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Chapter 4

Levinas, hospitality and the feminine other

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Levinas, hospitality and the feminine other

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Key themes

Introducing Emmanuel Levinas

Levinas and hospitality

Feminine hospitality

We could start this chapter by dishing up a vast array of interpretations and definitions, and refer to a number of debates in which the term hospitality takes centre stage. This would be done with the intention of illustrating the meaning and academic, societal or managerial relevance of hospitality. We will resist this temptation. We find that a philosophical understanding of hospitality is often eclipsed by endeavours to ground its academic or societal relevance. Instead, this chapter aims to convey a particular understanding of hospitality according to the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995). We read this philosophy as a philosophy of hospitality according to, but not based upon, the reading of his colleague, dear friend and fellow philosopher Jacques Derrida (see Derrida, 1999). The purpose is to shed light on the fundamental question of why and how people are hospitable towards others.

We use the philosophy of Levinas to answer the central question from the perspective of the host/guest encounter. The argumentation is built up as follows: first, we will introduce Emmanuel Levinas through fragments of his life story that have led to the formation of his particular, and at times radical, philosophy. In this section, we will discuss the necessity of involving Levinas in the academic debate of hospitality. The second section addresses the link between Levinas' philosophy and hospitality. We will analyse chapters from *Totalité et Infini* (Levinas, 1961, 1969) and several collected philosophical papers (Levinas, 1987) that specifically address hospitality. The third and final section is devoted to the puzzling association of the 'femininity of hospitality' that Levinas considers is the 'primary hospitable welcome' (1969: 155).

To delve into Levinasian philosophy is challenging; his texts are written like poetry – repeatedly strengthening the same argument like ‘waves on a beach’ – (Derrida, 1978: 103). Nevertheless, we feel that this discussion will provide readers with a more fundamental understanding of the origin of hospitality and how it is linked to ethics.

Introducing Levinas

In the twentieth century, Levinas developed his radical thoughts on philosophy in order to ‘disturb’ the common philosophical order. Traditional Western philosophy at that time focused mainly on questions of being and humanity from an individual perspective, placing the self at centre stage. Wholly different than this traditional school of thought, Levinas’ principal argument from the start has been that we cannot discuss philosophy or begin to speak of ethics if we focus on the self and thereby pre-exclude the Other.¹ Ethics begins when we encounter and welcome the Other. A consequence of this philosophical shift is that Levinas’ magnum opus *Totalité et Infini* is read as ‘an immense treatise of hospitality’ by Derrida (1999: 21). In *Totalité et Infini* Levinas argues that the I should be open and welcome the Other, for whom she bears infinite responsibility. Welcoming the other is a prerequisite for ethics and it is exactly this intersubjective openness that caused Derrida to build his argument linking hospitality to Levinas’ work. In *Adieu* (1999) – initially a eulogy for Levinas – Derrida introduced a novel reading of Levinasian philosophy as a ‘philosophy of hospitality’. Since then, many scholars have built upon this interpretation (Derrida and Dufourmantelle, 2000; Katz, 2003; McNulty, 2006; Irigaray, 2008; Still, 2010a). However, instead of following Derrida’s reading, we shall bring our focus back to its source as provided by Levinas. To understand the origin of Levinas’ thinking, it is important to place this in the time frame of the twentieth century, during which the political and economic situation had a grave impact on Levinas’ life and future work, in particular the Second World War. War can be considered as the absolute opposite of hospitality, and it was this experience of war that formed the beginning of *Totalité et Infini* as a philosophical plea for hospitality. We will start with a brief history of the life of Emmanuel Levinas.

Life and early career

Emmanuel Levinas was born in Kovno, Lithuania in 1906. Levinas came from a Jewish middle-class family and was the eldest of two brothers. He started studying philosophy at the University of Strasbourg in 1924. This is the place where Levinas met the philosopher Maurice Blanchot, with whom he developed a lifelong friendship. In 1928, Levinas attended Freiburg University to study phenomenology under Edmund Husserl² and, during this time, he also became acquainted with the work of Martin Heidegger.³ Husserl and Heidegger were Levinas’ principal influencers with regard to his early thinking. Moreover, Levinas dedicated his thesis to Husserl’s work. *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl’s Phenomenology* (Levinas, 1973) was the first French introduction of Husserl’s philosophy. In this period (1932), Levinas married his childhood friend Raïssa Levi. Their daughter Simone was born before the war, and a second daughter and son were born after the war (Andrée Éliane and Michäel), although the second daughter died at a young age. Between 1930 and 1940, Levinas began to turn away from what he called the ‘German thinking’ of both Husserl and Heidegger. Their schools of thought focused too much on the *individual* (ego) and Levinas saw traditional Western philosophy as striving towards ‘the perfection of our own being’ (2003: 51). One could argue that this focus

on the individual being risks excluding other human 'beings' that surround and affect us, and it is exactly this exclusion of the other that signifies much, but not all, of Levinas' future work.

The consequences of the Second World War

The course of Levinas' life took a significant turn during the Second World War. In 1939 he was naturalised as a French citizen and drafted into the army as an officer. At the end of 1939 he was sent to the front where he was taken as a prisoner of war. Due to his status as an officer, Levinas was sent to a military prison camp instead of a concentration camp. These were dire times for Levinas, who learnt that most of his family members (his parents, brothers and parents-in-law) had died during the pogroms in Kovno. His wife and daughter survived. As a result of an alleged message that Levinas sent to Blanchot during his captivity, Raïssa and Simone found refuge in Blanchot's apartment in Paris. They were then offered shelter in a convent near Orléans. The horrors of the war, the experiences during incarceration and the loss of his family had a profound impact on Levinas. During the Second World War Levinas experienced at first hand the monstrosities that follow when human beings devalue the life of other human beings into a subhuman state. To illustrate this point, Levinas shared an anecdote of how a wandering dog in the military camp would be the only living thing to recognise the imprisoned officers as human (also referred to as 'The last Kantian in Nazi-Germany', Levinas, 1990).

Presumably, it was the sum of Levinas' critique towards the prioritisation of the individual by traditional Western philosophers, plus the experience of human devaluation during the Second World War that resulted in his emphasis on the intersubjective relation for years to come. What went wrong in philosophy or the world for that matter? Was too much focus placed on the individual, or what Levinas calls the 'pure subjectivism of the I' (du subjectivisme pur du moi) (*Totalité et Infini*, 1969: 25; 1961: 11–12)? And did we, in an effort to understand the meaning of being – of subjectivity – set aside the hospitable welcoming of the Other? Levinas would probably affirm that there is no sense in thinking of morality or ethics – as philosophers do – from an individual perspective, no more than it makes sense for one to be hospitable alone. Hospitality is the encounter with the Other and so is ethics. During an interview in 1986 with François Poirié, Levinas argued that we have always been in a collective rather than an individual state: 'From the very start you are not indifferent to the Other. From the very start you are not alone!' (Poirié, 2001: 50). In the next section, we will extend this observation by discussing the link between Levinasian philosophy (particularly as described in *Totalité et Infini*) and the idea of hospitality.

Levinas and hospitality

In the preface of *Totalité et Infini*, Levinas says: 'This book will present subjectivity as welcoming the Other, as hospitality' (Ce livre présentera la subjectivité comme accueillant Autrui, comme hospitalité) (1969: 27; 1961: 12). By this statement, Levinas draws our attention to a new perspective on ethics. Following this understanding, ethics does not originate in reason, as many traditional Western philosophers of that time would have argued, but it precedes reason (Welten, 2011: 6). Ethics starts when we are called upon by the Other to take responsibility for her, much as hospitality begins after our doorbell has rung, and a stranger is standing on the doorstep. Might one understand from this introductory statement that Levinas intends to say that the very purpose of being lies in our being there for the Other and, more specifically,

in our being hospitable towards that Other? Indeed, Levinas provides us with an ‘ethics of hospitality’ that gives philosophical primacy to the orientation towards the Other. Following this understanding, we will use the words ‘ethics’ and ‘hospitality’ interchangeably, as both relate to the relationship between the I and the Other. The intersubjective relationship for Levinas is constituted by language (*Totalité et Infini*, 1969: 39). It is through language that the I is urged to ‘leave itself’ (*Totalité et Infini*, 1969: 39) and move towards the Other who, during discourse, remains distant – transcendent.

The Other/L’Autrui

Let us further examine the ethical relationship by focusing on the mysterious Other Levinas is speaking of. When Levinas writes about the relationship, primacy is given not to the I, but to the Other. This is because the Other places an ethical appeal on me and thereby disrupts my ‘order’. The Other that causes a disruption is a difficult, yet primary, element in Levinas’ philosophy, and in many ways it is linked to the unanticipated encounter between a host and guest – the latter being a stranger at first. Yet, contrary to the dichotomous view of the host that provides and the guest that receives hospitality as presented in several studies of commercial hospitality (e.g. Lashley and Morrison, 2000), the understanding of this dichotomy according to Levinas is wholly different. Levinas (1987: 124) says that the host is already taken hostage by the guest long before her arrival. We will come back to the view of the host as hostage later in this chapter. First, we will elaborate on the meaning of the Other as guest. Therefore, we will start by examining the meaning and significance of the Other as radically different – or radical alterity – by reflecting upon Levinas, who writes:

L’Absolument Autre, c’est Autrui. Il ne fait pas nombre avec moi. La collectivité où je dis « tu » ou « nous » n’est pas un pluriel de « je ». Moi, toi, ce ne sont pas là individus d’un concept commun.

(*Totalité et Infini*, 1961: 28)

The absolute other is the Other. He and I do not form a number. The collectively in which I say ‘you’ or ‘we’ is not a plural of the ‘I.’ I, you – these are not individuals of a common concept.

(*Totalité et Infini*, 1969: 39)

In this section, Levinas introduces the Other as a Stranger (*l’Etranger*). Levinas means to say that the Other is literally different, irreducible, and thus not similar – or the same – to the I. We cannot, even if we wanted to, understand the Other as just another version of ourselves, which we then project onto her. The Other never lives up to our prejudice. Yet, although the Other is a stranger to me, I am always already a host to her. In an interview, Levinas describes our automatic responsibility to be hosts as follows: ‘as if I had to do with the other before knowing him, in a past that has never taken place’ (Poirié, 2001: 52). A scene between host and guest serves as a good example here.⁴ When we are at home (*chez-soi*) and a stranger comes knocking, then, in a brief moment before we open the door, and even when we do open it, we are hesitant about the stranger standing on our doorstep. In a sense, we fear and even distrust this strange other. Is this a potential friend or hostile stranger? The eminent problem in this scene is exemplary of how our culture tends to deal with the unknown. Levinas terms this inclination to understand, determine and thereby capture others within our frame as ‘totalising’, as violence, even (1969: 40). The unknown brings unease, a violation of our integrity.

Consider how we deal with the refugees that have been spreading across Europe since 2012. These 'strangers' are met with much resistance. Are they friends (human beings worthy of refuge) or foes (IS-extremists, rapists)? Our (in)hospitality towards and underlying fear of strangers becomes painfully clear. Yet Levinas' philosophy of hospitality does not start with fear of the Other. As stated earlier, it begins even before fear arises; it starts with the I who is uniquely chosen – the chosen one – to be host to the Other. In contrast with the human inclination to 'resolve the unknown', Levinas presents the Other as completely transcendent and 'absolutely other' (1969: 40). Levinas does not settle the unease that comes with the unknown; he rather enforces it. Thus, if we open the door, it will be to welcome a stranger who we do not know, nor need to know, in order for us to engage in language. It is exactly this hospitable welcome of the strange other that Derrida (1999) argues happens without the condition of the knowing, that creates opportunity for the I to break out of its ego – or totality.

The breach/La rupture

Levinas is opposed to totalising systems of ego-thinking. His philosophy is meant to disrupt or 'breach' the inclination to frame others, or totalize them (1969: 40). With his presentation of the Other as stranger, Levinas appoints his philosophical ideas to the argument that the other may remain a stranger. We can let her be (Irigaray, 2008). This does not mean that we cannot enter into a relationship with her, nor does it relieve us of our obligation towards her. We have already stated earlier that Levinas' philosophy is challenging to understand. We have to disappoint readers who, up to now, believed that the Other is synonymous to the human other. By encountering the Other, Levinas does not necessarily suggest a human encounter with the Other as this can also be conceptual, without actual physical contact or even visual sight of the Other. Nevertheless, Levinas does speak of the face-to-face encounter, which is puzzling to say the least. Levinas' answer when asked about this idea was: 'The face is not of the order of the seen, it is not an object' (Poirié, 2001: 48). Levinas argues that we can either experience the face-to-face encounter as if we were photographers, seeing the face as object (looking at their hair, eyes and nose), or we can 'meet' the face and simply say 'good day!' (Poirié, 2001: 61). By doing the latter, we engage, we wish the Other well before even knowing her. This statement shows the primacy of ethics over the knowing.

Thus, the conceptual Other is always present, and so we are always already ethically obliged. Coming back to the face-to-face encounter, this is where the breach happens. The breach is caused by the void of the unknown. Remember how Levinas tells us to let the Other be completely other – or strange – if we do, then this void violently breaks through our totality. Our totality is breached because instead of reducing the other to an image that is constituted by ourselves (whereby we would stay in our totality) we break out of ourselves and our patterns of thought and move towards the infinite otherness of the Other. This is a somewhat troubling endeavour as the encounter with the other might change us – it calls us into question (Levinas, 1969: 43). Hence, this disruptive element – or trauma – central to Levinasian philosophy is analogous to the first welcome between I and the Other. In the following section we will discuss the welcoming movement that transforms the I into host, and the stranger into guest.

The face and its command/Le visage et son appel

The encounter with the Other not only imposes a breach on our totality, it also confronts us with an 'ethical appeal' which is the face of the Other. Again, we must not presume that this is

always an empirical face, one that you can actually see. The word 'face' relates to the expression of the Other, which has an impact on myself. Levinas writes:

La manière dont se présente l'Autre, dépassant l'idée de l'Autre en moi, nous l'appelons, en effet, visage. Cette façon ne consiste pas à figurer comme thème sous mon regard, à s'étaler comme une ensemble de qualités formant une image. Le visage d'Autrui détruit à tout moment, et déborde l'image plastique qu'il me laisse, l'idée a ma mesure.

(1961: 43)

The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*, we here name face. This *mode* does not consist in figuring as a theme under my gaze, in spreading itself forth as a set of qualities forming an image. The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me, the idea existing to my own measure.

(1969: 50–51)

This quote shows that the face in no way lives up to my image of it. Instead, it expresses (*il s'exprime*) something and the openness with which I receive this expression can be considered as a welcoming movement that is a 'right and good movement' linked by Derrida (1999: 25) to hospitality. Coming back to the host–guest example I have, despite my hesitation, opened the door and engaged in conversation with the Other, whom I now welcome as guest. Of this gesture, Levinas says: 'Aborder Autrui dans le discours, c'est accueillir son expression où il déborde à tout instant l'idée qu'en emporterait une pensée' (To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression, in which at each instant he overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it) (1961: 43; 1969: 51). Thus, the disturbance caused by the face-to-face encounter with the Other teaches me something new. It provides a new perspective that I could not have found myself. However, in order to learn – be taught – I must let 'the other into oneself, to one's space – it is invasive of the integrity of the self, or the domain of the self' (Still, 2010b: 13). Hence, the presence of the Other disturbs my order.

What is more, I must regard the Other as somehow higher than myself, coming from a height (Levinas, 1969: 79). The Other presents herself from an elevated – transcendent – position that we can compare with that of God. Levinas considers religion to be the relation with the Other. Hence, Levinas draws this comparison when he states that the Other 'resembles God' (1969: 293). Could I consider the Other as superior to myself? Levinas (1969: 216) argues that I should; the ethical relationship is asymmetrical. The Other is in charge and I am her subordinate. We can relate this asymmetry to an example in the hospitality industry. We should emphasise, however, that there is an eminent difference between behaviour governed by a specific function (i.e. waiting tables) and ethics. Nevertheless, we find asymmetry in many professional host/guest relationships that are based on the Dutch saying 'the guest is king', where the host is expected to act as a humble servant. Here, the host is a host on condition of getting financial compensation for his efforts (considering he is not a volunteer or philanthropist), which slightly complicates the matter of understanding his efforts as purely ethical. We can thus differentiate by asymmetry guided by ethics, or otherwise. The asymmetrical relation usually does not apply to guide human behaviour in everyday life (excluding parent–child/fan–idol/lover to lover relations) and it is certainly not a norm in our highly individualistic society. However, for Levinas the asymmetrical relationship is foundational for his philosophy. The Other is higher and deserves primacy, courteousness even. For Levinas, courtesy towards the Other is as if to say 'Après vous' (Poirié, 2001: 49). With this understanding of the invasive nature of the encounter in Levinasian hospitality, the way that the face of the Other penetrates

through my totality, my receiving of the Other and the asymmetrical nature of our relation, we can now begin to discuss the ethical appeal of the Other.

The appeal/le commandement

The face of the Other expresses itself in such a way that an appeal goes out from it. Levinas' philosophy is best known for this ethical appeal – or command – of the Other. In a way, the Other is the ethical appeal (Welten, 2011: 152). Here, we introduce yet another parallel between this philosophy and the idea of hospitality. We will discuss this similarity by analysing the meaning and consequence of the appeal. The ethical appeal is a 'command of hospitality'. It is as if the gaze of the Other places the burden of responsibility for the Other on 'the shoulders' of the I. Literally, her expression invokes our ability to respond (response-ability) to her being present. The encounter between the I and the Other can therefore never be neutral. It is not as if we need only open the door, see the other, let her expression affect – disturb – us and then go about our business. Following Levinas, the encounter would be rendered morally insignificant if it resulted in internal contemplation only. Therefore, Levinas stresses that we must act upon (respond to) the ethical appeal. Note that we do not act based upon a conscious decision to do so, our action of taking responsibility for the Other is what constitutes humanity.

We have already presented the ethical relation as asymmetrical. This asymmetry has implications for the ethical appeal. It implies that the Other may place the burden of responsibility on me but, conversely, I cannot demand her to also bear this burden in return. The responsibility I bear for the Other automatically exceeds her responsibility for me. I cannot simply copy and paste my responsibility onto her ('I'll scratch your back, if you scratch mine!') simply because the Other is radically different from myself – we is not the plural of I. I can only account for my own action. If it were any different, then the ethical relation would be reduced to an economic relation of trade (Welten, 2011: 154). As such, there is no moral obligation to reciprocity present in hospitality according to Levinas, who stresses that 'courtesy or ethics consists in not thinking that reciprocity' (Poirié, 2001: 49). Drawing the parallel to a general conception of hospitality asserted by Lashley and Morrison (2000), where hospitality is considered as the willingness to be hospitable without demanding something in return, we can see that the ethical relation according to Levinas is based on similar, yet not identical, precepts. On a more fundamental note, Levinas says that the encounter with the Other who expresses an ethical appeal to take responsibility is what places us on 'the right track'. It urges us to do 'good', or at least provides us with a trace to what is 'good'.

The subject as hostage/Le sujet comme otage

Taking the parallel one step further, the responsibility that we can take for the Other, the concrete action, is, for example, to let her share in our economy (our house and belongings). That could very well be, inviting the guest into our home in order to offer shelter and food. Here, Levinas refers to what is written in the Bible where hospitality is portrayed as feeding the hungry, giving clothes to the naked, water to the thirsty and providing shelter for the homeless (see Matthew 25: 34–36). Again, Levinas stresses that we are not indifferent to the, in his words, 'material misery' of the Other (Poirié, 2001: 52). Although there are other institutions that relieve our obligation to provide food and shelter for others (e.g. soup kitchens, homeless shelters), from an ethical point of view, Levinas states that we cannot be indifferent (Poirié, 2001: 52). Remember that before anything else – any claim or conversation – I am always automatically a host bearing responsibility for the strange Other, who is my guest. With this in mind, Levinas introduces the idea of the host (*hôte*) as hostage (*otage*) (Levinas, 1987: 124; Derrida, 1999). This, in fact, relates

to the constitution of being as being for the Other. Therefore, the subject is a hostage. Due to the idea that we automatically bear responsibility, we cannot deny it and are being held hostage by it. The responsibility that we must take for the Other has no causal effect, it is not as though I am to blame for the material misery of the Other and therefore I have to solve it. I am always indebted to the Other. In his careful analysis of Levinas' philosophy, Derrida explains the idea of the subject-host as hostage as follows: 'the being hostage is the subjectivity of the subject as *Responsibility for the Other* (1999: 55). Thus, the I that is summoned by the Other to be host is held hostage by this very summoning. The I has no choice but to respond to this call. Levinas accords great value to the idea of the host considered as hostage and says: 'It is by reason of the stage of being hostage that there can be in the world pity, compassion, pardon and proximity (even the little there is)' (1987: 124).

The home/L'habitation

In order to clarify the idea of the host as hostage, we will discuss a specific situation in which this transformation can take place, the home. Before doing so, we will explain what Levinas means by this term. The home, or habitation, represents a separation from the world where man can be 'at home with himself' (d'un chez soi) (Levinas, 1969: 152; 1961: 162). While the home is a place where one can withdraw, or take 'empirical refuge', at the same time this home – or state of inwardness – also creates opportunity for the outside world to come in (Levinas, 1969: 154). It is only from within the seclusion of my house that I can be asked to open the door and be hospitable towards others. To further explain this inward/outward effect of habitation, Levinas (1969: 154) introduces the term 'dwelling', which signifies the state in which I contemplate the world in a state of recollection. This dwelling precedes the face-to-face encounter. In the shelter of my home, in the safety of it, I can start my movement to the outside world – the exterior. To this understanding, the Belgian philosopher Luce Irigaray (2008: 7) adds that dwelling is necessary for the movement from the self – the I – to the Other. For Irigaray, much value is accorded to the self and her dwelling as a condition to express hospitality to the other. Presumably, Levinas does not accord the same meaning to dwelling when primarily understood as a state of securing the position of the I. His philosophy concerns an orientation that begins with the I, but is always directed towards, or preceded by, the presence of the Other (Levinas, 1961: 215).

After clarifying Levinas' understanding of the home, we can now come to elaborate how the home can transform a host into hostage. Initially, the home belongs to the host. Due to this possession she is the only one – and uniquely so – who is obliged to, or could be asked to, share her home if needed. Mind that, in Levinas' philosophy, the host is always already obliged and called upon by the ethical appeal of the Other without any questions asked. Indeed, the home can be a place of refuge ideally situated to dwell, but it is also posited as an open invitation to strangers. Levinas says:

car ma position de moi consiste à pouvoir répondre à cette misère essentielle d'autrui, à me trouver des ressources. Autrui qui me domine dans sa transcendance est aussi l'étranger, la veuve et l'orphelin envers qui je suis obligé.

(1961: 237)

for my position as I consists in being able to respond to the essential destitution of the Other, finding resources for myself. The Other who dominates me in his transcendence is thus the stranger, the widow, and the orphan, to whom I am obliged.

(1969: 215)

A careful analysis of this quote shows us how Levinas connects the responsibility to care for the Other in a destitute state, here exemplified as that of a stranger, widow or orphan, to the I. Furthermore, the sentence mentioning ‘finding resources’ could very well relate to the possession of the home. This home, then, says Levinas, is essentially acquired to share with the strange Other. Here emerges the link between the home and the host-hostage transformation. This might be a startling way to think about the home. Do we not buy a house (and the high mortgage that comes with it) for our own enjoyment and that of our family? Here, in Levinas’ terms, we would be mistaken. In looking at the word ‘dominates’ in the quote above, we see that the Other dominates us in their Otherness, in their destitution, thus obliging us to share our home if need be. We therefore find that the home provides hospitality in two ways. First, the home is ‘hospitable for its proprietor’ (*Hospitalière à son propriétaire*) (Levinas, 1961: 157; 1961: 169). It provides a place for the I to live and dwell. As Derrida says: ‘a *hôte* received in his own home’ (1999: 41). This can be thought of as interior hospitality. Second, it creates opportunity to be hospitable in responding to the ethical appeal of the Other. A response to this appeal could be to welcome the stranger into our home. Here we speak of exterior hospitality. Thus, the idea that we possess a home (as resource) in the first place and the responsibility to relieve the material misery of the Other together constitute a situation in which the I is taken hostage by the home. I cannot exclude myself from this permanent state of responsibility. The ethical appeal is already there, echoing in my home from the basement to the kitchen and the upstairs bedrooms, summoning my ability to respond from a height. To conclude, note that we must not understand the word ‘hostage’ with its common negative connotation of being held captive against your will. The ethical appeal of the Other and the sharing of our home with this Other, even if it transforms us from hosts to hostages, again is what makes us human.

We have shown how Levinas’ idea of hospitality is radical and invasive of the self; hospitality is ethics. The face-to-face encounter with the Other – who remains a stranger – imposes an ethical appeal on us to take responsibility. What is striking about Levinas’ idea of hospitality, as opposed to generally accepted ideas, is the thought that we are always already obliged to invite, care for and share with Others. We need not be asked to provide hospitality, paid for to provide it or otherwise. Levinas presents hospitality as an unavoidable feature of human nature, as its constitution, even. In the following section, we will further analyse a segment in Levinas’ discussion of hospitality in the home that specifically relates the idea of hospitality as shown by the feminine Other: the hospitality of femininity. Though there are several passages in *Totalité et Infini* referring to the feminine (e.g. the ‘Phenomenology of Eros’), we restrict our reading to one particular passage that deals explicitly with the question of hospitality imposed in this chapter. The passage called ‘Habitation and the Feminine’ (Levinas, 1969: 154; ‘L’Habitation et le Féminin’, Levinas, 1961: 164), is rather short, yet it has stirred up quite some discussion, predominantly among feminist philosophers. Contrary to the rhetoric in his other writing, Levinas remains somewhat ambiguous in describing feminine hospitality. Therefore, in response to Derrida’s call for a ‘long interrogatory analysis of this passage’ (1999: 36), in the following section we shall endeavour to re-interpret the meaning of feminine hospitality.

Feminine hospitality

In *Totalité et Infini*, Levinas (1961: 155) discusses hospitality in the setting of the private home. As elaborated above, the home is the place where one lives and dwells in one’s orientation towards the Other. Initially, Levinas describes the house as the place where the I can withdraw and be alone. However, in ‘Habitation and the Feminine’, Levinas (1969: 155) introduces another inhabitant of the home, namely the feminine other, or ‘the Woman’⁵ (*La Femme*). This

passage is particularly interesting to analyse, since it specifically mentions the word ‘hospitality’, which is rarely the case in *Totalité et Infini* as Levinas tends to use the words ‘welcome’, ‘receiving’ and ‘openness’ when referring to hospitality. The question remaining is where does this Woman ‘come from’ and what is her position in Levinas’ text? To answer these questions, let us examine the beginning of the passage where Levinas (1969: 154) uses the words ‘intimacy’ and ‘familiarity’ in relation to the being at home of the I (*le chez-soi*). The word familiarity is confusing here, as Levinas stated earlier that the I is alone in the home that automatically becomes an invitation for the Other, the stranger. Also, the word stranger does not correspond to familiarity. We are not familiar with strangers who Levinas says are ‘already language and transcendence’ – expressing an ethical demand from a non-empirical position (1969: 155). Hence, there must be another figure present in the home to whom Levinas is referring. He then goes on to explain how ‘The intimacy with familiarity already presupposes is an *intimacy with someone*’ (L’intimité que déjà la familiarité suppose est une intimité avec quelqu’un) (Levinas, 1969: 155; 1961: 165). Now it becomes more obvious that Levinas is referring to an actual person who is residing in the home. Moreover, this person – the Woman – is the one who brings about intimate familiarity in the home (Levinas, 1969: 154). Might we understand from this passage that the Woman is held responsible for producing the house as a home, as a sort of ‘homemaker’? The answer to this question requires further examination.

Hospitality as discrete absence/Hospitalité comme absence discrète

The phrases with which Levinas introduces the Woman have been quoted many times before. However, it is vital to quote them again if we wish to understand the position of the Woman in Levinas’ text:

Et l’Autre dont la présence est discrètement une absence et à partir de laquelle s’accomplit l’accueil hospitalier par excellence qui décrit le champ de l’intimité, est la Femme. La Femme est la condition du recueillement, de l’intériorité de la Maison et de l’habitation.
(Levinas, 1961: 166)

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.
(Levinas, 1969: 155)

We will analyse the words in this sentence that are necessary for understanding Levinas’ idea of the Woman. These words are ‘discreetly’, ‘absence’, ‘the primary hospitable welcome’ and ‘condition’. First, we have the word ‘discreet’ that has a double meaning in French (*discret/discrete*) and English (discreet and discrete). If she is *discrete*, the Woman can be understood as being ‘detached from others’, whereas a *discreet* Woman would ‘judge by means of silence’ (Bevis, 2007: 321). It can be argued that Levinas is separating the Woman from the Other. This is because the Other is not discreet when expressing an ethical appeal to the I, breaking through totality, while the Woman signifies her presence more discreetly. She seems to have another ‘function’. Second, she is also absent in that her language, as opposed to that of the Other, is silent (Derrida, 1999: 37). The Woman does not ‘teach’ the I (Derrida, 1999: 37), she is also not placed on a transcendent height similar to a deity (even though Levinas does use capital letters to indicate Woman). Thus, the Woman is a discreet absence, but foremost and third, she also embodies the primary hospitable welcome that Levinas argues is a ‘welcome in

itself' (1969: 157). Based on our reading of Levinas, we consider that the Woman is a welcome in itself because she facilitates the dwelling and individual recollection – or the interiority – of the I, thereby enabling the face-to-face encounter with the Other. She does this by means of discreet language, and thus different than the language with the Other – to 'open up the dimension of interiority' (Levinas, 1969: 155). Finally, we can argue that the discrete absence of the Woman – her language – is the condition for the I to be hospitable to the Other and, therefore, she represents hospitality. With this understanding of feminine hospitality, it is no surprise that Derrida argues the Woman is the 'anarchic origin of ethics' (1999: 44).

The Woman/La Femme

In the section above, we have seen that Levinas places the Woman in the home where she is a condition for hospitality. When reading 'Habitation and the Feminine', it becomes clear that the Woman 'lacks' many of the qualities possessed by the Other (Derrida, 1999). She comes short of the dimension of height, the ability to teach via language, and she does not express an ethical appeal. Does this mean that the Woman is somehow regarded as lower than the Other? Additionally, from an empirical viewpoint, it is not completely clear whether Levinas, by using the word Woman, is referring to an archetype or to an empirical woman. The confusion caused by this ambiguity has stirred up much debate, particularly among feminist scholars. Obviously, Levinas' postulation of the Woman as a discrete absence, securing intimate familiarity, gives rise to critique and 'grave misunderstanding' (Bevis, 2007: 323) by feminist scholars who, in their efforts to secure equality and universality (Borgerson, 2007), fear that Levinas not only places the Woman in a lower rank but indeed that he silences her altogether, which could even be seen as a totalising act. This concern becomes clearer when we review some of this criticism. Levinas is criticised by Luce Irigaray for leaving the feminine other without a face (such as the summoning face of the Other) and thus that his 'philosophy falls radically short of ethics' (1991: 113). Furthermore, Simone de Beauvoir (1993) accuses Levinas of privileging the masculine over the feminine, and regarding the feminine as a mere object that is needed for the man to become a subject. The woman, then, is a means to the end of man. Another critical issue raised by Borgerson (2007) is that Levinas reinforces rather than reduces the dualism between men and women. We take Villarrea's statement that Levinas does nothing to help women's emancipation (1999: 291) as a summary of the critical issues raised above.

Yet, if we follow Derrida's reading of Levinas, we find that a new meaning of femininity surfaces. On the one hand, as exemplified by critics of Levinas, we can interpret Levinas' writing as, in Derrida's terms, 'classical androcentrism' while, on the other hand, Levinas' idea of the Woman can also be interpreted as a 'feminist manifesto' (1999: 44). Let us then follow the latter as a more optimistic interpretation. The misunderstanding of Levinas' writing lies in the idea that the object of the text is indeed the empirical woman. The following quote by Levinas helps us to resolve this misunderstanding: 'Need one add that there is no question here of defying ridicule by maintaining the empirical truth or countertruth that every home in fact presupposes a woman?' (*Faut-il ajouter qu'en aucune façon, il ne s'agit ici de soutenir, en bravant de ridicule, la vérité ou la contre-vérité empirique que toute maison suppose en fait une femme?*) (1969: 158; 1961: 169). Here we see that Levinas anticipated the question that we, and many scholars with us, have raised. The idea of the feminine other is not to be understood as the empirical other woman. It is rather that Levinas introduces the feminine as a metaphor that indicates an appearance that precedes ethics or hospitality.

Derrida, in his meticulous analysis of this passage, concludes that the 'welcome in itself' is conferred to the 'feminine being', instead of 'empirical women' (1999: 44). Consequently, the

feminine appearance serves as a condition for ethics. With this understanding, we begin to see how Levinas builds his argumentation of hospitality based upon several conditions. The feminine other – the Woman – is the first condition. She is another inhabitant of the home, thus part of the *chez soi*, that enables the dwelling of the I. Dwelling, that Levinas says is ‘a coming to oneself’ (1969: 156), takes place in the intimate familiarity of the home that is created by the feminine other. This dwelling serves as yet another condition for the I to welcome the Other in a face-to-face encounter, to be hospitable. Thus, the Woman is an essential element in Levinas’ thinking on hospitality. She is not merely an object needed for the constitution of hospitality; it is rather that she precedes it.

Our analysis of the implication of the feminine other in ‘Habitation and the Feminine’ as asserted by Levinas follows the positive interpretation of a ‘feminist manifesto’ (Derrida, 1999). We take it that Levinas seeks to empower, rather than weaken, the position of the empirical woman by according such a fundamental and pre-original condition for hospitality to an appearance that is closely related, yet not similar, to it. This is not to say that the many critical, androcentric issues that have been raised are irrelevant. We simply do not follow that interpretation here as it is besides the point of our review into hospitality as ethics. Moreover, this is not a feminist inquiry. Indeed, we agree that critical inquiry into Levinas’ writing can only help to further the scientific debate. We acknowledge the fact that Levinas mentions feminine features such as discretion, absence, intimacy and familiarity that come across as tiresome – according to general and might one say even totalising opinions of women – and old-fashioned female traits. Nevertheless, by interpreting Levinas’ texts empirically, as if his philosophy merely discusses everyday situations between women and men, we have become preoccupied by what seems to us to be a ‘straw man theory of Levinas’ – deliberately presenting a weak argument to then knock it over with a stronger one. As mentioned before in this chapter, an overly empirical analysis of Levinas’ philosophy often leads to misunderstanding. The Other is not the empirical other, the man standing across the street or the ice-cream vendor. Nor is the Woman a ‘desperate housewife’ (lighting the fire, providing cold beer and slippers, rolling her eyes) in our homes. Levinas asserts that these others are transcendent Others, without proper shapes or forms, present before anything else. Thus, Levinas’ idea of femininity is inextricably inter-linked to hospitality. This discussion functions to broaden the perspective of ethics as hospitality whereby the feminine other represents its fundamental condition.

Conclusions

In this chapter we have addressed the fundamental question of why and how people are hospitable towards each other by analysing the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. We have presented his ‘philosophy as ethics’ and concentrated foremostly on the face-to-face encounter between the I and the Other as radical alterity as described in *Totalité et Infini* (Levinas, 1961). Succinctly put, Levinas presents the ethical appeal of the Other as constitutional for the humanity of the I. His philosophy is often understood as a radical philosophy (Critchley and Bernasconi, 2002: 237). We have attempted to show the radical nature of his thinking by introducing Levinas’ view of the host/guest, that is, the I/Other dichotomy and relation. We have interpreted the idea of hospitality as welcoming and openness towards the strange Other, without this welcoming being preceded by a conscious choice. Our analysis reveals that Levinas’ idea of hospitality does not presuppose reciprocity, as my responsibility always exceeds that of the other. Furthermore, we have extended the view of hospitality by discussing its conditions with regard to the home, the dwelling and, finally, the fundamental condition for hospitality, enabled by the absent discretion of the Woman.

Levinas' philosophy of hospitality as ethics is fundamental in that it provides ethical ground-work for the human encounter; it is transcendental in that this encounter is experienced from a height, and it is metaphysical in that it provides an ethics of hospitality, *avant la lettre*, as an answer to the question: why be hospitable? This philosophy is difficult to comprehend as it rids you of the certainty of having understood what Levinas is actually saying. As soon as you picture the face-to-face encounter in your head, as though it were a movie scene, Levinas invites you to erase this image by presenting the untouchable and invisible Other almost as a deity. In trying to envision the home as one made of bricks and stone and a bright red front door, representing a threshold between the I and the Other that is used as a metaphor in many discussions of hospitality, Levinas pulls the rug from under your feet and presents it as a state of interiority, of dwelling. When you imagine the feminine other as an empirical woman, by the colour of her hair or the shape of her nose, Levinas' writing quickly convinces you otherwise. Levinas thus provides us with a philosophy that continually disturbs our mode of thought in the same manner that the Other in his philosophy disturbs the I, pulling us away from empirical science into philosophical interpretation. Challenging as it is, Levinas' philosophy invites us to rethink ethics as hospitality where taking responsibility for the Other is an inescapable yet basic feature of humanity. To conclude, we assert that in our shared ambition to further the study of hospitality it is essential to understand Levinas.

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Notes

- 1 According to Levinas' style of writing we capitalize the word Other in this chapter.
- 2 Edmund Husserl was a German philosopher who established the school of phenomenology.
- 3 Martin Heidegger was a German philosopher, well known for his works on existential phenomenology and philosophical hermeneutics (the interpretation of texts).
- 4 We use an empirical example here. Yet it must be noted that Levinas' view of hospitality does not depart from empirical encounters.
- 5 Levinas often uses capital letters to indicate Others who have elevated standpoints, such as the Other and, in this case, the woman.

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