:

In order that this future arises in its significance as a postponement and a delay in which labour, by mastering the uncertainty of the future and its insecurity and by establishing possession, delineates separation in the form of economic independence, the separated being must be able to recollect itself and have representations. Recollection and representation are produced concretely as habitation in a dwelling or a Home. (Levinas 2004: 150)

Here I read the feminine as a formation and condition of an ethical body – it is a response to the other “I am here.” The idea of home, and of its intimacy, is guaranteed by our hospitality which is caused by the presence of gentleness and kindness issuing from the feminine. It is precisely the encounter with the feminine that makes the subject hospitable (Levinas 2006: 77; Levinas 2004: 261). It should be noted that Levinas does not intend to show the feminine as a biological phenomenon characterized by natural softness and kindness. Rather, he is articulating that the feminine characterizes the intersubjective relation. According to Levinas, the feminine is already evident in the “first revelation of the other” (Levinas 2004: 258). It tears the solitude of isolated subjectivity and, at the same time, prevents a return of the subject to itself (*Ibid.*: 265). In other words, after having experienced the openness, hospitability, and tenderness in the face of the other, there is no reason for subjectivity to turn back to the solitude of existence. Thus, the feminine opens a horizon of the future for the isolated subject (*Ibid.*: 259–260).

It should be noted that the appearance of the beloved is different from the appearance of the face, because it is, first of all, an embodied appearance. It is no longer a trace of the beloved but a pure bodily presence in erotic vulnerability, tenderness and fragility (*Ibid.*: 264). It is also an open flesh of subjectivity which is exposed towards the beloved one. The tender is different from the physical body and the expressive body of the other<sup>3</sup>. Since the beloved is someone having a face, the exhibition of its face is always a sort of profanation. It is evident that to love means to be concerned for the vulnerability of the other, but it also indicates participation in its mystery that is brought into light in the erotic relation (*Ibid.*: 257). But this mystery can never be disclosed, since the beloved cannot be grasped and because the lover searches for this endless. This eternal search in love points to the ‘not yet’ that cannot be projected or achieved. Thus, love is thought to be a search for the infinite in the future. But, in the future I also search for a grasping and holding of my own embodiment, which can be interpreted as a return to the same, or, in other words, a return to being-in-one's-own-skin.

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<sup>3</sup> It is neither *corps propre* described in Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* as an incarnation of ‘I can.’ Taking the study of perception as his point of departure, Merleau-Ponty was led to recognize that one's own body (*le corps propre*) is not only a thing, a potential object of study for science, but is also a permanent condition of experience, a constituent of the perceptual openness to the world and to its investment. He therefore underlines the fact that there is an inherence of consciousness and of the body of which the analysis of perception should take account. The primacy of perception signifies a primacy of experience, so to speak, in so far as perception becomes an active and constitutive dimension. The development of his works thus establishes an analysis which recognizes corporeality of consciousness as much as intentionality of the body.

Levinas intends to establish a relation with the future which escapes a bodily repetition. In loving the other's love, the future beyond all possibilities and all expectations announces itself. According to Levinas, this love and search for the future logically issues in a child (Levinas 2004: 268–269).

Nevertheless, this feminine other revealed in the face is, as Levinas suggests, also a woman: “and the other whose presence is discreetly an absence, with which is accomplished the primary hospitable welcome which describes the field of intimacy, is the Woman. The woman is the condition for recollection, the interiority of the Home, and inhabitation” (*Ibid.*: 171). As soon as we switch from the feminine in the face-to-face relation to the woman, the status of woman as the other changes slightly. Woman turns out to be a condition of the ethical relation, since in her vulnerability, exposure, and hospitality she puts an end to any possibility of exteriorization and possession<sup>4</sup>. Levinas affirms that “in order that I am able to free myself from the very possession that the welcome of the Home established, in order that I be able to see things in themselves, that is, represent them to myself, refuse both enjoyment and possession, I must know how to give what I possess... But for this I must encounter the indiscreet face of the other that calls me into question” (*Ibid.*: 170). It is evident that while the woman and the erotic relation

ground and cause the ethical relation, the woman herself is not in full measure a part of the intersubjective relation. However, I suggest that Levinas indeed considers a woman's body as a gesture of giving one's self and as being a refuge for the other. Thus, Levinas connects the sensibility of the feminine with the home which is thought to be a bodily hospitality. As a result, the feminine substitutes its erotic sensitivity for the ethical bodily welcome.

### **Ethical Body as Flesh Made Word**

In order to become ethical embodiment, subjectivity has to move from erotic love to the birth of the child, whose being derives from the union of the loving pair. From the erotic experience of skin contact, subjectivity is transformed into ‘having-the-other-under-one's-skin.’ The erotic relation cannot be accomplished within itself. According to Levinas, it results in the birth of a child and in responsibility for the child. Thus, erotic embodiment has necessarily to be transformed into ethical embodiment, where the feminine is no longer nakedness and openness but, on the contrary, is reshaped into the-other-in-the-same.

In *Otherwise that Being*, this idea of proximity to the beloved other is revealed as maternity, which is also skin and flesh contact. Subjectivity as one-for-the-other is borne in maternity, meaning a deposing of itself, a deposing which, according to Levinas, is the very possibility of giving. This giving could be described as a gift of my body, my food and clothes to the other before I have been born as a sensible subject, even before my free will, and without the possibility of being together, since the

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<sup>4</sup> The theme of the woman as a condition of ethical relation deserves a separate discussion. However, in the context of this paper I just note that Levinas refers to the story of Rebecca who could anticipate the needs of Abraham's servants: she had offered water before they had asked. Thus, the image of a woman and a gesture of the woman's body condition ethical response.

other has already marked me inside. As Levinas writes:

sensible experience as an obsession by the other, or a maternity, is already corporeality. The corporeality of one's own body signifies, as sensibility itself, a knot or a denouement of being. ... one-for-the-other, which signifies in giving, when giving offers not the superfluous of the superfluous, but the bread taken from one's mouth. Signification signifies, consequently, in nourishing, clothing, lodging, in maternal relation, in which matter shows itself for the first time in its materiality. (Levinas 2006: 77)

Subjectivity loses the for-oneself and leaves space for the ethical language by becoming the ethical body. It is the carrying of responsibility, vulnerability and suffering that is pre-natal, not only in a biological sense but also in an ethical one, where the ethical is prior to the physical: "the subjectivity of sensibility, taken as incarnation, is an abandon without return, maternity, a body suffering for another, the body as passivity and renouncement, a pure undergoing" (Levinas 2006: 79).

Levinas does not speak only about the biological body which gives itself: "the concept of incarnate subject is not a biological concept. The schema that corporeality outlines submits the biological itself to a higher structure" (*Ibid.*: 109). Thus, he attempts to formulate a concept of an ethical language grasped in embodiment and sensibility. The embodied sensibility of maternity represents the saying which is beyond the simple answer "I am here." It is pre-reflective sensibility characterized by touch rather than by speech or by vision. Levinas writes: "In starting with touching, interpreted not as palpation but as contact, we have tried to describe proximity as irre-

ducible to consciousness" (*Ibid.*: 80). It is an archaic and passionate giving of one's flesh as an ethical response to the other and for the other. In the maternal, the saying questions not only the spontaneity of erotic embodiment but also reveals the depth of being exposed to the other in one's own skin and in one's own broken flesh. There is no return to erotic embodiment, because prior to the enjoyment of the erotic caress, the subject finds itself in eternal flesh substitution for the other.

The ethical embodiment of maternity reveals the mother-child relation, which is different from the father-child relation. In the father-child relation, subjectivity both remains itself and becomes other than itself: "Paternity is the relationship with a stranger who, entirely while being other, is myself, the relationship of the ego with a myself who is nonetheless a stranger to me" (Levinas 1990: 91). Yet, in the mother-child relation the child belongs to the substance of the mother and it is *of* the mother<sup>5</sup>. There is a sharing of substance that finally leads to total substitution: in feeding, the mother gives herself to the child. It is one-for-the-other without keeping the same. In this sense, the ethical body of the father always has a possibility to move to the modality of erotic embodiment of the one-for-the-other. However, the ethical embodiment of maternity presupposes a total disruption of the erotic embodiment, because the other has torn the essence of the erotic flesh; the other is *of* the mother's flesh, where the subject already substitutes the other in all possible places.

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<sup>5</sup> This theme has received a detailed explanation in Stanford 2001.

Maternal ethical embodiment becomes appropriate for the signifying of the sense – “bearing par excellence” (Levinas 2006: 75). Here I find a remarkable change in the reading of the feminine – it is revealed as the signifying, par excellence, of alterity, of subjectivity and of the saying. Describing the feminine as the-other-in-the-same, Levinas discovers the ethical saying in the core of the said:

But the saying extended toward the said received this tension from the other, who forces me to speak before appearing to me. The saying extended towards the said is a being obsessed by the other, a sensibility which the other by vocation calls upon and where no escaping is possible. (Levinas 2006: 77)

Before the other appeals to me, I am already forced to answer, because in maternity, subjectivity is disclosed as being obsessed by the other and being a hostage of the other.

Giving, welcoming and deposing oneself are linked to the saying within the said. Let me also add that maternity as subjectivity in absolute exposedness to the other (to the child) is described by Levinas as speaking (*Ibid.*: 92). It is a form of an ethical language, the essence of which consists in being silent and offering that silence as a gift for the other and as being-for-the-other. This silent speaking is a fundamental passivity that again indicates a non-intentional state of consciousness: “this passivity is the way opposed to the imperialism of consciousness open to the world” (*Ibid.*: 92).

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas writes: “The other who welcomes in intimacy is not the *you* [*vous*] of the face that re-

veals itself in a dimension of height, but precisely the *thou* [*tu*] of familiarity: language without teaching, a silent language, an understanding without words, an expression in secret” (Levinas 2004: 155). Indeed, as I discussed earlier, the welcoming revealed as the ethical of the feminine escapes thematization and phenomenality. In his analysis of welcome and ethical language, Derrida specifies that “the welcome orients, it *turns* the *topos* of an opening of the door and of the threshold towards the other; it offers it to the other as other, where the *as such* of the other slips away from phenomenality, and, even more so, from thematicity” (Derrida 1999: 54). The passage suggests that “offering to the other as other” is the offering of the saying, precisely the feminine as hospitality read in the context of language. The essence of the ethical language consists in welcoming the other, but this welcoming is not just a situation in which I find myself obliged, but one in which I could speak for the other.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, I would add that in discussing the meaning of erotic and ethical embodiments, Levinas also attempts to overcome the opposition of body and language. He elaborates a complicated inversion of the body into language and vice versa. The incarnation of the language in sensible embodiment is a linguistic constitution of the bodily self but, at the same, is a negation of the linguistic pronoun “I” and its active agency in flesh experience in modalities of the one-for-the-other and the other-in-the-same.

In this paper, I have suggested that embodiment has a crucial ethical significance in Levinas' philosophical corporal schemata. The concept of the flesh has a reversible character owing to the modalities of being-in-one's-own-skin and having-the-other-under-one's-own-skin. It means that embodied contact with the other in the face-to-face relation is both inward – feeling one's own vulnerable surface and pain, and, outward – giving one's own body to the other. The discussed modalities of embodied subjectivity reveal an ethical experience of unconditioned responsibility: subjectivity is formed as the one-for-the-other in erotic love relation through caress and welcome, while maternity and the feminine concep-

tualize corporeality as absolute giving of one's own body and substitution for the other in having-the-other-under-the-skin. This brings us to the discussion of a new embodied identity, i.e. identity as flesh unfolding towards the other first deconstructed and then again restored in the face-to-face relation. The originality of Levinas' philosophy of corporeality consists in discussing responsible subjectivity in such terms as the caress, skin touch, being-in-one's-own-skin and having-the-other-under-one's-own-skin. Thus, I shall conclude that sensibility and ethical responsibility are indeed inseparable: the ethical response finds itself in the form of intersubjective and incorporated sensibility.

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## ATVERIANT KŪNĄ KITAM: LEVINIŠKOJI MOTINYSTĖS IR MOTERIŠKUMO INTERPRETACIJA

**Irina Poleshchuk**

**Santrauka.** Straipsnyje analizuojamas etinis kūnas Levino filosofijoje. Pagrindinis klausimas – kaip skirtingi subjektyvybės modalumai, išnirę į šviesą betarpiškoje akistatoje su Kitu, įsteigia konkretų etinį ir juslinį įkūnytumą. Pagrindinės straipsnio temos yra glamonė, lietimas ir skausmas bei jų vaidmuo kuriant etinį įsikūnijimą. Dėmesys skiriamas tokiems egzistenciniams modalumams kaip „buvimas savo paties odoje“, „vienas kitam“, „kito buvimas po mano oda“. Motinystės ir moteriškumo konceptualinis veikimas akistatos situacijoje išryškina reikšmę atsakančio ir atsakingo jausmo, kurį Levinas atskleidžia savo pagrindiniuose darbuose „Kitaip negu būtis, arba anapus esmės“ ir „Totalybė ir begalybė“.

**Pagrindiniai žodžiai:** Emmanuel Levinas, jausmas, įkūnytumas, kūnas, veidas, kitas, oda, glamonė, lietimas, skausmas, motinystė, moteriškumas

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